

Vues d'Afrique: The new African cinema in Canada

BY HAL WEAVER

When the new African cinema comes to Canada this month (April 24-30 in Montreal, early May elsewhere), Canadian cinephiles will be able to screen a continental cinema that is vibrant, diverse and provocative.

What characterizes the films we are likely to see during the 5th Journées du Cinéma Africain (JCA) in Montreal and on tour in other Canadian cities? What observable trends highlight current African production, now in its third decade? Screenings at film festivals in Africa (FESPACO '87 and '89) and Europe (Amiens '87 and '88, and Nantes '88) reveal the following:

CURRENT TRENDS

- The revitalization of feature-film industries in English-speaking Africa, especially in Nigeria and Ghana. Nigeria's private-industry formula films in Yoruba left the Ouagadougou (site of the '89 FESPACO, pan-African film and

TV festival) audiences in stitches. Ghana's rebirth is spearheaded by the government-funded Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC), working closely with private film companies.

The thrust of this new dynamism is exemplified by *Heritage Africa* (Kwah Ansah, whose earlier *Love Brewed in an African Pot* successfully toured English-speaking Canada as a fund-raiser for the NGO, CUSO). *Heritage Africa* became the first film from an anglophone African country to win the grand prize at Ouagadougou's prestigious FESPACO (1989). John Akomfreh's *Testament* (previous film, *Handworth Songs*) has been praised for its lyrical qualities. Both are re-interpretations of the period when Kwame Nkrumah dominated Ghana's indigenous political scene – the first prior to independence in 1957 and the second a decade later.

But it is surely to Nigeria that the future belongs. New government policies in both culture and mass communications and a revitalized Nigeria Film Corporation (NFC, under filmmaker Eddie Ugbomah) have already led to a nearly finished, sorely needed film lab in Jos (also headquarters for the NFC) and an imminent decision about a possible international film festival within two years. Nigeria already has Africa's most prolific filmmaker: Ola

Balogun, with *Black Goddess*, *Orum Mooru* and other titles. The Yoruba-language films (with subtitles in English or French) have been joined by controversial *Maitatsine* (Sule's first Hausaspeaking feature), a bloody re-enactment of the religious fanaticism of a Muslim sect terrorising Kano to the point where the Governor called in the Nigerian Army for pacification – shades of Jim Jones' Jonestown and of the Ayatollah's attacks on Rushdie.

First features have emerged from Zimbabwe and Kenya, both locations for recently successful Hollywood films (*Cry Freedom* and *Out of Africa*). Both have recently established specialized schools in film and TV production.

- The evolution of a new generation of filmmakers whose trademark is low-budget, personal statement films and in whom there is high expectation from critics and authorities.

Included in this group of creators are Sissoko of Mali, with *Finzan*; Ouédraogo of Burkina Faso, (*Yaaba – Grandmother*); and Gaston Kabouré, also of Burkina Faso, with *Zam Boko*. All are second features. Both Burkinibé filmmakers use a highly personalized, ethno-dramatic style: dramatic re-enactment characterized by long shots with long takes, slow pace and the natural beauty of rural decors. Kabouré's leadership role in the rebirth of the Federation of Pan-African Filmmakers (FEPACI) assures him an important place in current African cinema.

Sissoko, on the other hand, has opted for urban decors of Mali's capital, Bamako, in his low-budget films. All were prizewinners at Ouaga and should find their way to Canada in mid-year either through the the JCA, or the World Film Festival.

- South-South co-productions across national and continental boundaries, illustrated by Burkina Faso, with joint ventures with Cuba and other countries. Interest-free loans by the Burkinibé government and collaboration between public and private sectors, perceptively seen by authorities as necessary for the survival and growth of Burkinibé cinema. Ghana, with its revitalized GFIC, is also active in international co-productions, involving both African (Gerima, Ansah) and non-African (Herzog) directors.

Camp de Thiaryoye (Ousmane Sembene – the 'Pope' of African cinema – and Thierno Faty Sow), which received a special prize at the 1988

Dr. Harold (Hal) Weaver, who gave the first course in the world on African cinema, currently teaches Third World film at the Université de Montréal. He is also a consultant in cross-cultural communication and international cooperation.



Tania Rogers in John Akomfreh's *Testament*

Venice Festival, was a co-production of Senegal, Algeria and Tunisia at both the creative and financial levels. And the two new, fledgling film countries (Kenya and Zimbabwe), already used for shooting Hollywood and European productions (*and Canadian - ed.*), can be expected to profit from co-productions.

• **Unabashedly commercial films**, with possible international mass appeal often shot on location in glamorous urban areas (eg. Abidjan, Ivory Coast) and often with humour too seldom found in more politically or more culturally motivated films. These films are especially found in decidedly capitalist states: *Bal Poussiere* (Henri Duparc); *Bouka* (Gnoan M'Bala); and *Les Guerisseurs* (Siiri Bakaha) all of the Ivory Coast, as well as the productions from Nigeria noted previously.

Can we now expect to see African versions of

Coming To America, *Out of Africa*, *Cry Freedom* or perhaps *The Revenge Against Tarzan*?

• **Proliferation of complementary African Diaspora films or Proliferation of a complementary African-Diaspora cinema by:**

1) African-born filmmakers living abroad for diverse reasons (economic, technological, cultural, political) and 2) African-origin, African-oriented filmmakers born outside Africa. (Creators based in Europe - France, the U. K., Belgium, Holland - all countries with a colonial past; and in the New World - the U. S., Brazil, Cuba - all with legacies of slavery and colonialism.

As well, in the Creole-speaking isles of the Indian ocean and Caribbean, filmmakers are reinterpreting African history and the traumatic dislocation and nomadry outside Africa. *Sarraounia* (Med Hondo, Mauritania-France) and *Testament* (John Akomfreh, Ghana-U. K.) join the earlier *Harvest 300 Years* (Haile Gerima, Ethiopia-U. S. A.) as revisionist cinematic products challenging the traditional Eurocentric interpretations of African history.

Two of the most important films produced by and about the African Diaspora in the Caribbean are emotionally moving, aesthetically innovative and historically accurate. *Rue Casse Negres* (Euzhan Palzy, Martinique-France), is a touching portrait of a young man struggling for development and coming of age in the French colony of Martinique in the 1930s. The earlier classic *Other Francisco* (Sergio Giral, Cuba - with struggling mid-years in New York) is undoubtedly the most important, analytically significant film ever made on African slavery - and resistance to slavery - in the New World. The film attains historical importance because of its innovative style in demystifying the romantic depiction of slavery in abolitionist novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Francisco* - hence the film's title - and in hundreds of the pro-White planters' South/anti-Black Civil War and reconstruction films, *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation* being two of the least subtle examples.

A common denominator of these African-Diaspora films, no matter the birthplace of the filmmaker, is an Afrocentric sensitivity. Those in the Caribbean draw upon a knowledge of oppressive and repressive political and economic realities imposed and legalized by European colonization and enslavement of Africans. All in all these African-Diaspora filmmakers, with access to better material conditions (technological and economic) than those currently available in Africa, have used varying aesthetic techniques to analyze African peoples' resistance to domination - wherever. all these films deserve wider distribution, commercial and noncommercial, than they have thus far received.

London-based film cooperatives (CEDDO, Sankofa, Black Audio) with multi-year subsidization for production and distribution

from Channel 4, are critically analyzing current, local and international exploitation through such sensitive issues as race, gender, class, identity search and sexual preference.

In Paris, filmmakers are continuing the predominance of French bureaucrats and technicians at all stages of the creative process (pre-production, production, post-production). Lest we forget, most films from Francophone Africa are, in fact, African-French co-productions. Numerous filmmakers have dual addresses in Paris and in Africa.

• **A deeply feminist - not always female - commitment to human and equal rights for both genders.**

Morta Negu (Flora Gomes, a male), Gineau-Bissau's first feature, treating the collective struggle for political independence after five centuries of Portuguese rule; the



Filmmaker Gaston Kabouré of Burkina Faso

significant decline in the distribution of African films:

"Of course, much work needs to be done on audience-building, especially given the fact that many people... still tend to approach African cinema with a sense of uncertainty at best."

Initiatives of the African-Diaspora and other visible minority communities, with such publicly supported cultural and communications entities as CBC, NFB, CRTC, Communications Canada, provincial Ministries of Culture and Communications, provincial educational broadcasters, may lead to a wider aperture of views through film and TV.

Meanwhile, the annual JCA-Vues d'Afrique and other exhibitions offer the rare occasion for Canadians to view at least some of Africa's film and TV productions and to come away at least a little better informed about African dreams and realities as seen through the lens of her filmmakers. •



Sembene Ousmane



Tunisian filmmaker Nejia Ben Mabrouk

semi-autobiographical *Trace* Néjia Ben Mabrouk, Tunisia) who fought for five years to have her film released; *Une Porte sur le ciel* (Farida Benlyazid, Morocco) and *The Citadel* (Mohamed Chouikh, Algeria), about frustrated love and hypocrisy in an Algerian village, are among the recent crop of films with this theme - a theme pursued since Africa's first feature: Ousmane Sembene's *Black Girl* (*La Noire de...*), in 1966. All of Sembene's features between 1966 and 1976 put women at the centre of the drama as he pursued his systematic attack on colonialism and its legacies after political independence.

Despite a host of complex problems dating from the '60s beginning of indigenous filmmaking in Africa (technology, production, distribution, exhibition and censorship), the New African cinema is alive and well and - albeit with zigs and zags - growing, expanding and evolving.

Jim Pine's observation about African and other marginalised films in Britain applies equally to Canada, which has seen in the last decade a

MORE INFO

• Dates of the 5th Journées du cinéma Africain are April 24-30 in Montreal. For dates in other cities, contact: Vues d'Afrique, 417 St-Pierre, Ste. 402, Montréal, Québec H2Y 2M4. Tel.: (514) 284-3322.

• In the fall, an exhibition entitled "The Best of the New African Cinema: Africa and the Diaspora", will tour Canada. The exhibition will be previewed at the annual Canadian African Studies Association conference in Ottawa, May 10-13. Contact: 440 Mt. Stephen, Suite 21, Montreal, Que. H3Y 2X6. Tel.: (514) 989-9917. Or leave message for Dr. Weaver at the Université de Montréal (514) 343-6182.

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