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Moving Peripheries and Marginal Cultures:
Cinema and the "Dark Continent"

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ABSTRACT

Moving Peripheries and Marginal Cultures:
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This thesis asserts the importance of culture in contributing to
meaningful First-Third World dialogue. Drawing from Edward Said's
notion of "orientalism", it is argued that contemporary approaches to
development constitute a "discursive universe" that perpetuates neo-colonial
structures and attitudes, and that is prescriptive, quantitative and
ethnocentric. It is maintained that a dialogue foregrounding culture offers the
basis for a non-hierarchical understanding of difference, within an overall
recognition of cultural specificities.

The theoretical basis for such a project is located in Cultural Studies, a
wide-ranging, inter-disciplinary approach that has evolved out of the
experience of various socially, sexually and ethnically marginalized groups.
Cultural Studies does not so much offer an experimental "model" as it
proposes a number of conceptual terms through which we may glimpse the
nature and dynamics of power and ideology as these operate both within the
larger culture and in particular cultural practices.

Through the dual concepts of "hegemony" (Antonio Gramsci) and
the "politics of signification" (Stuart Hall), African cinema is located as a site
where cultural, political, aesthetic and ideological meanings are contested,
and the hegemony of mainstream commercial cinema eroded. This
hypothesis is explored through a historical, political-economic and formal
analysis of cinema in West Africa. At a broader level, Third World cultural
practices are seen as a "third moment" in the evolution of Cultural Studies, a
means of bringing an international perspective to it.

Finally, the notion of representation provides a bridge between
Cultural Studies and the developmental critique. It is argued that the ability

to generate indigenously rooted "self-representations" is fundamental to a sense of identity that empowers its holders.

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INTRODUCTION

"It is...a perversion to imagine that the discussion on development can be limited to what is called the satisfaction of basic material needs."

(Dag Hammarskjold Report, 1975)

"[L]a philosophie du développement...s'exprime dans le langage étrange d'un nouveau positivisme qui prône le culte des réalisations concrètes et palpables au mépris de l'imagination créatrice et des arts, de la méditation et des spéculations théoriques, des recherches savantes et érudites, bref au mépris des entreprises qui n'ont pas une visée pratique immédiate."

(Christophe Wondji, 76)

Though the following exploration of African cinema will touch upon many issues, it springs most fundamentally from a dissatisfaction with and a need to question contemporary paradigms of international and intercultural communication, and the place of "development" within its dominant frameworks.[1] Since its inception, research into the post-colonial experiences of Third World societies has been marked by a close affiliation with western experiences of societal development while the "models" elaborated have born a strong project orientation, stressing the political, economic and technological constituents of the developmental process. The only indigenous approach to gain currency within Third World Studies, at least within its marxist branch, was that of dependency theory in studies originating with the Economic Commission for Latin America in the late 50's. Despite dependency theory's important contributions toward a more

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It is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a detailed critique of these approaches. I am referring to a wide spectrum of works, ranging from classical "modernization theories", often known as the "dominant paradigm", to theories of cultural imperialism and dependency, as well as theories of intercultural communication, a primarily American-based inter-disciplinary field in the social sciences.

complex, case-specific and wholistic understanding of the nature of inter-national relations, it too bore the mark of its predominantly political-economic and sociological origins.

The recognition of Third World issues as a growing area of concern, both within policy and academic arenas, was limited by a singular and disconcerting lack of interest in ideas and writings that did not fit within the accepted canons of development theory. I am thinking here particularly of those writers, philosophers, artists and political activists whose works have reflected a broad concern with post-colonial <u>culture</u> and whose ideas often emerged from a direct and active, if not a leadership, role within decolonization/liberation movements[2] The foregrounding of culture and ideology in these writings, both as encompassing ideals and specific sites of struggle, did not necessarily imply a denial or lack of interest in quantitative' aspects of development. It could more usefully be seen as an epistemological shift, a rejection of approaches which relegated culture to a residual category, an "effect", within the domain of concretely measurable knowledge.

The focal point of this thesis may be situated in the development/ culture/communication nexus and in the way these intersecting elements are played out, or refracted, on the African cinematic screen. In considering for a moment the relationship between communication and development, we find none of the ambiguity or uneasiness obtaining in the development-culture dyad. Indeed, from the mainstream view of communication as the "magic multiplier" of development (Schramm, 1963: 51) to its perception as the newly privileged instrument of neo-colonialism (Schiller, 1976), communication has figured centrally in development studies. An even clearer affinity can be discerned between communication and culture, as language, literature, fine arts, new media and aesthetics are the cultural forms which make up much of the

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2. Among others, the writings of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Amilcar Cabral, Paulo Freire, Julius Nyere, and Kwame Nkrumah.

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stock-in-trade of communication studies. And, as part of the movement in development theory over the past 30 years has been away from strictly quantitative analyses towards a greater emphasis on "quality of life" issues, so the theoretical trajectory in communication studies has been away from information theory and process models towards the epistemologically and methodologically richer terrain of cultural studies. Lacking in this triumverate has been any explicit theorization of the link between culture and development.

Whether or not it is possible to locate an observable point of convergence between development practice and the communication theory located in cultural studies, it remains that culture cannot be denied just because it tends to throw off some developmental equation. The theoretical and practical ramifications of such a juncture is one that merits consideration, in particular the contribution that cultural studies can make to a more complex, critical and equitable understanding of development issues. Inherent in the foregoing is a recognition that cultural studies themselves owe much to theoretical and critical insights emerging from Third World experiences. This further clarifies the nature of western relations with cultures whose rhetorical constitution as "Third World", and all that this has implied, loses substance in their constant affirmation as something more than the product of western imagination. The cultural discourses of marginal groups or nations, as they have struggled to rekindle and reassert their identities, offer themselves as re-sources for what have variously been described as the morally ageing (Mattelart, 1984) and excremental (Kroker, 1988) cultures of the West.

In Africa or elsewhere, cinema as cultural practice cannot be understood in isolation from the larger social, economic and political environment, the configurations of power, which determine its possibilities of existence. Without entirely discrediting existing paradigms of international communication and development, it is necessary to widen the terms of discussion, to position culture as a space within which an expanded

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and revised notion of "development" may be negotiated. While theories of cultural imperialism or of dependency may be necessary to an explanation of the history and current status of African film industries, it is their sufficiency that must be questioned. To say that African film industries are embedded in relations of power is to point simultaneously to concrete economic relations and political conditions, and to a less calculable realm of culture and ideology which nonetheless has, to borrow from Althusser, its own materiality. This notion of power further needs to be amplified with a recognition of what Edward Said calls the "intellectual authority" exercised over the Third World within western culture, an authority which also infiltrates academic institutions and the whole discourse on development.

> "There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces." (Said, 1978: 19-20)

In sum, the notion of discourse as it is used here, which Said borrows from Foucault, is of a complex system comprising the texts, representations, myths and ideas about the Third World, as well as those socio-economic and political institutions which sustain a current situation of western cultural hegemony. Following this, the primary impulse of this paper has two components: firstly, to question and perhaps disturb prevailing academic and policy-based discourses on development, and secondly, to provide a case study of the way in which cultural domination is both realized and eroded in practice. It is, in short, an examination of the theory and practice of western cultural hegemony, but also, following Gramsci, of the conjunctural and contingent nature of that hegemony. But this is to anticipate the discussion which follows, a detailed consideration of the paper's underlying theory and epistemology.

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CHAPTER I

CULTURE, IDEOLOGY, HEGEMONY

> "Ofeyi lauged. 'Yes, I came in search of converts. Aiyétomo,
> Aiyéro, they were here all the time while I brought models
> from the European world...'
> Ahime stopped him. 'No. It was a most beneficial thing
> for us, your coming here all puffed with your sense of
> mission. It was good to know that our ways have always
> been the dream of mankind all through the ages and among
> people so far apart.'"
>
> (Wole Soyinka, 1973: 12)

Cultural studies emerged from a reassessment of critical (marxist based) theory in the light of the experiences of various racially, sexually, ethnically, socially and culturally marginalized groups.[1] Stuart Hall has provided a useful entry into the definition of cultural studies by distinguishing between what he calls its "culturalist" and "structuralist" branches. (1980) The first traces its roots to the British tradition of marxist historiography and social ethnography, and specificially, to the works of Raymond Williams (The Long Revolution, Culture & Society), William Hoggarth (The Uses of Literacy) and E.P. Thompson (The Making of the English Working Class). In contrast to these sweeping and inclusive analyses, the structuralist approach was premised on a much more precise theorizing of culture and the social in terms of ideological and discursive systems of signification. Notwithstanding their theoretical and methodological differences, a common problematic informed these nascent branches of cultural studies, one of elaborating, within a materialist epistemology, an understanding of the relationship between the individual

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The following discussion of Cultural Studies owes much to a joint M.A. and Ph.D. seminar given by Martin Allor in the Concordia Department of Communications in the spring of 1988.

and the social and between what Marx had originally termed the base and superstructural levels of the social formation. They were also bound by an explicitly political commitment, a recognition of the importance of "lived" experience, and of popular culture and consciousness as valid categories of analysis.

It is erroneous however to suggest that the trajectory of cultural studies has been a smooth and harmonious synthesis of these two strands. The attempt to forge such a grand synthesis came up precisely against the essential irreconcilability of their methodologies, the first premised on a political-economic/ethnographic understanding of culture which located the individual at "street level" and within specific contexts, the second on a discursive, semiotic and psycholanalytic analysis of ideology which situated the individual in relation to abstract textual systems and institutional practices. Two problems thus revealed themselves: first, that of attempting to extrapolate conjunctural studies (eg. the subcultural studies of Dick Hebdige) to other sites and secondly, of simultaneously maintaining a "high theoretical" approach and a conjunctural perspective.

Two historical and theoretical moments, both emerging in the early 70's, can be seen to have helped dislodge cultural studies from its impasse. The feminist moment occurred as women's voices began to be raised in political struggles and inaugurated, in a more theoretical vein, the placement of gender as a site of analysis, the nodal point within a larger system of social contradictions. The second began with the re-discovery of the philosophical, political and cultural thought of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian socialist whose major works, written during his emprisonment under Mussolini, were not translated into English until the 1970's. These moments were distinguished by their relation to concrete experiences of social, political and cultural struggle, rather than by their attempt to prescribe modes of action based on a priori theoretical systems. If feminist theory indicated a way out of the impasse in cultural studies by offering a site for investigating the relationship between discourse, the social and

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subjectivity, Gramsci's formulations opened the door to what Stuart Hall has termed a non-determinist, non-essentialist understanding of the social formation. Indeed, Gramsci's theories rest most fundamentally on the notion of conjuncture, on the historically and contextually specific nature of political, economic, cultural and ideological formations. While these insights were to some extent already implicit in, for instance, Foucault's studies of the triumverate of power, knowledge and discursive formations, or Derrida's textual/deconstructive strategies and notion of "différance", equally implicit in the latter were a privileging of the discursive and metaphoric realms over that of the "real". As Hall puts it:

> "This seem[ed] to dissolve the real theoretical gains made by the recognition of difference, of plurality in discourse, of the nonessentialist, multiaccentual character of ideology - pushing them over the brink into the gospel of absolute diversity." (1988: 52)

Gramsci's works can be seen rather straightforwardly as reflections on broad themes of history, culture and philosophy from a marxist perspective. They can also be read biographically, based on his own situation at the site of multiple marginalities. Born into extreme poverty in Sardinia, the ethnic and economic periphery of Italy, beset by physical deformity and chronic ill-health, Gramsci had, by the age of 17, acquired first-hand experience of the socialist politics which were to become his life's work. (Gramsci, 1971: xviii-xxi) While his political and intellectual formation drove him to the leadership of the Italian Communist Party, and ultimately into prison, they also occasioned his split from the hard-line positions taken up at the Second and Third Communist Internationals. (Gramsci, 198': 5) It is this revision of classical marxist dogma, in particular the scope and coherence of its reformulation, that served as the basis for a new revision of marxist orthodoxy in the 1970's.

Gramsci's "reading against the grain" of many of the mainstream currents in marxism at the time, largely emerging from post-revolutionary developments in the Soviet Union, can be partially ascribed to his close

involvement in Italian socialist politics throughout the rise and consolidation of fascism. The complexities and specificity of that struggle precluded, for Gramsci, a dogmatic interpretation of Marx's views on revolution but rather required a contextual understanding of its dynamics. Among the more radical refutations of Soviet-inspired purism was his view of the nature of State power. Against the Leninist position that the State must be "seized" by a proletarian army under the leadership of an intellectual vanguard Party (Lenin, 1976), Gramsci posited a much slower accretion of hegemony on the basis of "organic" ideological linkages between intellectuals and the population. (Gramsci, 1971: Part I/ch. 1) A corollary to this was the refutation of the necessary class-basis of revolution, contingent on his involvement with the Southern Question (i.e. Southern Italian nationalism) and a general concern with issues of nationalism and racism. (Gramsci, 1971: 70-74)

Among the key concepts defining the specificity of Gramsci's thought, the notion of "hegemony" has received widest currency in a broad range of disciplines. Gramsci premises this notion on the dialectics of State and civil society, "force" and "consent", and "theoretical philosophy" and "common sense". (Gramsci, 1971: part II/ch. 2, part III) A particular hegemonic configuration is at once cause and condition of these interacting forces and locations of power. The originality of Gramsci's formulations thus resides in his vision of power and ideology as a structural condition obtaining between constantly shifting levels of the social formation. In other words, hegemony is seen to be secured not only through a coercive State apparatus, but equally through cultural leadership (the cultivation of consent) and appeals to popular ideologies (common sense) circulating in civil society. (ibid) Gramsci's career as a cultural critic, particularly of Italian literary and theatrical traditions, but also of the classics as well as the rapidly growing forms of "popular culture" (cinema, serial novels) provide a third entry into the originality of his thought. (Gramsci, 1985) If Gramsci's rereading of marxist thought paved the way for a less determinist

understanding of power and ideology, his cultural writings consolidated those gains by elevating the civil arena as a site of multiple and complex determinations.

It is to Stuart Hall that we must turn for the most systematic appropriation of Gramsci's thought in the light of contemporary realities. Hall's works in themselves constitute a richly creative and original effort to build bridges across both cultural and theoretical discourses. He not only appropriates Gramscian ideas but augments them with insights from structuralism, anthropology, linguistics and semiotics, within an overall project of clarifying the complex nature of ideological determination and reproduction. (see especially Hall, 1982) Like Gramsci, Hall considers the ideological and cultural realms to be of central importance in the struggle for hegemony, further specifying that they operate primarily through language and other discursive systems. The struggle for hegemony consists in a struggle over meanings that are not fixed but which exist in relation to other elements in a discursive field While this notion of inter-textuality or inter-discursivity owes much to structural linguistics, Hall's definition of the "discursive field" draws on Gramsci's notion of common sense - the already-known, historically sedimented common stock of knowledge. (ibid.: 76-77) (Hall here credits Gramsci with enabling a historical conceptualization of discourse.) Hall further appeals to the Russian linguist Volosinov whose concept of "multi-accentuality" posits the intersecting within and struggle over the ideological sign of differently-oriented social interests. (ibid.: 77) Acknowledging his debt to Gramsci and Volosinov for introducing into the domain of ideology and language the idea of a "struggle over meaning", Hall further specifies the nature of this process, "...(one) of discursive articulation and disarticulation(, its) outcomes, in the final result, (depending) on the relative strength of the "forces in struggle", the balance between them at any strategic moment,...", (ibid.: 78) or, as he terms it elsewhere, "the politics of signification".

As richly suggestive as this formulation is, only a few salient points

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can here be addressed. The first consists in the significant reworking of neo-marxist theories of ideology, particularly that of Louis Althusser (1971). In contrast to the latter's "determination in the last instance" by class and economic force, and against his attempt to forge a grand synthesis between structuralism, psychoanalysis and ideology, Hall proposes the necessity of recognizing the historically contingent and conjunctural nature of all forms of signification. Against Althusser's "always already constituted subject", interpellated by an all-pervasive ideology and its apparatusses, Hall places subjectivities in flux, formed at the intersection of numerous and conflicting forces, ideologies and practices. Thus, while acknowledging Althusser's significant contribution to an understanding of ideology as material practice, and of ideological production and reproduction, he refuses the functionalist bent of Althusser's theory, noting that it became difficult, on this basis, "...to discern how anything but the "dominant ideology" could ever be reproduced in discourse." (Hall, 1982: 77-78)

In short, Hall appropriates Althusser's notion of society as a complex structure, but refuses the hermeticism which Althusser subsequently imposes on it, preferring a definition of the social formation as a "structure in dominance", "...a complex structure in which it is impossible to reduce one level of practice to another in some easy way." (Hall, 1985: 90) By taking up Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Hall gives himself the theoretical means of escaping this reductionist quagmire. While hegemony allows for the existence of a dominant ideological force field, its circulation within and between State and civil society, in relations of force and consent, and in systematic philosophies and popular ideologies, precludes closure and instead asserts the centrality of the dialectic in marxist theory. In Hall's words: "Ideology also _sets limits_ to the degree to which a society-in-dominance can easily, smoothly and functionally reproduce itself." (ibid.: 113)

It is within such a constellation of contradictory tendencies and practices that this essay proposes to situate African cinema, a network

comprising political, economic, social, ideological and cultural factors at local, national and international levels. At the risk of being repetitious, the conjunctural and contingent nature of this framework must be stressed, a strategy which goes beyond mere description but stops short of prescriptive or definitive answers. While lending coherence and discipline to analysis, this approach avoids a deterministic view of power and ideology and the larger problem of theory guaranteeing, a priori, the answers. Its implicit critique of positivism and essentialism eschews old certainties and seems particularly well-suited to an era of sliding signifiers and radically shifting alliances. Though there is a danger of conferring a false unity at an international level, of slipping into a "world-systems" approach and all its attendant problems, it has been convincingly argued that an overriding market logic confers on the international production and circulation of films a certain systemic coherence. (see, eg. Mattelart, 1984) As the geographical and economic boundaries of this global system and its sub-systems are permeable, so its achieved hegemony is unstable and shifting and must, as Hall puts it, ceaselessly be renewed and reenacted. (1988: 54) Indeed, the struggle of Third World nations for cultural and political self-determination, particularly in the wake of the failure of developmental paradigms to bring their promised prosperity, suggests a possible third moment in the elaboration of cultural studies, a way of broadening its scope from a local to a global level.

How might the relationship between culture, ideology and hegemony and African cinema be articulated? Broadly speaking, cultural studies provides a familiar vocabulary, an analytical framework steeped in western social-scientific premises that clarifies the nature of "cultural politics". In more precise terms, African cinema falls primarily within the domain of "civil society"; its effectivity as a system of representation must be sought within the theatre of consent and common sense rather than that of coercion and official ideology. While the status of cinema as institution and its economic and political conditions of existence must be considered, it

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is equally important to explore the extent to which it generates or undermines consent and connects at an experiential level with its constituent audiences.

This location of cinematic practice within a domain of popular culture and ideologies bearing differential and often problematic relations with their "official" counterparts does not imply its distance from political activity. It simply marks a distinction between "official" politics and the "politics of signification". To Hall's statement that the struggle to determine meaning is both a discursive one as well as a very practical struggle over access to the means of signification, (1982: 76-78), we might add a third level of contestation over cinema as <u>sign</u>. Such a struggle is less over particular textual representations or practices than it is to define the role and meaning of cinema within the context of African societies. Following Volosinov's notion of the sign as an arena of class struggle, we might say that the apparatus of film is itself an ideological sign whose meanings and uses are not fixed to any originary context but are constantly being dis- and re-articulated.

The more important question, however, is what this analysis of African cinema can bring to contemporary critical theory and cultural studies? For critical theory to retain its dynamism, its integrity as an explanatory paradigm, it must constantly replenish itself in concrete instances of cultural and political struggle. It must include a commitment to what Mikhail Bakhtin has called "dialogic" communication, or a dialogue of history, and address the "assymmetrical nature of cultural exchange" between First and Third Worlds (Burton, 4) My concern in this project is therefore less to test the claims of western critical theory to "...generality if not universality of application against instances of cultural and historical specificity." (ibid.: 6) than it is to explore the ways in which critical discourses are elaborated in the first place, on a specific cultural terrain and within a specific epistemological context. It is, in other words, concerned to ascertain the influence of African cinematic praxis on a Western culture with

universal pretentions.

Towards a definition of African cinema

There is no essential or precise characterisitic that may be said to "define" African cinema, only African cinemas defined by their location at multiple points of intersection. African cinema is in a constant state of flux, of creation, of dialectical tension within its own sphere and with the economic, political and ideological currents operating in the larger environment. These complex levels of determination and their cultural products have been well described by Paul Willemen as

> "...new, politically as well as cinematically illuminating types of filmic discourse..." (by authors who start from) "...a recognition of the many-layeredness of their own cultural-historical formations, with each layer being shaped by complex connections between intra- as well as international forces and traditions." (Willemen, 1987: 8)

The metaphor of a web which might be invoked to express these tightly interwoven levels and spheres of identity formation has as its unfortunate corollary a certain loss of precision, a danger that the diversity of African films and cinematic practices will be diminished in the search for a "theory of complexity". Broad traits that may have defined African cinema in an earlier period appear inadequate following three decades of post-independence growth, just as the term "Third World" is meaningful only at a broad level of historical generalization. While African cinema may still be marginal in global terms, and while this fact may still be a rallying point for a politics of culture, internal diversification and growth imposes the need to constantly redefine both the term and its derivative politics. African cinema now boasts its own systems of center/periphery, mainstream/margins. The extent to which these potential areas of conflict are either realized or minimized is both dependent on and inseparable from the larger process of reconciling national, regional and pan-african identities and interests. Perhaps the most precise statement one can make about African cinema is that it is itself isomorphic with the paradox that

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characterizes African societies as a whole: culturally diverse and complex in content, it is, in economic terms, bound into a common condition of marginality.

An initial vector in this web of influences that have defined and circumscribed African cinema is found in colonial and post-colonial experiences. Among the legacies of a century of colonial occupation has been the partitioning of Africa into linguistic/cultural, economic and political blocs that were (and remain) primarily a product of European economic needs and the imposition of its values. Post-independence Africa has, to a great extent, continued to be shaped by external constraints and exigencies. Old lines of communication and spheres of influence were rerouted or reshaped by the post-war shifting of global power centers from Europe to the United States and the Soviet Union, their former "peripheries". Thus, while the decolonisation of Africa was clear evidence of the waning of European economic and political power, it is also clear that decolonisation heralded a re-newed colonisation which on the one hand, unburdened Europe of its administrative responsibilities and, on the other, transformed Africa into an ideological and economic battleground between old and new colonial powers.

This provides a convenient entry point into the second major axis or vector along which lies African cinematic history, and which, though intersecting with exogenous influences, partakes more closely of an internal or indigenous realm. It is, more precisely, about efforts at individual, State and regional levels to write the history of African cinema and as such, originates with independence. Since this history has largely been about the denial and/or re-defining of colonial/national boundaries, and about re-discovering pre-colonial history, it is an indispensable adjunct to the above externally-focused analysis in any comprehensive treatment of African cinematic culture.

There are in turn two aspects to this internal dimension. On the one hand, there is the very pragmatic recognition that the future of African

cinema rests on such an interlocking network of individual, State and regional initiatives, of a need for these three levels to work closely together if anything like a viable indigenous film culture is to survive. As in other areas, the attempt to juggle what are often conflicting goals has not been easy. The effort has, however, created a better understanding of problems and possibilities, and provided a number of concrete, indigenously-rooted models and experiences from which future efforts may be inspired.

A second feature of this internal dynamic partakes of what western theorists of popular culture have labelled the "affective" realm. While we can relatively easily tell the story of African cinema through its situation within an international context of cinematic production, distribution and exhibition, or on the basis of practical indigenous initiatives, we have still failed to capture that impetus that is simply the _desire_ to produce and disseminate films that speak to pertinent values and concerns. This desire is manifested in the sheer resiliency of filmmakers in Africa, their perseverance in the face of apparently insurmountable constraints. Without proposing a political economy of desire, it is important to reiterate that the disturbing of existing hegemonic formations, and the creation of new ones, occurs as much through ideological and cultural processes as though economic and structural ones. This is what Stuart Hall has called the "politics of signification", the contestation of cinematic space not purely for its utilitarian (i.e. economic) value but for its signifying potential, its cultural value.

In both these exogenous and indigenous dimensions, African cinema serves to challenge our assumptions about the exercise of power and the maintenance of hegemonic fields of influence. Despite the considerable influence still exerted by older and more recent world powers, there is a strong argument to be made that the collision of the old Europe centered world with a bi-polar one, in particular as it played itself out in marginal locations, fragmented not only particular hegemonic formations but the nature of hegemony itself. It brought in its wake both the dispersal of power

into a multi-polar world <u>and</u> a fundamental re-evaluation of the nature of its exercise. Despite the inadequacy of such concepts as "first", "second" and "third" worlds, and the difficult history of such forums as the non-aligned movement and other regional groupings, their existence signals a profound transformation in the nature of global relations, as of Third World self-perceptions.

From this perspective, the post-colonial diagnosis for Africa and for its cinematic culture is neither unequivocally good nor bad. While its people and cultures are still prey to fickle winds and unscrupulous exploitation, independence has also meant the possibility of choosing beyond European models and prescriptions, whether these be Soviet, American, or from a growing range of indigenous and Third World experiences. This diversity of impulses and cross-cutting affiliations is often seen to have worked in Africa's disfavour; to have engendered a crisis of identities, balkanization and fragmentation, as though such problems were unknown in the "developed" world. This selective interpretation stems from a development discourse that is, as noted earlier, primarily western in origin and quantitative in nature, and which has perceived Africa's post-independence trajectory in terms of its failures rather than its successes. Little recognition is given to what has been a pragmatic effort to draw from the institutions, ideas and technologies of western culture and to marry them meaningfully with indigenous cultural, political and social traditions and needs.

For all its exotic "otherness" and cultural distinctiveness, entry into the world(s) of African cinema will bear few surprises for the reader conversant with the experiences of any marginal group striving for social, political and/or cultural self-expression. It is a story reproduced in countless struggles by countless filmmakers. Nevertheless, the following will be an attempt at mapping out African cinema in all its specificity both diachronically, by following the historical courses that it has carved out for itself, and synchronically, by locating the sp ,tio-temporal universe that it

currently occupies within the larger domain of cinematic culture.

Cinema in Africa is intimately bound up with the history of colonialism, and its post-colonial history with the maintenance, under new rules and constraints, of spheres of influence. Chapters two and three of this thesis chart the terrain of African cinema from a historical point of view, as the play of political and economic forces have structured its environment. They analyze the multiple ways these spheres of influence are both perpetuated and challenged. They are, to revert to Gramscian terminology, about the way different and often conflicting sources of identity work with and against hegemonic processes of identity formation.

While African cinema forces us to acknowledge the factors that maintain it in what Tehar Cheriaa has termed a condition of "abnormality", a paradoxical situation of simultaneous "objective" existence and "functional" non-existence. (Cheriaa, 1983: 28), it also compels a closer look at the politics of culture, a fundamental re-evaluation of paradigms which insist on the overwhelming importance of economic factors in circumscribing action. The partiality of such an approach and the definition of African cinema that it entails becomes evident in the light of the persistence of a committed African cinema and the "miraculous" nature of each film produced. Chapter four will therefore shift the discussion from political-economic determinations to film as cultural artefact, considering the way African filmmakers translate their social and political concerns into cinematic language and aesthetics.

CHAPTER II

THE PRE-HISTORY OF '..RICAN CINEMA

"The movie,...is an agressive and imperial form that explodes outward into other cultures."
(Marshal McLuhan, 1966: 258)

The task of reconstructing African cinematic history necessarily begins with the late 19th century European scramble for Africa. This is not to suggest that European colonialism was the only, or the most important factor in the history and modern development of Africa. Rather, it concurs with the view that colonialism was but one episode in a continuing saga of historical changes, some internally generated, some proceeding from external incursions, all contributing to the contemporary specificity of African culture and societies. In cinematic terms however, European colonialism was a decisive moment. Indeed, both practically and ideologically, cinema was intimately linked with the project of colonialism. The development and perfecting of different cinematographic apparatusses took place concurrently with the partition of Africa among various European nations, simultaneous processes of outward expansion and absorption into the European range of vision and field of control. In both these senses, the development of cinema was an adjunct to the European project of drawing African colonies more tightly into its sphere of influence, of capturing, freezing in time, framing, anthropologizing, and ultimately "barbarizing" (Vieyra, 1969: 37-8) the African. As the realm of the "eye" grew in step with that of the "I", the controlling gaze with the dominance of the ego, so did cinema become one among a range of means used to control (fear of) the African "other", in a manner that would appear to justify "primitive" fears of the photographic process

The scramble for Africa gradually gave way to the consolidation of power blocs on the African continent: territories governed primarily by England, France, Portugal and Belgium. By the 1930's, all of the colonial

administrations had begun to implement film production units and to elaborate policies as to their function in colonial society. As one among a variety of structures implanted by missionaries, administrators and traders, these early cinemas reveal much about the different colonial styles, about the differential nature of the exercise of power. It is that overall "ideology" of hegemonic control, as revealed in specific cinematic practices, that is at issue here, that which, along with industrial, economic and institutional infrastructures, has guaranteed a continuum between colonial and post-colonial periods.

The limits of space preclude consideration of all these colonial spheres. It is therefore my intention in this paper to cover only those governed by Britain and France, ultimately limiting the analysis to emergent feature film industries to West Africa This choice stems from a variety of factors. First, among nations competing for colonies in Africa, the imperial enterprises implemented by Britain and France were the most extensive and most highly developed. Superior economic and technological power enabled Britain and France to penetrate and "develop" Africa on a scale unmatched by any other European colonizing nation. Secondly, the constituent nations of West Africa, partly owing to their colonial legacies, were and remain the most cinematically productive of sub-Saharan Africa. As well, because it is a "naturally" cohesive geographical entity, it offers ready access into the ways national and regional interests have been accommodated and conflicts overcome in an attempt to maximize bargaining power vis à vis the international community.

Some practical difficulties arise in a comparative analysis of different colonial styles as they relate to film. The history of African cinema prior to and since indepedence has largely been written within the context of an "afro-francophone cultural diaspora", that of English speaking Africa being comparatively unexplored. This difference in the availabi ty of research material is mirrored at the level of film production, with "francophone" West Africa clearly in the lead. Hence, what may appear here as an analysis

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skewed towards the growth of cinematic industries in what were previously French colonies reflects the much larger role cinema has played in the growth of mass culture and arts in these countries, relative to their "anglophone" neighbours.[1]

The following two sections give an overview of film production during the colonial period and attempt to provide some understanding of the differential nature of hegemony exercised by Britain and France in West Africa. This will lead into a consideration of their roles in determining cinematic practices and policies in independent Africa.

Britain

British involvement in film production began in 1935 with sponsorship by the colonial office of the British Film Institute of a "Bantu Educational Film Experiment". Financing for this project was secured from major industries and corporations closely connected with the colonial enterprise (i.e. resource extraction, including mining and plantations, etc.) Despite its questionable "educational" orientation, and the dictatorial control exercised by its director, L.A. Notcutt, this experimental project was remarkable for its establishment of a series of entirely self-contained 16mm. film units, capable of producing films from start to finish. (Diawara, 1984: 9-11) Over the two years of its existence, the project produced 35 short films in 9 languages The films were used to promote colonial activities, and intended to facilitate adaptation to colonial conditions and institutions and to reinforce work in the classroom. They featured local folklore as a means of preserving African traditions. (ibid.) Such objectives were consonant with the British system of 'indirect rule", a policy of safeguarding indigenous structures and coopting traditional figures of authority. Indirect rule was a philosophy dictated by economic necessity (it quite simply alleviated the costs

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1. This is not intended as an invidious comparison. Theatre and literature have been much more important forms of popular/mass cultural expression in former British colonies. (See Barber, 1987)

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of colonial administration) but was also predicated on the belief that British institutions and culture were too sophisticated for the average African to comprehend. (Ayandele, 1971: 152-57) The profoundly racist and paternalistic attitudes towards their African subjects exemplified in cinematic practices and goals were not specific to this domain but were endemic to the British colonial project in Africa as a whole.

With termination of the educational film experiment, a more rationalized and economical system of Colonial Film Units (CFU's) was instituted. The system was comprised of dispersed film production units and a central headquarters in each of the three British regional enclaves - East, Central and West Africa. Material shot by local film units was sent to a central organization for the more difficult stages of processing and editing. The original impetus for CFU's, to create a network for the distribution of wartime propaganda films, shifted in the post-war period to one of disseminating films on British etiquette, promoting consumer products, and generally encouraging the adoption of western practices and standards. The essential lack of appeal of these films to African audiences, recognized by John Grierson in a 1949 report commissioned by UNESCO, led to the establishment of a school in Accra, Gold Coast (now Ghana) for the training of African film-makers. (Diawara, 1984: 13-14)

Through the 1950's, and in the face of increasingly militant nationalist and independence movements, the British gradually relinquished their financial responsibility in colonial film production. In 1955, colonies were asked to take over its expense. The British-based Overseas Film and Television Center replaced CFU's, acting as a point of coordination between autonomous film production units, as a training school for film and television crews, a location for post-production work and a retailer of film equipment. (ibid.) This administrative reform effectively maintained dependent relations between Britain and its colonies, while eliminating the financial burden of investing in colonial enterprises.

Despite the considerable infrastructural development of film

industries in Britain's West African colonies, their associated production, training and distribution practices worked against the formation, following independence, of autonomous film sectors. Foremost among such practices must be cited British unwillingness to countenance the training of African film makers at a level higher than assistant to production teams and directors provided by the London-based Colonial Film Unit. Even in Ghana, where the Gold Coast Film Unit (GCFU) assumed independence in 1950, five years before the closing of the CFU's, creative control over films continued to be exercised by independent British filmmakers, with little opportunity for students emerging from the Accra-based film school to direct their own films. The dependence of the GCFU on the Overseas Film and Television Center was also ensured by the practice of making films in 35 mm. (ibid.:16) The British colonial period of filmmaking can be summed up as one which provided the technical facilities, but little in the way of a cinematic culture. This was perhaps most crucial at the level of the formation of public tastes. Faced with a choice between badly-made productions of the CFU and "mass entertainment" movies of American, European, Asian and Indian origin, audiences inevitably chose the latter. (Présence africaine # 14-15, 1957)

The production of films of a didactic, informational and documentary nature continued following independence in Ghana and Nigeria, as did the locating of film production structures within Ministries of Information. As Roy Armes notes with respect to the virtual absence of feature film production in former British colonies:

> "Film (was) seen as a tool - a medium of mass communication
> with enormous educational potential - but not as a means of
> expression for the national culture and identity." (1987: 217)

This is not to suggest that documentaries or newsreels are without cultural significance, simply to note the potentially much greater importance of foreign-dominated entertainment sectors, operating in one of the largest distribution networks remaining in Africa following independence. (Vieyra, 1975: 400-12) A cursory look at the post-independence experience in Ghana and Nigeria in their film sectors reveals both persistent features of and

important divergences from structures and practices established during the colonial period. In many ways, film and broadcasting systems in these two countries are replicas of those in Britain, of its deeply rooted tradition of State-supported documentary film production and broadcasting networks.

Despite inheriting some of the most sophisticated cinematic infrastructures in all of sub-Saharan Africa, including the capacity to shoot, process and edit both 16mm and 35mm film, the documentaries, newsreels, propaganda films and occasional features produced in the first decade of independence were, with few exceptions, the work of foreign directors (Vieyra, 1975: 98-103, 148-53). Both countries made television the privileged instrument of national cultural development. This was particularly important in Nigeria where television adaptations of African plays under the direction of Segun Olunsola provided early indigenous input in the area of entertainment. The general trend in both countries was towards a clear separation of powers between State-sponsored documentary and televisual sectors and a largely privatized commercial realm of feature film production. State sectors put little effort into supporting feature film production, either through financing, the provision of facilities of production and post-production, or by curbing the power of foreign (U.S. and Lebanese) distributors whose monopolies in both countries discouraged filmmakers from even attempting to produce and market films locally. (Opubor/ Nwuneli/Oreh, 8-9, Aig-Imoukhuede, 49-51)

Current shortcomings of film production in these States can thus generally be traced back to unstable foundations laid in colonial times, even if critics now are more likely to find fault with post-independence regimes. With respect to Nigeria:

> "Even now it appears that the relevant arms of the government think narrowly of film only as a medium of disseminating government policies, and a medium of informing or at best educating the masses, rather than an industry as relevant to the building of our nation as that most elusive steel industry." (Dosumu, 62)

According to Kwate Nee-Owoo, an almost identical situation prevails in

Ghana:

> "Les activités the l'Association (cinématographique
> ghanéenne) devaient couvrir l'organisation de la distribution
> et de l'exploitation des films nationaux, mais elles ne semblent
> pas avoir progressé en ce domaine au cours des dernières
> années. La production, quant à elle, reste limitée le plus
> souvent à des documents qui servent d'auxiliaires visuels à
> l'enseignement et à l'éducation. Enfin, la diffusion s'est
> principalement appliquée à servir les besoins de l'Etat en
> matière d'information." (1981)

Another important feature of the Ghanaian and Nigerian experiences in cinema has been the lack of dialogue or cooperation between the two countries, despite their proximity to each other, their shared histories and interests. This is a clear legacy of the British system of "indirect rule" which treated each colony as economically, politically and administratively self-contained. This in turn entailed a piecemeal process of decolonization with separate timetables for each colony which, along with the widely flung nature of Britain's African holdings, militated against any systematic efforts toward cooperation in the post-independence period. Following independence, an unofficial system of indirect rule seems to have been perpetuated as the Colonial Office was absorbed into the Commonwealth Affairs Office and African nations joined that "...appealing complex of sentiment, moral obligation and shared assumptions..." known as the British Commonwealth. (Webb, 616) The maintenance of bilateral ties with Britain, whether symbolic or in terms of access to markets, were privileged over the cultivation of multi-lateral, horizontal alliances between independent African nations.

If membership in the Commonwealth signalled a transformation in the nature of British hegemony in Africa, the significance of that body was largely symbolic as compared with the economic (and cultural) influence wielded by Anglo-American interests in an alliance cemented throughout this century. Independence inaugurated, in Britain's past colonies, a new era of technological and aesthetic dependence on the West, as they became prey to the shifting tides of empire. American, Indian, Asian and European films

had been channelled into Africa through the Colonial Office basically since the silent days of film. In 1947, Britain imposed a quota system on non-British films, but with decolonization, restraints on access to the Nigerian and Ghanain markets disappeared. These overlapping and shifting hegemonic spheres were revealed in clearly delimited sectors: State-controlled broadcasting systems and documentary film production units inherited from Britain alongside private feature film industries essentially modelled on Hollywood. (N'Gakane/ Nee-Owoo, 1981)

Ultimately, the most enduring legacy of colonialism that can account for the relative poverty of film cultures in "anglophone" Africa is less tangible or material than it is psychological. Ghanaian and Nigerian cinema were profoundly colonized, inheriting from the British a pragmatic, empiricist attitude toward the role of film in national development, with little sense of its cultural value, alongside an audience nurtured on the aesthetics of American westerns, Indian melodramas and Hong Kong "action" movies. As Manthia Diawara argues, film policies have perpetuated both dependence on outside filmmakers, and the making of films that are racialist and degrading to the intelligence of Africans. (1984, 22-5)

The release in 1980 of the Ghanaian feature, Love Brewed in an African Pot, seemed to augur a brighter future for independent cinema in Ghana. The film garnered large audiences at home and in other "anglophone" African countries, received the "Prix de l'Authenticité" at the Festival of Pan-African Cinema at Ouagadougou, and has enjoyed a certain amount of international renown. The film's popular success has in turn created a more favorable environment for future film productions in Ghana (notably among private investors) and was a direct influence in the creation of a Film Fund to be financed by existing institutions. (Nee-Owoo, 1981) It did not however make it any easier for the film's director, Kwaw Ansah, to raise the financing for his second feature, Heritage. Five years in the making and recently released, it too has met with popular success in its home market. Despite a recent statement by Ghana's Secretary for Information regarding the

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need to break international distribution monopolies and to make the 41st year of the Ghanaian film industry "...a year of positive action to create an awareness in our society of the potentials of the industry." (Nee-Owoo, 1988), the future for a "national" Ghanain cinema remains uncertain. Television continues to occupy a priority position in "official" perceptions of national cultural development, while private institutions and investors are still only vaguely interested in promoting an industry that can enhance the cultural base of the people. (Ansah/Arasoughly) A more promising direction for a progressive Ghanian cinema seems to lie in the development of affiliations between independent filmmakers working through private production houses, universities and such British based groups as the Black Audio Film Collective. (Nee-Owoo, 1988: 2373)

An ironic twist has in turn seen the emergence of one of West Africa's most prolific feature filmmakers from Nigeria's independent sector. Ola Balogun's films, original blends of popular cultural forms and commercialism, have proven as contentious within critical circles as they have been successful with audiences. Balogun received his training at the Paris-based Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques (IDHEC) and so was somewhat less influenced by the British documentary tradition. He also shares with other pioneers of a commercial Nigerian film industry a distinctly "Hollywoodian" conception of the "popular" and of success. (Diawara, 1984: 19-20, Boughedir, 1981) The popular appeal of Balogun's films in what is effectively Africa's largest film-going market has, rather than attracting the interest of the State, only reinforced its view that cinema is best left in the hands of the private sector.

France

The discursive universe constituted by relations between France and her former African colonies was both qualitatively different and quantitatively much vaster than that operating within the British sphere of influence. This was most immediately evident in the availability of research

material itself, a relative plethora of journals, books and articles tracing out the broad cultural concerns and issues that have preoccupied African and non-African artists, theorists and policy makers over the past 40 years of the French-African relationship. Film has evolved within an overall cultural exchange that has expanded rather than decreased in importance since the accession to independence of former French colonies.

An equivalent difference of magnitude operates in the realm of film production, where "francophone" African nations have taken the lead in the number of indigenously directed and produced films and in the national and regional initiatives put forward in the area of film policy. As the following will show, a comparative history of these two traditions reveals what might be termed "reverse paradoxes": where the Ghanaian and Nigerian scenarios can be summed up as technical over-capacity operating in the absence of a cinematic culture, for francophone nations it has been a case of a strong cinematic impetus thwarted by a lack of technology.

Both the British and French systems of colonial rule were justified by a belief in the inherent superiority of their respective cultures and institutions, and in their duty to "civilize" their colonial subjects into these vastly superior ways of life. France's approach to this mission was however more "direct" than what was essentially a laissez-faire policy on Britain's part. Direct rule , initially rested on a policy of "assimilation" which imposed the French system of communal rule on its colonies, conferred rights of citizenship on its inhabitants, subjected them to French law and educated them in its language and customs. (Ayandele et al, 148) As France encountered more recalcitrant cultures and strongly organized African states in her colonial expansion, this policy gave way to a doctrine of "association" more apparently respectful of local culture, in which colonies were administered through a hybrid of French and traditional authorities and institutions. (ibid.: 149-50) Inhabitants of associated colonies, under a system known as the "indigénat", were subjects of France without the civil and political rights of citizenship. (ibid.: 152)

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The differential impact of this dual policy on France's colonies was felt largely at the level of local government institutions. It was however mitigated by the relative weakness of these local bodies in relation to a highly centralised overall system of administration in French West Africa. A hierarchy of "chefs", "commandants" and Lieutenant-Governors administered each territory and reported to the Governor-General in Dakar, the administrative head of all French West Africa, who was in turn responsible to the French Ministry of Colonies and ultimately, to the French parliament. "French West Africa was thus a federation of territories linked together through the Governor-General to the government of metropolitan France." (ibid.: 151) This centralization, along with the imposition of French structures of authority occupied predominantly by French officials, the consequent erosion of indigenous offices, and the contiguity of France's territories, combined to produce a much stronger, more cohesive and efficient system of French colonial rule than was the case with British colonies.

These factors also coalesced in a decolonization process quite unlike that of Britain's and which, in a sense, served to strengthen rather than weaken the cohesiveness of French-African relations in the post-colonial period. As with the British colonies, the drive towards political independence in francophone Africa accelerated following W.W.II. Unlike the former however, France took the initiative in reforming its colonial administration and defusing the nationalist impetus by granting, immediately following the war, increased powers of administration in each territory and by abolishing unpopular policies, including the distinction between citizen and subject, forced labour, and the "indigénat" system. The election of deputies to the French National Assembly and the Senate as well as to the Assembly of the French Union (previously the French empire) contributed to the growth of an African elite capable of filling such posts. The net effect of these reforms was to draw French West Africa even more firmly into the metropolitan sphere. (ibid.: 181-2)

These improvements proved inadequate in the face of a rising and

more radical tide of nationalism; reforms granting limited self-government to each territory in 1956 paved the way for what was to be the final stage of decolonization, beginning in 1958. That year, Charles DeGaulle became president, inaugurating his term with a constitutional proposal for a referendum in which French African territories would vote for or against autonomy within a newly transformed french "Communauté". The Community's executive council, made up of de Gaulle as president, ministers of the French cabinet and the prime minister of each of the member states, was to deal with issues of common interest such as defence, foreign affairs and economic policy. The threat of economic sanctions against any state voting "no" forced all but one of France': colonies to agree to the arrangement.[2] Within two years, nationalist sentiment had forced an amendment to the constitution in such a way as to allow all French West African colonies to become fully independent states, without losing their membership in the Community. Thus did France's erstwhile colonies in Africa remain closely linked, through a range of technical, financial, military and cultural agreements, with their former metropolis. (ibid.: 183-5)

In sum, clear features distinguish the French from the British process of decolonization. In the latter case, independence came following long and bitter struggles on the part of militant nationalist movements, and brought the severing of all political-legal ties. Decentralized, separate timetables were followed, and became the basis for the weakness of post-independence ties between former British colonies. In the case of French colonies, a variety of contractual linkages were maintained following independence while a single decolonization timetable in what was essentially a federal system meant the continuation of a sense of community among the francophone states of West Africa.

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2. As a result of Guinée's negative vote, France withdrew all subsequent assistance and refused to accord her diplomatic recognition. Guinée thus stands as an exceptional case to this account.

Before taking a closer look at the nature of those relations, it is necessary to briefly situate film within the colonial context of French West Africa. It would seem that a first attempt by the French to represent Africans to themselves began and ended with the roving cinématographe of Louis Lumière - henceforth, Africans and Africa became objects of anthropological interest, an exotic "tableau de fond" for American or European productions, or alternatively, consumers of foreign films. (Vieyra,1969: 41, Diawara, 1984: 93) In keeping with different colonial philosophies, policies and practices adopted by the French differed from their English counterparts. France neither implemented colonial film production units, nor elaborated a practice of producing films especially for African consumption. The only legislation specifically geared towards controlling production in its colonies was the Laval Decree, promulgated following the development of sound film, and intended to prevent the subversive or anti-colonialist use of film by Africans. (Diawara, 1984: 45) The system of direct rule, with its assimilationist premise, was assumed to be a sufficient means of promoting French culture, and the adoption by Africans of its institutions, values and aesthetics.

In the year of de Gaulle's referendum, a belated attempt was made to slow the tide of independence and shore up the policy of assimilation, by producing a series of films intended for Africans and in praise of French civilization. Essentially modelled on British colonial films, these simplistic didactic films had little ideological impact, while France's brief exercise in colonial film production "...was not significant enough to leave a structural legacy of production which could be compared to the production structures left behind in Anglophone Africa..." (ibid.: 94)

In the absence of cinematic institutions and policies overtly linked with the colonial project, and apart from an extensive network for distributing American and French films, the origins of a film culture in French colonies must be located elsewhere. Influence was exerted on the one hand by the practice, consonant with direct rule, of providing avenues of promotion for selected Africans, whether through military or governmental

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ranks, or, in this case, through training at the Paris-based Institut des Hautes Etudes cinématographiques (IDHEC). Some of the most eminent of makers and chroniclers of African cinema are among its graduates. A second influence can be traced to those French filmmakers and theoreticians who began to concern themselves with Africa in the post war period (at approximately the same time as Grierson was submitting his report to UNESCO regarding film in British Africa). Among such influential individuals can be cited Alain Resnais and Chris Marker whose film <u>Les Statues meurent aussi</u> was an early indictment of the cultural and artistic impact of colonialism; Jean Rouch, whose ethnographic films helped de-mystify the filmmaking process and launch the careers of several African filmmakers; and George Sadoul, whose "Histoire du Cinéma mondial" first denounced the fact that no African films had been made in 65 years of cinema. (ibid.: 45-8, Martin, 1982: 30-1)

It is important to note the different, though analogous, influence exerted by the French filmmakers from that of Grierson and his followers. While the latter provided the basis for a unifying, homogeneous film policy administered through state institutions, the former were a fiercely independent, heterogeneous group whose only common characteristic seems to have been a passion for debunking entrenched structures and practices, whether cinematic or philosophical. While filmmakers in former British colonies were weaned on a Griersonian cinematic formula of civic education and propaganda, combined with a penchant for high production values and over-sophisticated technology, French filmmakers came to Africa looking for release from the constraints of traditional cinema, and returned to France with images and ideas that would directly inspire the Nouvelle Vague and cinema vérité movements.

Thus, in the declining years of French colonialism, a clear split had emerged between "official" policy vis à vis the status of cinema in the colonies (although at this point it was essentially a negative policy rather than one of positive engagement), and "unofficial" influence and support exerted

by independent filmmakers and critics. These dual influences deepened and solidified following independence in ways which will be taken up later in this essay.

Independence brought an immediate and total reversal of former French policy toward film, and the provision of financial support and production facilities, including 16mm cameras, sound and electrical equipment, film stock, vans and projectors, to newly established Communication and Information Ministries. (Diawara, 1984: 92) The Consortium Audio-Visual International (CAI) was established (subsidized by the four leading producers of filmed-news in France) whose role was to share the cost, along with the French government, of producing newsreels, educational films and documentaries that would record the independence process and promote it among African populations. Most technicians and filmmakers were French, and post-production facilities were located in France. By 1964, all francophone states had production units attached to their Ministries of Information, and were inviting internationally renowned documentary filmmakers, including Jean Rouch, Michel Brault, Claude Jutra, and Joris Ivens, to make films of "national", educational and documentary interest. (ibid.: 96-7) Thus, apart from the sweeping character of French support, there is little at this point to distinguish the development of "francophone" African cinema from that of its English-speaking neighbours.

A second policy shift however did initiate what would grow into a wide discrepancy between levels of film production in anglophone and francophone countries of West Africa. In 1963, the Ministère de la Coopération instituted a Bureau du Cinéma, appointing Jean-René Debrix, past general director at IDHEC, as its head, with a mandate to encourage independent African filmmaking through co-production agreements. By 1975, 185 shorts and features had been made in francophone Africa, 80% of which were co-produced with the Coopération. (Debrix, 1978) This arrangement continued unchanged until, following the death of Debrix, and complaints by African states that it supported the making of politically

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inflammatory films, the regime of Valérie Giscard d'Estaing froze further aid to filmmakers. The interruption was short-lived however, and a revised aid program was instituted under François Miterrand. The latter charged the old Coopération with promoting a regressive form of aid, with cultivating a few "exceptional" and politically benign independent directors at the expense of production and distribution infrastructures that would help African cinema as a whole to become independent. To counter what it called "le mal développement" of African cinema, reformist administrators at the Coopération began channelling funds through OCAM (Organisation Commune africaine et mauricienne), which in turn sponsored the establishment of film schools, production facilities and an African-controlled distribution network. They also began to promote African films outside their "normal" international distribution circuits of French repertoire cinemas and cultural centers to commercial theatres and television. (Diawara, 1984: 53-7)

The full impact of these reforms has yet to be felt, but it is clear from the foregoing that France's assistance to African film production from 1963 to 1979 was not an unequivocal blessing. A central bone of contention has been the nature of co-production agreements. In one version, the Coopération provided financial and technical assistance based on its decision as to the "cinematographic feasibility" of submitted scripts. Critics charged that this arrangement not only led to the rejection of controversial scripts, but, by requiring their detailed "découpage technique", imposed aesthetic criteria inappropriate to African films. A second form of cooperation involved buying the distribution rights to films that had already been made, with such rights sometimes running to five years in non-commercial venues. The latter arrangement was a generally unfeasible option for African filmmakers hampered by the lack of production and post-production facilities based in Africa. Both were seen to permit an unacceptable degree of control over films, either directly through content, or indirectly through distribution practices that ghettoized African films and preserved the monopoly of French commercial distributors in the African market. In short, French aid to

filmmakers was seen as a means of imposing aesthetic values and political perspectives, and of maintaining independent African states in a situation of cultural and economic dependence vis à vis France. As with the British case, France's film policies in her former colonies can be seen as perpetuating a neo-colonial system of direct rule, a double-edged sword of cultural and structural assimilationist strategies. This translates into the cooptation and cultivation of selected filmmakers into leadership roles in their field, and monopolization of the means of producing and distributing African films.

Film is only one, albeit a key sector, among a wide range of cultural domains and structural links binding France to her former colonies. Indeed, this continued association extends beyond the areas of film production and distribution and outside the borders of Africa to constitute an international francophone diaspora sustained through a range of economic, social and legal affiliations. A panoply of official and unofficial channels, working arrangements, co-production agreements, journals and festivals have effectively sustained African participation within a hegemonic configuration that has at its center the French Republic and French Culture. And while culture has been the founding stone of this edifice, its economic stakes are not negligeable. There was, in the early 70's, an estimated film-going market of 60 million people, distributed over 500 theaters, in the area covered by OCAM. (Kamphausen, 37-8) France's behaviour in the period leading up to and following the loss of her colonies has thus been shaped by rational, pragmatic considerations: the preservation of influence and power, first in a bi-polar, and increasingly in a multi-polar world. What has been unique in the French case is the extent to which culture, and for our purposes film, has been a central pillar supporting that much larger project.

However, as has been suggested throughout this essay, hegemony is by no means a hermetic sphere; it is conjunctural, and highly contingent on the balance of economic, political and cultural forces operating in both national and international environments at any given time. Helping African film sectors through co-production agreements and technical support was, for

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France, the best all-round solution to the problem of declining influence; but, as with earlier colonial projects, it was destined to engender contradictory influences and ultimately, the demand for greater independence. Without denying the French cultural umbrella under which much of francophone Africa sits, this hegemonic "text" has been challenged by a wide variety of "subtexts" - ideologies, organizations and movements that are shaping an increasingly complex cultural and cinematic landscape.

One of the most important subtexts has grown in the interstices of private/public spheres, a critical response among groups working to promote and decolonize African cinema, and who have traditionally advocated the allocation of public funds to its development, to the French State's current domestic and external policies vis à vis film and television. Critics charge that it has caved in to internationalism at home, while espousing a rhetoric of anti-colonialism in its former colonies. This debate is a reminder of the persistence of old ideologies and alliances: on one side of the divide sit the cultural nationalists, many of whom are among the aforementioned filmmakers and critics who have consistently championed the cause of an independent, decolonized cinema, both at home and abroad; on the other sit bureaucrats and State officials (both private and public figures) whose ambiguous but generally non-interventionist position with regard to media globalization mirrors the French State's own strong interventionism in the cultural affairs of its former colonies. (Hennebelle, 1982) This ambiguity may be seen as consonant with an overall international shift towards "neo-conservative cultural nationalism": a policy of aggressive expansionism in the international free market (especially within the francophone diaspora) may be seen as a more effective defense against anglo-american expansionism than protection of the domestic sphere would be.

The Mitterrand regime's practice of channelling aid to African cinema indirectly, through inter-African forums and cultural organisms has certainly reduced the "visibility" of the French State as co-producer of African films

since the early 80's. Often, this presence has been replaced by that of private French production companies. It is doubtful however that this withdrawal signals a reliquishing of the territory; it is, rather, an attempted long-range response to technological, economic and political imperatives currently refashioning our audio-visual environment. (Mattelart et al. 1984) While the impact of reformed policies has not been unequivocal, (eg. if money is channelled through States, will independent African filmmakers benefit, given the frequent reluctance of States to promote cinematic "fictions" which they can purchase more cheaply abroad), they have helped sponsor such apparently positive initiatives as the creation of African-based production, training and distribution organizations.

The latter issues will be returned to in greater detail in the following chapter. This overview of cinematic structures and practices as they have survived the transition from colonialism to independence makes clear the extent to which emerging nations continue to be shaped by both the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. In former British colonies, the tendency since independence has been to let market forces take their toll in the private sector while continuing to channel financial and technical assistance into the public audio-visual systems it had established during the colonial period. The relatively clear-cut split between State/documentary and private/feature film sectors in the latter case constitutes a quite different situation from the complex of public, para-public (state-supported independent organisms), and commercial interests contesting the terrain of francophone cinema in Africa, each confident of its position as arbiter of aesthetic values and tastes.

In the third decade of independence, it is possible to discern a convergence, common trends evolving across the range of West African cinemas, irregardless of their colonial legacies. These trends seem, on the one hand, to be related to a shift from an outward to an inward looking gaze, from the West as point of reference to the internal dynamics and contradictions of post-colonial African societies. (Irele, 1981: 6) In film sectors, this is manifested in the growth of commercial production companies and

the formation of networks of filmmakers, producers and critics working through unofficial (non-State) channels. It might be said that the exogenous forces that have shaped the cinematic field in Africa have continually been redirected and refashioned by forces at work within the African environment. The following examination of these internal factors will thus provide a more complete understanding of the way hegemony is sustained and eroded through the play of political, economic and ideological factors.

CHAPTER III

INDEPENDENT AFRICAN CINEMA

"La culture est toujours un peu le cheval de Troie grâce auquel
on finit par dominer économiquement, surtout lorsqu'on
recherche une domination "pacifique" et "séduisante"
(Gaston Kaboré, 1986: 43)

State and nation in the African context

It is patent, in light of the previous chapter's discussion, that the
conception and growth of cinema in Africa has been intimately associated
with the political and economic evolution of the continent as a whole. Any
understanding of the internal dynamics of African cinema must therefore be
relative to what has been a, if not the, most crucial problematic faced by
post-independence African societies - the attempt to build politically and
culturally cohesive nation-states. The origins of this process, and of its
attendant difficulties, is once again to be found in the colonial period.
Although France and England delimited and nominated their territories,
colonial entities could not be considered "nations" in any natural sense of the
term. Rather, they were the product of strategic and commercial negotiations
whose arbitrarily decreed boundaries often fragmented what had previously
been cohesive ethnic, linguistic or religious groups, incorporating these
fragments within the borders of the colonial state. Indeed, the political
centralization of the colonial state and its primordial economic role meant
that much of the process of class formation, as well as the struggle for
independence, took place within and around the State. In the areas under
consideration, where independence was ceded incrementally and through a
process of "africanization" of State structures, modern nations bear a strong
legacy of their statist origins and are only weakly integrated as "national"
entities.

This initial problem has been underscored by the economic and technological dependence of African states on former colonial powers, within a complex and growing system of international trade and finance. It is intensified through political, legal and military institutions that are modelled on the colonial State rather than legitimated by indigenous needs and values. It is, finally, cemented through value systems and class structures that bind African elites more effectively to the international community than to the populations they are meant to represent. The economic, social and political problems that continue to afflict West African nations can thus be traced directly to colonialism and to an ongoing situation of neo-colonialism, the inability, rooted in the above constraints, to validate ideological claims, to implement effective development policies, to make nationalist rhetoric the basis for stable political and cultural entities.

The problematic categories of "state" and "nation" in Africa has strong resonances with Gramsci's theorization of the relationship between State and civil society, and particularly with their part in the constitution of a "national-popular" culture. Gramsci's study of Italian political and cultural history revealed a chronic lack of such a realm, "...the product of centuries of 'cosmopolitan' rule...and the cultural dominance of cosmopolitan traditional intellectuals." (1985: 197) For Gramsci, the cultural and political are organically linked throughout history and the national popular partakes of both these realms. The creation of a hegemonic bloc rooted in consent rather than domination thus requires both the willful participation of the people in political life, and the formation of a popular cultural realm, the construction, in other words, of "...a widespread national-popular movement...(on)...the ideological terrain of civil society...". This resonance between Gramsci's analysis of Italy and the present situation of many African states is enunciated even more forcefully in the following passage:

> "The Italian nation had...been more a rhetorical or a 'legal' entity than a felt cultural reality, existing at most for the intellectual and ruling élites but not for the people. It was therefore necessary to break the grip of these élites, which

meant also breaking with their intellectualistic way of posing questions of national culture in terms of a merely ideal or high-cultural 'nation'." (ibid.: 198)

The relevance of this dichotomy between "state" and "nation", between a ruling intelligentsia and the popular masses, for the development of film industries and cultures in Africa cannot be overstated. It is not that African States are inherently incapable of speaking for or to the nations whose interests they purport to represent, but rather that there are tensions at work which are crystallized or reproduced in the emergence of film sectors within national cultural arenas. As suggested repeatedly throughout this essay, hegemonic spheres are neither permanent nor unchanging and it is to debates within the context of individual, national and regional initiatives to establish film cultures on a firm footing that may be found some of the most important challenges to official or statist definitions of culture. These debates and initiatives have centered most fundamentally on the respective roles to be played by State and independent film sectors in the definition and development of national film cultures, a distinction generally, though not entirely coincident with that of non-fiction and feature film sectors.

This distinction was consolidated in the first decade of independence when a fiction film sector grew almost entirely from individual initiatives, and independently of State-sponsored emergent cinemas based on newsreel production and/or derivative of television. (Vieyra, 1975: 19) The first indigenous images were of independence events and celebrations, their informational, educational and archival purposes implicating them from the start in processes of nation-building and development under the auspices of newly created Ministries of Information. (Bachy, 1983c: 14) The direct and highly rational-purposive nature of this State intervention into civil society, and in general of the State at all levels and in all sectors of African national formations, contrasts sharply with their willingness to let commercial forces regulate the feature film sector. One reason for this neglect is simply that feature films were not a high priority on the development agendas of most African nations; as Armes notes, they could not be reconciled with larger

national objectives. (1985: 65) Another was the critical position often taken by independent filmmakers vis à vis political regimes. Perhaps most telling was the State's unwillingness to sacrifice the revenus it collected through taxes on imported films. Of course, this dividing line is not as sharply delineated as the above suggests: State film sectors have acted as important training sites for independent filmmakers and in some cases have increased their support for feature film production.

The State has thus stood as a centerpiece in a highly complex and evolving series of debates and contestations over the meaning of culture, its relevance to nation-building and development, and of the role of film within this whole tableau. The following account will examine the positions taken by individual filmmakers, the regional and pan-african organizations they have created, and by State sectors, with respect to issues of training, production, distribution and exhibition. As stated in Chapter 1, this struggle is as much over cinema as a signifying element, to define the role and meaning of cinema within African societies, as it is a practical one over access to the means of signification.

Individual initiatives

Though there is little in the first decade of independence to distinguish the establishment of State film sectors in anglophone and francophone countries of West Africa, there were clear, if incipient, differences appearing in the area of independent and feature film production. Despite the difficulty of making meaningful comparisons on the basis of limited numbers, it is noteworthy that the first fictional or semi-documentary productions to come out of Ghana (1968) and Nigeria (1966) followed by more than 10 years the first equivalent effort in francophone Africa. (Hennebelle, 1978: 169-177) Though made in France prior to independence (due to restrictions against anti-colonialist films imposed by the Laval Decret), the Guinean Mamadou Touré's Mouramani (1953) and the Senegalese Paulin Vieyra's Afrique sur Seine (1955) still served as important originary symbols

of an independent African "cinema of the imagination".

Among individual efforts to create an indigenous African cinema in its formative years, no-one is more deserving of the title of "pioneer" than Paulin Soumanou Vieyra whose activities, writings and humanistic vision were fundamental to the elaboration of an African cinematic discourse. Vieyra was the first African graduate of the Paris-based IDHEC and founder of Le Groupe africain du Cinéma. This association of five filmmakers proposed, in 1958, the creation of an international film center for the production of educational, instructional and feature films within African States of the Communauté Francophone. Though Vieyra went on to produce numerous documentary shorts, his most important work was, until his recent death, as a historian, critic, policy maker and ambassador of African cinema. From 1955 onward, Vieyra's prolific writings provide an extensive investigation of cinema in terms of its colonial manifestation and in relation to contemporary African societies. In numerous publications and countless critical reviews, Vieyra explores the revolutionary potential of cinema, its connection with nationalist, cultural and political struggles, its role as an instrument of development, in addition to its aesthetic, formal and technical dimensions, within an African context.

In 1963, another Senegalese, Sembene Ousmane, gave African cinema its first independent fiction film. <u>Borom Sarret</u> was also the first wholly African film to appear on international screens, winning a prize at the Festival international de Tours. (Boughedir, 1984: 41) Sembene moved through careers as fisherman, mason, docker and novelist before his interest in cinema, particularly in its ability to touch illiterate as well as educated sectors of the population, led him to studies at Moscow's Gorki Studios. (Armes, 1981: 73) Sembene's commitment to the political role of "entertainment" films, combined with the professionalism and popularity of his films, made his a preeminent voice in the elaboration of an African cinematic identity, even as it engendered frequent run-ins both with his colleagues and with the French Ministère de la Coopération that produced his

early works. When a later script was rejected by the Coopération's committee on the basis of its contentious (i.e. anti-colonialist) subject matter, Sembene denounced the co-production agreements as a new form of slavery and went on to produce the film independently. (Diawara, 1984: 52) La Noire de... became the first feature-length African film. Released in 1966 and winning top prize at the Journées cinématographiques de Carthage, it is perceived as the true departure point of African feature production and a monument to its independent spirit.

Referring to filmmaking in Africa as a system of "mégotage" (making do with scarce resources - "skimping along"), Sembene clearly enunciated the systemic constraints operating against African filmmakers: the lack of indigenous technical and financial resources for production, primarily a function of State apathy vis à vis independent film; dependence on external aid or loans; and the virtual absence of distribution and exhibition outlets, either internal or external, in a field dominated by foreign companies. This systemic incoherence meant that first time filmmakers rarely repeated the experience, either due to disillusionment or because they were forced to find other jobs in order to pay off their accumulated debts. (Boughedir, 1984: 41)

In Ivory Coast, Timité Bassori, newly graduated from France's Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques, was installed as the first director of the Société Ivoirienne du Cinéma in 1962. (Diamwara, 1984: 112) In statements echoing Sembene's criticisms, Bassori argued that African Ministries of Information, with their mandates of newsreel production, served to stifle the imagination and creativity of filmmakers they employed, while government policy in general failed to address the problem of French distribution monopolies. (ibid.:70) For Bassori, as for Sembene, the key issues to be addressed were structural and political ones; in his many incarnations as writer, director/producer and administrator, he has spent the last three decades in the service of a feature film industry in Ivory Coast.

The contributions and proposals of many other advocates of an independent African film sector might be cited to reiterate what had, by the

mid-60's, become a common refrain: the need for nationally based film infrastructures, and indigenous control of distribution networks. Most of these efforts foundered on what was an overall reluctance on the part of States to consider feature film production as a serious field of endeavour. It rapidly became evident that individual filmmakers could not, single-handedly take on and resolve the systemic problems of African film production and distribution. Over the past two decades, the voices have multiplied of filmmakers who echo in their creative works the ideals they uphold for a decolonized and liberated African cinema and who have articulated their visions in the context of regional and national organizations.

Regional initiatives

While the 60's brought a growing diversity of cinematic models and ideologies, contingent on the backgrounds, training and personal motivations of key individuals, a common thread bound these diverse voices into unanimity at the level of production and distribution. The difficulty of single-handedly taking on both foreign distributors and apathetic governments spurred filmmakers to raise their voices collectively, broaching the issue of African cinema at the Colloque de Gênes (1965), the Premier Festival des Arts Nègres de Dakar (1966) and the Table-Ronde de Paris (1967). (Diawara, 1984: 71) Participants at the colloquia proposed an elaborate plan for the creation of an inter-African film office which would oversee the creation of a complete, African-based film infrastructure, including production, financing and distribution, as well as film cinemathèques, archives, festivals, and training centers. Though premature, its impact began to be felt almost immediately. These idealistic forums, along with the establishement in 1966 of a first pan-African film festival, les Journées cinématographiques de Carthage (JCC), provided the initial momentum and basis for the consolidation of a range of associations and policies, at both regional and national levels, throughout the 70's.

Two major regional organizations have monitored and nurtured

African cinema since the foundation of the Tunisian-based JCC in 1966. Following in its footsteps, the Festival panafricain du Cinéma de Ouagadougou (FESPACO) was founded in 1969, initially as a West African competition, but ultimately incorporating the whole of Africa. These two festivals, held in alternate years, have served as crucial meeting places for African filmmakers, as outlets for the presentation of their films to African publics and as a market where an international community of filmmakers and buyers may become acquainted with their work. A second regional forum exists in the Fédération panafricaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI), a professional association of filmmakers, founded in 1970 at the JCC and whose primary mandate has been to encourage the creation and promotion of national cinemas across Africa. Issuing from two national associations of filmmakers (Senegalese and Tunisian), FEPACI grew, from 1970 to 1975, to incorporate 33 independent African countries and several liberation movements among its members, and can thus be said to have created an important forum for dialogue between arab, francophone and anglophone countries. (Boughedir, 1984: 48)

Although organizationally distinct, FEPACI and FESPACO/JCC operate as complementary rather than competing groups. FEPACI has a hand in the organization of the festivals, while most of the latter's participants belong to associations affiliated with FEPACI. While they share similar motivations with respect to the development of cinema in Africa, a division of labor does exist. FEPACI sees its objectives within a larger perspective of African cultural, political and economic concerns, and directs its pressure toward national governments; Festivals and the "thematic" colloquia that are held concurrently with them focus specifically on film, with efforts concentrated on cooperative endeavours between African filmmakers and producers. Thus, while both organizations attempt to coordinate efforts among filmmakers as a means of exerting pressure on governments, their levels of discourse and action are quite different. FEPACI represents the interests of filmmakers to representatives of the State; its status places it

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squarely within the latter's organizational and discursive purview. Festivals, by their very nature, are more grounded in a popular discourse; filmmakers are there looking for audiences, in Gramsci's terms, to cultivate "organic" linkages with their constituencies.

In constituting itself as an "association of associations" whose affiliates are national organizations of filmmakers, FEPACI's intention was to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of governments and other organizations. Granted observer status by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and recognized by OCAM and UNESCO, this goal at least seems to have been realized. During the 1970's, FEPACI held two congresses: the first its inaugural one at Carthages, the second in Algiers in 1975. In its founding charter, FEPACI set out recommendations for aesthetic and political strategies that would help "decolonize" African cinema and in so doing, contribute to the political, cultural and economic liberation of Africa as a whole. These included fighting the Franco-American monopoly of film distribution and exhibition in Africa, and encouraging the creation of national cinemas (Pommier, 153) FEPACI championed the freedom of filmmakers to express their views by proposing that production houses remain independent of State control. The role of the State was to be limited to nationalizing distribution and exhibition sectors, using revenues to reimburse filmmakers for some of the costs of their films. It also recommended government support of Festivals and other regular meeting places for African filmmakers and their works. (Diawara, 1984: 74-6)

At their second Congress, held in Algiers in 1975, FEPACI augmented the terms of discussion to situate African cinema within a context of development as well as liberation, a shift analogous to that which had taken place among the first wave of independence governments. In his address to the Congress, FEPACI spokesman Joseph Ki-Zerbo was as categorical as he was eloquent in his denunciation of western, escapist cinema as a channel of cultural as well as economic domination:

"Le cinéma est une industrie à effets multiplicateurs, une

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industrie animatrice d'autres industries. Le développement, lui, sera l'affaire du peuple ou ne sera pas. Le développement ne peut s'accommoder de l'évasion des esprits, du traitement des cerveaux africains au chloroforme et à la drogue anesthésiante, en vue d'y introduire le scalpel de l'aliénation. Le "brain drain"...le plus terrible n'est pas celui de quelques centaines de cadres supérieurs africains, mais celui de centaine de millions de cerveaux africains qui vivent dans l'ailleurs d'un cinéma d'intoxication." (1978: 159)

In addition to its strongly anti-imperialist polemic, FEPACI stressed the importance of cinema in promoting self-reliance and development by giving to people the means of their own emancipation. As a primordial instrument of education, information, consciousness-raising and creativity, cinema was not only an aesthetic good but a long-term investment in African societies. Against notions of the filmmaker as "solitary artist", and commercial success as a criterion of film quality, FEPACI posited the filmmaker as artisan in the service of the people, and the success of a film its ability to express popular needs and aspirations. Thus, the role of film writers, directors and critics in the service of development was deemed to be on a par with that of other "intellectual workers". (Ki-Zerbo, 162) The Charter is notable for the virtual absence of any concrete proposals, beyond the call for a State role in the promotion of national cinemas "...free from censorship and from all other coercive means likely to inhibit the creative freedom and the democratic and responsible exercise of the filmmaker's profession." (FEPACI, 1978: 165)

In contrast with FEPACI's heavily ideological rhetoric, the yearly festivals held at Carthage and Ouagadougou increasingly came to be organized around specific themes and problem areas of African cinema. In this way, festivals and the colloquia they sponsor have been centrally important as forums for the discussion and elaboration of economic and cultural policies that support independent film sectors. Their role in developing audiences for African cinema, both at home at abroad, has been particularly important, and directly proportional to their ability to influence government policy. The phenomenal growth of local attendance at Fespaco,

(from 20,000 in 1970 to 100,000 in 1972 and 500,000 in 1985), (Diawara, 1986) is not only an incentive to produce more and higher quality films, but increases the national and international prestige of films, which in turn puts pressure on governments to place independent film production higher on their list of priorities. While such a trajectory has by no means been smooth and uninterrupted, the participation of governments and inter-State organizations in festivals through funding, organizational and "moral" support, provide filmmakers with a hot-line directly into the State's chambers.

The transformation of the JCC and FESPACO from primarily cultural exchanges to arenas where filmmakers could elaborate policies and lobby their governments began at a conference held in Tunis in 1974, where a representative of the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) and the director general of the Union Générale du Cinéma (UGC) were invited to observe proceedings. These invitations represent the beginning of an attempt to resolve, as amicably as possible, the problem of distribution monopolies held by these organizations in, respectively, anglophone/ arabophone and francophone regions of Africa. (Boughedir, 1984: 45) Subsequently, a series of colloquia held at Ouagadougou and Carthage between 1974 and 1980, and organized around "the production and distribution of Arab and African films", reiterated, in more practical terms, the concerns raised in this period by FEPACI. A three point strategy was elaborated with the aim of encouraging viable national film sectors. The first point called for the creation, by each State, of a national distribution company that would hold a monopoly of the importation of films and establish an annual quota of screenings for foreign films. These discussions, and the actions they provoked, revealed distribution as the key link in the cinematic chain; without its control, all hopes for coherent, self-sustaining and independent film industries in Africa were thought to be in vain.

At the close of the 60's, distribution companies that had dominated African markets since colonial times remained secure in their monopolies.

In francophone countries of West Africa, La Compagnie africaine cinématographique industrielle et commerciale (COMACICO) and La Société d'Exploitation cinématograohique africaine (SECMA) were responsible for bringing in the American (50-55%), French (30-35%), and Indian, Egyptian and Italian (10-15%) films that were standard cinematic fare in these countries. The two companies also owned the majority of commercial African theatres, which they divided into "salles d'exclusivités" (first-run theatres), "salles mixtes" (first and second run programs for weekends and weekdays) and "salles populaires" (second-run Indian and Arabic films, American "B" movies).[1] (Pommier: 37-45)

In anglophone states, the American Motion Picture Export Corporation of Africa (AMPECA), affiliated with the MPEAA, held the predominant share of the market, alongside smaller Lebanese and Indian distributors. (Arulogun, 33) As with other types of neo-colonial industries in Africa, these monopolies constituted a net drain on African resources: monies collected in rights or ticket sales were repatriated and reinvested into metropolitan film industries. The majority of African films at this time, being educational or informational in content, found distribution through a range of non- commercial venues, operated by the State, missionary societies, the army, cultural centers or a rural circuit of cine-busses. An exception to this was the distribution of newsreels through the commercial circuit. (Vieyra, 1983: 26)

In 1969, COMACICO and SECMA took on the first distribution of an African film, Ousmane Sembene's Le Mandat, increasing its "African portfolio" in the following two years with productions from Sénégal,

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1. These classifications are leftovers of the colonial era when theatres were reserved for "European", "mixed" and "African" audiences. The distinction remains valid in many ways, although the comparatively luxurious, city-based first run theatres are frequented by upper-class Africans and Europeans; the "salles populaires" remain exclusively for Africans and often consist of little more than a projection surface and a few chairs in an open space.

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Ivory Coast and Niger. Distribution arrangements were, however, only marginally better than no distribution at all for African filmmakers and producers. With their films classified as foreign, and lacking any legal protection of their rights, African producers were required to pay 50 to 75% of their net revenues to distributors, making it impossible to pay back debts incurred in the production of films. (ibid.: 25)

By the early 70's, a number of events coalesced in an initial challenge to the power of the majors and in a reorganization of the francophone market. The monopolies of COMACICO and SECMA received their first blow in 1970 with the entry into the market of Gaumont, a cooperative of French producers disgruntled with the prevailing distribution system, advocating a percentage system rather than lump-sum payments for the rental of films. AFRAM Films Ltd also made its appearance, created by the MPEAA in order to secure access to the francophone African markets. (Pommier, 31)

Concurrently with these mutations, three countries were independently leading the way in the nationalization of their film sectors. In 1970, Upper Volta nationalized its theatres and created the Société Nationale Voltaique du Cinéma (SONAVOCI) to oversee the importation, distribution and exploitation of films in its territory. An immediate boycot by the French majors threatening the closure of all their theatres forced Upper Volta to compromise, ultimately accepting a deal whereby SONAVOCI would distribute SECMA-COMACICO films on the basis of a set, annually contracted, fee. The measure of control afforded by this arrangement allowed Upper Volta to allocate 15 percent of SONAVOCI's revenues to the production of local films and the building of new theatres. (Bachy, 1983a: 11-2) In the same year, Mali's Office Cinématographique Nationale (OCINAM) followed the example of Upper Volta, which much the same results. (Bachy, 1983b: 14) Given the small number of theatres that made up the markets of Upper Volta and Mali in 1970, respectively 6 and 20, it is clear that their actions presented less of an economic than a symbolic threat to the monopolies held by COMACICO and SECMA.

This symbolic power was greatly reinforced when Algeria nationalized its film importation and distribution sectors in 1971. Anticipating this action, Algeria had provisioned itself with films and was thus able to resist the MPEAA boycott for five years. This assertion of its right to chose the films it would import, and the consequent freeing of screen time for local productions, not only made Algerian cinema one of the most prolific and creative on the continent, but has also made it one of the most important of models for other African nations. (Boughedir: 1984: 70-1)

In the wake of these nationalizations, and of what was perceived as a growing anti-French sentiment, the French government intervened in the operations of COMACICO and SECMA, in an attempt to adapt cinematic structures to new African realities and to maintain the French ideological presence in Africa. (Boughedir, 1983a: 155) In 1972, the two companies were bought out by the newly-created Société de Participation cinématographique africaine (SOPACIA), whose majority shareholder was the Union générale cinématographique (UGC).[2] The notion of "participation" contained in the acronym was revealed as a tactic for maintaining a privileged status when SOPACIA came up against the resistance of Senegal to the takeover of its theatres. Following the Senegalese declaration of a national monopoly on the importation of films on January 1, 1974, SOPACIA proposed a 20% capital investment on its part in the Société nationale sénégalaise de distribution (SIDEC). Even with this majority of shares, SIDEC was undercut in its ability to purchase film rights by SOPACIA which was bidding on behalf of 14 countries, for a network of 600 theatres as against Senegal's 80. SOPACIA thus remained the sole provider of films for Senegal, this "...effective control of the market under the appearance of African sovereignty..." representing, in the words of Ferid Boughedir, the "perfect neo-colonial adaptation". (ibid.: 156) An additional constraint existed in the stipulation that the UGC remain

2. UGC is France's third largest theatre chain and distributor, behind Gaumont and CIC.

SIDEC's exclusive supplier of films, unless the latter found a supplier able to undercut UGC prices by more than 20%. (Vieyra, 1983: 28)

In the ensuing years, SOPACIA was faced with the fragmentation of its territory by national and private distribution companies, and consequently by declining profit levels, made worse as States raiser, theatre tax levels. This policy of "africanisation" of the film sector entered a new phase as SOPACIA progressively sold off its theatres to private African entrepreneurs. In 1979, when SOPACIA became the Union africaine de cinéma (UAC), it further abandoned the physical distribution of film to Africans, while, as Boughedir notes, retaining for itself the most crucial element of control, the importation and programming of films. (1983a: 157)

Despite the mutation, that had taken place in the West African market by the end of the 70's, much of the change seemed in name only, the substance of control continuing to reside squarely in foreign hands. The market remained divided into three zones, western, central and eastern, with Senegal having been made, following an agreement with UAC, titular gatekeeper of films being distributed in the western zone, comprising Mali, Mauritania, Guinée and Senegal itself. It was in this context that the second recommendation put forward in the filmmakers' three-point strategy seemed, on the eve of the 80's, about to be realized. This point advocated the creation of common distribution markets among countries within the same geographic and linguistic zone. Such an interstate consortium would provide greater leverage than possible when States acted alone, and a market within which African films could conceivably turn a profit, or at least recoup their expenses (ibid.: 155) The idea for such a consortium had been raised as early as 1972 at a meeting of heads of State at Lomé, capital of Togo, and reiterated in a statement by filmmakers gathered at the 4th FESPACO in 1973. (FEPACI, 1973) Two years later, another meeting produced a signed agreement which created, at least on paper, the Consortium Interafricain de Distribution cinématographique (CIDC) and the Centre Interafricain de production de Films (CIPROFILMS), to be headquartered at Ouagadougou. Another four

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years would pass before OCAM officially instituted the CIDC and CIPROFILMS, naming their director and allocating capital funds and operating budgets. (Bachy, 1983a: 51-2)

The founding objectives of the CIDC were recuperation of the African film market, through exclusive control over the importation and distribution of films within member countries; encouragement of national distribution policies and organisms; the promotion of African cinema through financial participation in production; guaranteed access of African films to local screens in addition to the search for international distribution outlets; and finally, monitoring of the quality of films being made available to African publics. (ibid.: 53) Though enormous in scope, the cornerstone of this mandate was to be found in distribution: by setting itself up as unique buyer for all its member states, as such benefitting from wholesale prices for films, the CIDC would thus be able to pass on its savings to them and, in theory at least, more effectively control the type and quantity of films entering national markets and free up funds for indigenous production. CIDC would further help production by using the funds collected through distribution to finance the building of CIPROFILMS, a cinematographic complex, fully equipped with 16 and 35 mm. production and post production facilities, whose mandate was to produce educational, development and commercial films for countries adhering to the Consortium. (ibid.: 60)

Plans for the production center remained in limbo, largely because of dependence on funds from CIDC, whose own operationalization had been problematic. Officially, the CIDC took over the distribution activities of the UAC in 1980, purchasing, on credit, all of the latter's existing stock of "African" films, and agreeing to open a Paris office to deal with the purchase of films to be imported. The UAC was to play a partial role in CIDC-Paris, and much of the former's personnel as well as its director general were transferred to the new agency. A number of large questions loomed as to what precisely this role would consist in, and as to the extent of CIDC's "de facto" control of products to be distributed. Ferid Boughedir strikes the heart

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of the question when he asks whether it was possible that one of the last strongholds of French cinematographic distribution in the world would so readily be given up, to be devoured by greedy American trusts. (1981: 169) As will be discussed in the concluding section of this chapter, a variety of problems have thwarted implementation of the CIDC's mandate in the 80's; nonetheless, it very creation marked the crossing of an important threshold toward a common, indigenously controlled market. Within its first year, CIDC had purchased and was distributing over 50 African films, paying substantial advances to their producers and ensuring the enlargement of 16 mm films to 35 mm. (Boughedir, 1983a: 159)

Although not specifically called for in the filmmakers' three point strategy, two "bonus" developments in the creation of a regional cinematic infrastructure in this decade must be noted. In 1976, UNESCO and the French Ministère de la Coopération jointly created the Institut d'Education cinématographique (INAFEC). Located in Ouagadougou, the INAFEC is the first institute for the training of film and television professionals to be opened on the African continent. (Bachy, 1983a: 48) And in 1981, a businessman from Upper Volta, Martial Ouedraogo, invested US $300,000. in the creation of the Société africaine du Cinéma (CINAFRIC). Ouedraogo's entrepreneurial vision of cinema as an industry with strong potential as a developmental pole in Africa, a means of generating growth and employment in a wide range of manufacturing and service industries, essentially rejoins that expressed by various associations of African filmmakers. Comprising 16 and 35 mm. shooting, editing and soundtrack facilities, studios, workshops, screening rooms, auditoriums and a film library, not to mention a discothèque and restaurant, the purpose of CINAFRIC is to produce and co-produce films of all genres and lengths, and to rent its facilities to independent filmmakers. (Bachy, 1983a: 61-68)

National initiatives

In the last of its three-point strategy, filmmakers had recommended a

general reform of cinematic taxes, a measure that would allow existing African films a fair return, and raise funds for new productions and for the creation of new theatres. Specifically, the demand was for a general lowering of taxes, their harmonization between States, the redirection of some portion of taxes towards production funds and implementation of preferential rates for African, as against foreign films. (Boughedir, 1983a: 155) Implicit in these measures was the positing of an arm's length relationship between filmmakers and the State, the latter creating a favorable environment for the production and exhibition of films, without interfering in their content or in the creative process. By implicitly arguing for the creative and political autonomy of the filmmaker vis à vis the State, this recommendation reiterated that which had been explicitly stated in FEPACI's Algiers charter, and which has been a dominant theme in the discourse of African cinema.

It is clearly impossible, within the scope of this work, to cover the full spectrum of national experiences in the development of film industries. In the following, I am drawing on Manthia Diawara's analysis of the evolution of national cinemas in former French colonies as occurring along three lines. In States with "liberal" economic systems, a distinction is made between those that facilitate film production with various forms of subsidies, and those in which television has been made the centrepiece of media development, acting as producer and co-producer of occasional films. A third type of production emerged in States which rejected free market economics and attempted, early in their histories, to nationalize film production, distribution and exhibition. (1984: 100-101) While recognizing that these examples do not exhaust the range of idiosyncratic patterns of film development in Africa, they do reveal problems and features shared by the majority of West African states.

Senegal

As the "jewel" of the French West African empire, and the only colony to bear the full brunt of its assimilationist policy, Senegal emerged

from the colonial period more fully endowed with the cultural and economic benefits contingent on such a status than most of its neighbors. This edge was confirmed and reinforced in the domain of film, where it quickly established itself as a leader in the production of films and filmmakers, and in the latters' role in promoting the cause of African cinema through regional and international forums. As was suggested earlier, Senegal has not been reluctant to exploit its preeminent position, most particularly by controlling the circulation of foreign films within its sphere of influence (i.e. the western zone). Of course, as a subsidiary player in a larger game, it has not altogether avoided its own victimization.

Prior to 1973, Senegal achieved this leading position in the virtual absence of cinematic infrastructures and in an environment entirely dominated by foreign companies. National production was shared between Les Actualités Sénégalaises, staffed primarily by French nationals and responsible for major documentary, newsreel and feature productions, and the Service du Cinéma, created at independence to finance and produce special topic documentaries and educational films for various government branches. (Vieyra, 1983: 31-2) While the Service du Cinéma provided the earliest directing opportunities for Senegalese filmmakers, it eventually proved inadequate to the needs of independent filmmakers, who stepped up demands for improvements in the conditions of production in Sénégal. The purpose of the Société nationale du Cinéma (SNC), created in 1973 within the Ministry of Culture, was to encourage national production of fiction and documentary films and to work with the Association des Cinéastes sénégalais in the training of young directors. (Vieyra, 1983: 37-40) However, like its predecessors, the SNC was not endowed with production facilities; the money it procured from government budgets went towards the purchase of film stock, the rental of equipment, the hiring of technicians, the payment of film processing, editing and sound synchronization, and the rental of studios, all of which were located in Paris. (Diawara, 1984: 106-7)

Although the SNC produced 6 feature films in its first year of

operation, three of which were considered commercial successes, the organism was phased out in 1976. This seems to have been the result of several considerations. With the political messages of some of the films deemed objectionable and damaging to the government, the spending of government resources to such ends became difficult to justify. More importantly, conflicts had soon developed between the SNC and the State distribution monopoly, SIDEC. This problem was primarily one of organizational mismanagement, of lack of coordination between the two Ministries (Culture and Commerce) that oversaw the activities of each body. Rather than working together to create an indigenous film industry, the SNC used government monies to produce its films, while the taxes collected by SIDEC from the distribution and exhibition of foreign films were spent elsewhere. This organizational problem was exacerbated by the high cost of producing films, a result of dependence on foreign production facilities and on the 35 mm. format to which filmmakers had grown accustomed. (ibid.:107-8)

Following dissolution of the SNC, independent film production in Senegal essentially returned to its pre-1973 condition - a more complex version of "mégotage" than that described earlier, but identical in its essence. (Vieyra, 1983: 94) Government participation was reduced to the co-signing of bank loans, episodic subsidies by Les Actualités sénégalaises and a reinstated Service du Cinéma. Filmmakers re-established direct links with the French Coopération, or sought co-production agreements with a variety of foreign sources. (Diawara, 1984: 109; Boughedir, 1984: 77) The only concession made by Senegal in the area of taxation reform was the lowering of taxes exacted on exhibitors to 18%, with additional detaxation for the establishment of new theatres. At approximately half the going rate for all other countries in West Africa, with the exception of Upper Volta, this reduction not only helped increase the number of theatres, but encouraged exhibitors to "risk" projecting African films, rather than depending solely on the "karate films", melodramas and spaghetti-westerns with their guaranteed returns on investment. (ibid.: 92-3)

Ivory Coast

A country that has made television the cornerstone of its media development strategy, Ivory Coast shares, with Senegal, a pre-eminent position within Africa in the quantity and quality of its film productions. It was also the richest of France's colonial territories in West Africa, a status that fomented a certain rivalry with Senegal, second richest colony and administrative center of the West African federation. As the decolonization process accelerated, this rivalry took more precise contours. The Ivoirian leader Félix Houphouet-Boigny came out in favour of breaking up the federation and negotiating independence on an individual basis with France; in Senegal, Léopold Senghor's pursuit of a West African federation, as a united bloc in independence negotiations with France, was repeatedly thwarted by Houphouet-Boigny's actions in concert with France, who also favored individually negotiated settlements. (Ayandele et al, 188-191) These rivalries have survived remarkably intact in the post-colonial period. Under the guidance of Houphouet-Boigny, the longest surviving independence leader in Africa, a close affiliation with France and an uncompromising individualism vis à vis other West African states have been consistent features of the country's evolution.

In keeping with Ivory Coast's free market economic orientation, it might be said that the triumph of television in the late 70's was no more than the culmination of two decades of fair competition with the film sector. Diawara sees things somewhat differently, claiming that opting for television was largely a question of political and ideological expediency, as it obviated the question of nationalizing film distribution and exhibition. (1984: 116-7) In effect, a kernel of truth may be located in each of these hypotheses. In 1962, Ivory Coast instituted the Société Ivorienne du Cinéma (SIC) with a mandate to produce newsreels, informational and educational shorts and propaganda films, and to help produce features. One year later, television facilities with 16mm laboratories and studios were installed, attracting many of Ivory

Coast's aspiring filmmakers. Production at the SIC at that time was dominated by French directors. This situation prevailed until 1967 when the SIC began supporting the production of films by nationals, inaugurating a five-year "golden age" of Ivorian cinema. As in Senegal, all these films were produced with the assistance of the CAI, (even though, simultaneously, a number of Ivoirian "classics" were being co-produced by private Ivorian and French companies). In 1971, the CAI ended its co-production agreement with the Ivory Coast, leaving the SIC free to seek out new partners. (ibid.: 112-114)

In the early 70's, a wave of aspiring filmmakers were returning to Ivory Coast, fresh from their studies in European schools and drawn to television by its superior production facilities. Meanwhile, a number of factors were tending to curry official disfavour of the SIC, most notably a tendency for filmmakers to incur high production costs by relying on 35mm equipment, making it difficult to recoup production costs, even had their films been sufficiently "commercial". Reluctance to use the 16 mm equiment available through a number of Ministries accentuated dependence on production and post-production facilities provided by the CAI and subsequent partners. Although the SIC survived the remainder of the 70's, producing numerous documentaries and newsreels and the occasional feature, it failed to become the profit-making enterprise wished for by the Ministry of Information. Since the government had made no move to restructure the private distribution and exhibition sectors, nor to impose quotas on the importation and distribution of foreign films, thus leaving more room for national ones, nor subsidized national production through taxes levied on imports, it is difficult to know whether SIC-produced films were or were not commercial successes. (ibid.: 115-6)

Such imponderables aside, the Ivorian government, in 1979, closed the SIC, arguing that

"...it made no significant contribution to the training of filmmakers and technicians, that it attracted little international exposure because of the quality of the films, and that it ignored commercial considerations and had, therefore, become a

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financial burden to the government." (Bachy, cited in Diawara, 1984: 116)

A Centre de Production des Actualités Audio-Visuelles et du Perfectionnement Permanent (CPAAPP) was instituted, making film production subsidiary to televisual needs and drawing many of the "old wave" of directors, such as Timité Bassori and Henri Duparc, into its fold. (ibid)   Ivory Coast had implemented none of the tax reform recommendations put forth by regional organizations, although it later, on its own initiative, instituted a law eliminating taxes on the projection of indigenously produced films. Filmmakers   continued to produce films, as in Senegal, through an advanced process of mégotage. Aside from occasional subsidization or help in financing of films, the Ivorian State has more recently preferred to let the independent film sector grow as a result of private enterprise and individual iniatives. Les Films de la Montagne, Les Films de la Lagune, Katiola Productions, and Les Films du Koundoun are among the many private production houses now competing on the terrain of Ivorian cinema, and entering into individually worked out agreements with a range of private and public, African and French co-producers. (Vues d'Afrique, 1988: 14-25)

Upper Volta/Burkina Faso

As one of France's "hinterland" colonies, having neither the wealth of Ivory Coast, nor the administrative weight of Senegal, Upper Volta offers one of the most unique and intriguing chapters in the history of African cinema.   France's imperialist objectives lay predominantly in capturing that legendary empire of African trade and commerce, the Soudan, and its capital Timbuktu; the region later known as Upper Volta was little more than land to be crossed, a series of outposts on the road to these larger territorial ambitions. (Ayandele, 134-5) At independence, Upper Volta remained one of the least modernized of former French colonies, an entirely agricultural nation and, as a result of its location between the Sahelian north and fertile

forest regions of the south, prey to climatic extremes. Upper Volta's post independence political history is also markedly different from that of Sénégal and Ivory Coast. While the latter acceded to independence under strong, charismatic leaders who exercised their power in what were essentially single-party States well into the 80's, Upper Volta's has had a succession of leaders, its longest period of stable govenment (1966-1980) being provided by the military commander Sangoulé Lamizana. Lamizana was responsible for instituting a multi-party system in Upper Volta, and, as we have seen, for single-handedly taking on the French distribution monopolies in 1970.

Though no feature films were produced in Upper Volta until 1973, the roster of 16mm. films produced by the Ministry of Information under its co-production agreement with the CAI is impressive, and greater than any other sub-saharan nation of Africa. Destined for the country's primarily rural population, these films, from short to feature length, dealt with a broad range of agricultural, health, educational and economic issues. (Vieyra, 1975: 115-6/357-60; Bachy, 1983a: 19-21) The cinematic direction established in Upper Volta through the 60's thus differed sharply from that in Senegal and Ivory Coast in both content (educational films vs newsreels and propaganda) and form (16mm facilities vs 35mm). Though production throughout this period was overseen by the Frenchman Serge Ricci, the film unit at the Ministry of Information served as the primary training ground for aspiring independent filmmakers in Upper Volta.

A year following the creation of SONAVOCI, a Fonds de Développement du Cinéma Voltaïque was established, subsidized by revenues collected in the distribution market. Throughout the 70's, the Fonds supported indigenous production, both the making of short and feature length, documentary and fiction films, and the emergence of many first-time directors. The growth of national film production had led to the establishment, in 1977, of the Centre National du Cinéma, (CNC) whose mandate was to take over the role of the film unit located within the Ministry of Information, i.e. to produce didactic films (both documentary and

fictional) for distribution, through a network of cine-busses, in rural areas. (Bachy, 1983a: 24) The CNC produced many such shorts in the following years, some of which were recognized for their excellence, but did not produce another feature length fiction film until 1982. This film, Wend Kuuni, which won top awards at both JCC and FESPACO, marked the birth of a "new wave" of feature cinema in Upper Volta, to the extent that Paulin Vieyra would characterize it, in 1987, as "...le premier pays cinématographique de l'Afrique au sud du Sahara." (1987: 191)

In 1983, Upper Volta underwent a popular-democratic revolution, changing its name in the process to Burkina Faso. It is under the regime of Thomas Sankara, and owing to the institution of competitions and of financial and technical assistance to filmmakers, that such a "new wave" has been able to flourish in one of the six poorest countries in the world. New State policies were not, however, unprecedented; rather, they were inscribed in a continuum of policies, dating back to independence, but particularly to 1969, that have favored the growth of a film industry ideologically informed by goals of national independence and development. Though long subsumed to the ideological and developmental needs of the State, the body of didactic films so produced served a dual educational purpose, one substantive and destined for the population at large, the other in the art and craft of filmmaking.

Like Senegal and Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso has sought to protect its independence vis à vis other African States; unlike the former, its approach to cinema has been much more consonant with the views expressed through such regional organizations as FEPACI. Since the institution of FESPACO in its capital in 1969, Burkina Faso has both heeded the call of filmmakers, and initiated a progressive role for the State in promoting independent cinema. Whatever ideological, social or political factors might motivate this attitude, it is also clear that the small size of its film market makes Burkina Faso more dependent on the type of support provided by such regional organisms as the CIDC, INAFEC and CINAFRIC. The situation of Ouagadougou as

headquarters for all the major regional organisations, meetings and facilities in the domain of African cinema has ironically earned it the title of Africa's "Hollywood". Bearing little beyond superficial resemblance to that southern California fantasy land, it is somehow fitting that one of Africa's most destitute nations should emerge as the center of its film culture and symbol of its spirit of cooperation, as Boughedir terms it, "le phare d'un cinéma africain libéré". (Boughedir, 1984: 74)

The future-anterior of African cinema

Without exhausting the range of national efforts in the realm of cinema, the above account has been indicative of problems inherent in the working out of a "modus vivendi" between independent filmmakers, individual States, and regional organizations. On the eve of 'he 80's, the future of African cinema loomed with equal measures of promise and despair. If a number of gains seemed to have been consolidated ir the development of a regionally-based production and distribution infrastructure, as many seem to have been lost to the difficulty of "harmonizing" interests across States and to the establishment of national structures and policies. The 80's merely brought to the fore a much more complex range of possibilities and initiatives. The following will present some highlights of this decade, that are indicative of broad directions in the recent and future development of African cinema.

Again, it is not possible to do justice to the full scope of these changes as they have occurred in increasingly differentiated national markets. To be sure, the claim for distinctive national cinemas directly contradicts the view, such as that expressed by Tehar Cheriaa, that diversity at the level of administration and in structures of film production and distribution in African countries are in fact only nuances, variations in an overall condition of abnormality" - of difference - from the normal circulation of films within the international market. To Cheriaa's rather dour claim that

"...it is no longer possible to distinguish Senegalese cinema

from that of Ivory Coast, Congolese from that of Niger....their (common) destiny is to not communicate their message, their content, to anyone." (1983: 38, 26),

one can only reply that this condition is not particular to Africa, but is common to any cinematic form outside the commercial mainstream. The primarily economic grounding of its rationale does not adequately recognize the extent to which marginal cinemas are fragmenting traditional markets and creating new cinematic tastes. It is however in the spirit of Cheriaa's comments that the evolution of the CIDC and CIPROFILMS, their difficulties and successes in promoting the production of indigenous films and regulating the circulation of these and foreign films within African borders, must be assessed. As will be seen, such an analysis goes beyond the realm of production and distribution per se; the centrality of these institutions is such that one finds crystallized, within the trials and tribulations that have marked their evolution, the most salient features and issues of African cinema.

As noted earlier, CIDC began its operational phase in 1981 with the purchase of the UAC's "African" stock (with the exception of films acquired, in 1979, by SIDEC for the western zone comprising Mali, Guinée and Mauritania). Instead of the hoped-for coup, this transaction proved to be the beginning of CIDC's headaches as a majority of the 587 highly priced films were so worn out as to be almost unusable. Angry theatre owners retaliated by taking their business to SOCOFILM, a Swiss company newly arrived in the African market but whose primary activity was the distribution of films owned by AFRAM. The MPEAA, so long locked out of this French stronghold, was finally able to drive its stake deeper into Africa's now well-tilled cinematic soil. Adding insult to injury, the CIDC found itself without the financial means of purchasing new films for its market. In addition to this, the UGC, which had become CIDC's principal supplier, instituted an inordinately high fee rate and insisted on following the American practice of selling films in indivisible lots. (Boughedir, 1983a: 158, 1981:169)

Despite these difficulties, CIDC had, by mid-1982, acquired some 50

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African films and was distributing them throughout its territory. Through its Paris-based affiliate, it purchased over 700 American, French and Asian films in the first three years of its operation. In 1984, another crisis within CIDC disrupted what had been a relatively smooth and satisfactory 2 year period of growth. This crisis originated in the decision to expel the CIDC's private shareholders, based on their perceived incompatibility with State policies in the area of film development. These private interests, holding some 25% of CIDC shares and representing 70% of the African market, were in turn dissatisfied with the CIDC's policy of levying 30% on their gross revenues, as against 25% by nationalized distribution sectors. (Marcorelles, 1985) This already tense relationship between the CIDC and private exhibitors was exacerbated by the latters' preference for programming films guaranteed to return their investment - American or European "action" films, martial arts films from Hong Kong, and Indian melodramas - rather than much riskier African films. Such a climate proved ideal for the entry in greater force of private distributors, particularly in countries without nationalized distribution sectors, and deepened competition between the CIDC and AFRAM/SOCOFILM. (Boughedir, 1983a: 159)

The most intractable problem faced by the CIDC in its endeavour to become the exclusive buyer for OCAM countries has been its relationship with those states. Ideal operation of the CIDC is premised on the existence, within each of its member states, of a nationalized film sector, the harmonization between them of tax levels and ticket prices, and the creation of new exhibition sites. To date, only 6 of the 14 signatories to the constitutive charter of the CIDC have instituted national film societies, one of which, SIDEC, acts in competition rather than collaboration with CIDC and has an exclusively commercial orientation that precludes the financing of Senegalese productions. (Boughedir, 1989: 7) Only two have policies of reinvesting tax revenues in local production. Clearly, harmonization remains a distant ideal. While agreeing in principle with the objectives of the Consortium, most countries consider its activities to be interference in their

internal affairs, or have difficulty reconciling nationalization with liberal economic ideologies. (Bachy, 1983a: 54-56) In this climate, it is not surprising that the CIDC's problems have been compounded by difficulty in collecting dues from member states.

The CIDC's activities had, by 1985, virtually ground to a halt. Concurrently, FEPACI emerged from a long period of inactivity during which administrative structures were reorganized and decentralized, to propose new ways of addressing the problems being experienced by African filmmakers, and more precisely by the organizations and institutions constituted to represent their interests. FEPACI's revitalized commitment is well summarized in this statement by its Secretary General, Gaston Kaboré:

> "Nous avons entrepris de nous refaire une crédibilité non seulement auprès des institutions internationales et des organismes tels que l'OUA qui avait reconnue comme membre observateur depuis la fondation de la FEPACI en 1970 mais aussi par rapport aux Etats. Parce que nous estimons finalement que les Etats constituent les partenaires prioritaires de la Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes. Les associations nationales qui composent cette fédération doivent collaborer, dialoguer de façon quotidienne avec les Etats pour permettre de créer l'environnement favorable à l'éclosion d'une cinématographie nationale." (Fespaco catalogue,1989: 80)

FEPACI's structural reorganization and renewed activities on behalf of African cinema does not seem to have accompanied equivalent rhetorical or ideological changes. It is not yet clear to what extent its insistence on the primacy of State support will find a positive resonance among filmmakers who have always insisted on their right to independence from State-imposed filmic criteria. In a more pragmatic vein, FEPACI has advocated an alternative to the CIDC in the form of an import-distribution cooperative comprised of State and privately-owned distribution agencies. (Boughedir, 1989: 8)

The failure of the CIDC to realize the great hopes vested in it by African filmmakers, and the uncertainty of new initiatives in the crucial area of distribution would seem to bode ill for the future of independent cinema

in Africa. In a market 90% saturated by foreign films, and where "national" cinematic sectors are little more than sub-distributors of such films, there seems no denying Tehar Cheriaa's remark that the African market, from movie theatres to video-cassettes and television, remains fundamentally colonized. (1983: 29) The only cause for optimism remains, as Cheriaa puts it, that films continue to be made under conditions that can only be termed miraculous. (ibid.: 39) This irrational tenacity and unaccountable desire to make films against all odds resists theorization and more particularly, flies in the face of deterministic scenarios. How to account, under the homogenizing, hegemonic umbrella of western cultural and economic imperialism, for the germination of so many different and distinct species of African film?

Glimmers of hope to be found in this otherwise bleak scenario include the long awaited operationalization of CIPROFILMS, sister organism to the CIDC, in 1984-85. Plans to build CIPROFILMS' production facilities had foundered on liquidity problems at the CIDC. Thus when the Guinean government offered its modern cinema complex at Boulbinet in exchange for a ten-year deferment on its assessments, it seemed that a long nurtured dream had finally come to fruition. (Marcorelles, 1985) Along with CINAFRIC, whose facilities it both duplicates and complements, CIPROFILMS offers, for the first time, the possibility of completing a film entirely on African soil, and at a far reduced cost than had previously been the case.

Another optimistic trend in the 80's has been the steady growth of FESPACO and JCC as means of popularizing African cinema, both locally and internationally. This growth has been multi-faceted and wide-ranging in its impact. Each festival has seen an increase in officially competing films, in participating non-African films, in awards and sponsorship, and a growing international roster of journalists and critics. However, the festivals have marked their greatest successes in cultivating awareness of African cinema among local audiences, and in the creation of a pan-African forum for regular meetings and cultural exchanges. Entries from anglophone countries of

West, East and Southern Africa as well as from Angola and Mozambique have, in the 80's, become regular features on festival programs.

The thematic orientation of the festivals, and various seminars and colloquia that run simultaneously with them, provide an educational setting in which filmmakers, critics, scholars, historians and policy makers have explored political, formal and aesthetic aspects of cinema in Africa. In recent years, they have included such wide-ranging topics as "Les rapports cinema-tv", "African cinema and its public", "Film and the liberation of peoples", "Cinema and cultural identity", "The oral tradition in Africa cinema", and "The impact of new media". In 1985, FESPACO broke new ground by inviting Afro-American filmmakers, distributors, promoters, critics and historians to present their films and share their experiences in establishing a viable, independent film culture outside the mainstream of American cinema. In these various ways, FESPACO and JCC have been instrumental in creating an alternative diaspora to that implanted through colonialism and perpetuated through neo-colonial structures and ideologies. (Diawara, 1986) It is particularly interesting, in light of the present work, to note that the theme chosen for the 1989 FESPACO was "Cinéma et Développement Economique", an explicit reference to cinema, and culture, as both a material and ideological force in the economic and social transformation of African societies. In Gaston Kaboré's view, culture brings an independence of spirit that makes it a far from superfluous or unimportant in the difficult economic contexts of modern African states. (1984, 61) While its rhetorical passion may have cooled somewhat, the commitment to cinema as an instrument of development, first articulated by FEPACI in its 1975 Charter, has not.

As Boughedir writes, the 80's marked an end to the era of "pioneers" and "amateurs" in African cinema.

> "Forsaken by all and often by their own states, deprived of
> screen space by western distributors and exhibitors, the
> pioneers of African cinema had been free to create an
> independent cinema that truly reflected the social and cultural

realities of their countries, and in so doing had produced often stunning films." (1983c: 177)

African cinema had lost some of that magic of its beginnings, and now, like cinemas in much of the world, found that the interest that States and commercial enterprises were finally demonstrating was often conditional on conforming to prescribed images, and required different tactical approaches. (ibid.)

This changing climate and the growing complexity of African independent cinema has been reflected in the diversification of bodies representing the interests of African filmmakers, and in the changing tenor of demands made on States by organizations such as FEPACI. It was the perceived paralysis of the latter organization, of its inability to represent filmmakers' interests, that led, in 1981, to the formation of two splinter groups, Le Collectif l'Oeil Vert and Le Comité africain des cinéastes (CAC). As a collective whose members come from the new generation of African filmmakers, l'Oeil Vert has sought to revitalize the movement toward independent African film production by taking practical steps to reduce its dependence on France and other European countries. Their first step was to make an inventory of all existing filmmaking equipment in Africa preliminary to implementing cooperatives that would allow filmmakers to share the equipment among themselves, a strategy they dubbed "South-South cooperation". (Diawara, 1984: 79; Boughedir, 1984: 48) Also cooperatively organized, the CAC's purpose is to enable filmmakers to present a common front when offering their films for sale at festival marketplaces. Buyers are required to purchase blocs of films, along with the necessary promotional material, paying the CAC a small percentage for its administrative expenses. The founder and principal coordinator of the CAC is Med Hondo, an exiled mauritanian filmmaker of the "old wave" of African cinema and, since the early 60's, one of its most active promoters. (Boughedir, ibid.)

Though FEPACI itself did not reconvene until 1985, an "extraordinary" assembly of filmmakers was held in Niamey in 1982, producing a manifesto far broader in its scope and more detailed in its

recommendations than any previous document. The tenor of the manifesto revealed a sharp divergence from the ideological rhetoric of the Algiers Charter, offering a summation of the practical problems of African cinema and the means of addressing them. The charter's anti-capitalist stance gave way to a privileging of the role of the filmmaker as an "opérateur économique". Nationalization was considered a panacea whose limits had been revealed by the tendency of states to employ film as a means of propaganda, selectively financing films for their own glory. (Boughedir, 1983b: 161)

In their opening statement, the filmmakers outlined five principles fundamental to the viability of African cinema: recognition of the "indissoluble" links that must exist between production, exhibition, importation-distribution, technical/infrastructural and professional training sectors, each of which must be viable in its own right; the role of the State in organizing, supporting and regulating the film sector, and in stimulating and protecting all private or public investments in this domain; the need for regional and inter-african cooperation to complement national initiatives; recognition of the growing importance of television both nationally and internationally, ana development of film policies in concert with that phenomenon; and finally, the necessity of rationally organizing national markets so that money spent on the daily consumption of foreign films be used to finance indigenous film production. The remainder of the manifesto consisted in a more detailed treatment of measures to be taken towards the rationalization of film markets, and in areas of importation and distribution, production, infrastructural development and training. (ibid.: 162-64)

Although the Niamey manifesto remained a statement of intent rather than fact, it was as remarkable for its soberness and lucidity of analysis, as for the high ideals which inspired it. As l'Oeil Vert had recommended, in a literal sense, filmmakers were taking stock of their resources as the basis for a pragmatic assessment of the future - what needed to be done and what could be done with existing resources. Within present

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conditions of film production in Africa, filmmakers have embraced and revitalized the old system of "mégotage", exploring the limitations and freedom inherent in "independent" African filmmaking.

Among these recently evolving trends, none is more striking than the steady outward expansion of African cinema beyond its own continent, its gradual carving out of a space for itself on western screens, its insinuation into the consciousness of western audiences. This reverse colonisation has been more noticeable in Europe where African films have gone beyond the stage of adding an exotic touch to festival programs and are frequently screened on German, Scandinavian and French television networks. (Boughedir, 1983: 176) The linking of FESPACO with the Festival d'Amiens (France), le Festival francophone de Namur (Belgium) and the Montreal-based Vues d'Afrique has ensured the distribution of African films through the francophone cultural diaspora. Though it is the rare film that makes it beyond the occasional festival specifically devoted to African or Third cinema, the "best" films (i.e. those with highest production values) are regularly programmed at major international festivals. The Cannes, Venice and Montreal film festivals all featured Ousmane Sembene's Camp de Thiaroye and Souleymane Cisse's Yeelen in their 1988 programs. Also in 1988, Yeelen and La Vie est Belle, a Zairian feature, ran for several weeks in major theatres in Montreal, and are now both available of video-cassette. Canadian public broadcasters have also begun to show interest in programming African films.

Two other films that were successful both in domestic and foreign markets exemplify the uncertain and unique journey that each African film goes through from production to distribution. They are "firsts" in the annals of African cinema inasmuch as each established new records of popular and financial success in the commercial circuits of their respective countries, despite being considered "cultural" rather than "commercial" fare. The success of these films, both as personal and popular triumphs, is less an indication that African filmmakers have finally learned to make films that

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can appeal to mass audiences, than of the necessity of adequate distribution networks that make their films available in the first place, rather than confining them to cultural "ghettos".

A film that has acquired quasi-legendary status since its appearance in 1981, Djeli was the first feature of its Ivorian director, Fadika Kramo Lancine. It was also the first successful film to be produced both during and following dissolution of the Société Ivoirienne du Cinéma, and thus provides a glimpse into the way Ivorian filmmakers have adapted to a revived system of "mégotage". Djeli was made over a three-year period, with Lancine acting as his own producer, and was financed through personal savings, and the help of family and friends. It was initiated under an agreement with the SIC providing for the use of equipment and technicians, and terminated under a renewed agreement with the CPAAPP. (Diawara, 1984: 117) The film was shot on 16mm, blown up to 35mm, and premiered at the 1981 FESPACO where it won several prizes, including the Etalon de Yennega, the festival's top award, and the Prix de la Critique Internationale.

The public success of Djeli was largely due to the initiative of a private Ivorian businessman, who had begun regular programming of African films in his Abidjan theatre complex. Promotional campaigns for these 'unknown" films included truck-driven loudspeakers and personal invitations, attracting an initial audience but leaving films to sink or swim on their own merits, a daunting task where audiences were accustomed to slick French productions, (and in what is often considered the most sophisticated and professional of cinemas in Africa.) It is in this setting that Djeli was shown, outdrawing what had until then been the top-grossing film in the Ivory Coast, Le Professionnel, and its "star", Jean-Paul Belmondo. (Boughedir, 1984: 85) This success was all the more surprising given that the film was a visually exquisite, but slow-paced denunciation of the caste system, using "real" villagers in all the supporting roles. It is largely due to this success story that the Ivorian government subsequently eliminated all taxes on the projection of national films and that a growing number of

independently produced films have been able to repeat Djeli's success.

The second film to break records on earnings and entries in its home country was Finye, (The Wind) by the Malian director Souleymane Cisse. This film, along with his previous Baara and the recently released Yeelen have earned Cisse a reputation as one of the finest among contemporary African filmmakers. This excellence is all the more remarkable given the generally appalling conditions under which Cisse has worked, difficulties that are exacerbated by his tendency to address politically "risky" issues in an uncompromising manner. In Finye, the story told is of repressive authority and youth alienation in a society caught in the contradictory winds of tradition and modernity. Like Djeli, Finye took 3 years to produce. Having begun with the support of the French Ministère de la Cooperation, Cisse was forced to stop work when the latter cut its aid program to African cinema in 1980, and to go elsewhere for the funds to finish shooting his film. Post-production was completed during several trips to France in 1982 and Finye went on to win the top award at Ouagadougou in 1983. The film was subsequently made an example of reformist administration at the Coopération, and was promoted through commercial film circuits and television, and at the most prestigious of French film festivals, Cannes.

Though it might seem misleading to hold these two films up as "typical" examples of African cinema, or as models of its success, it is precisely their idiosyncratic and uncertain trajectories of production that makes them typical. Like Djeli and Finye, the majority of African films that achieve a measure of success, whether at home or abroad, are, as Tehar Cheriaa might say, exceptions to the "normal" rules of film production and distribution. They also indicate the extent to which, despite the consolidation of a network of regional and national associations and lobby groups, much of the impetus for change still comes from individual filmmakers and producers working outside instituted or official channels. As each film in Africa articulates very clearly the common constraints faced by filmmakers in their attempts to produce and distribute films to African audiences, each personal triumph is

likewise shared by the entire community of African filmmakers whose efforts are legitimated in the popular success enjoyed by their films. There is, finally, no "balance sheet" that will allow us to place the assets of African cinema against its liabilities, nothing that can measure the extent to which hegemony is being eroded or sustained. There are too many contingencies, too much dynamic tension generated in the play of creative impulses, national interests and collective visions. African cinema is as varied as the forces that have produced it, a cinema that finds its identity primarily in the process of looking for it. Its defining features are uncertainty, marginality, unrequited desire, lack of closure, difference.

Conclusion

In the same spirit, any conclusion to this chapter can be only a tentative summation of its principal arguments and objectives. It has attested, on a structural level, to the role of African filmmakers as "leaders of the revolution". This revolution has to do with nation-building, with creating the infrastructural basis that will enable film to act as an instrument of decolonization and disalienation, as an adjunct to other cultural forms and practices in the constitution of "national-popular" cultures. As peripheral actors within what are themselves peripheral entities, the practical role that has been thrust on African filmmakers and other artists and cultural activists is one of elaborating progressive notions of the nation-state and of national identity. To a large extent this has meant working outside State structures and official definitions of culture, recognizing the mutual interests that bind independent filmmakers at regional and international levels. Neither the nation nor the State have "withered away", but they have consistently and repeatedly been brought into question through discourses that attempt to go beyond narrow or hegemonic political and cultural rhetorics.

On the one hand, African cinema has developed in tandem with broader social processes where the focus of concerns and of ideological and cultural expression has shifted from external causes of change to internal

ones, from the colonial experience to that of independent African nations. On the other, African cinema acts as a catalytic force in the displacement or dispersal of the hegemonic center, as it infiltrates western screens and western consciousness with visions of the "other", and alternative ways of seeing. However, the foregoing account makes clear the tremendous resistance of colonially-implanted patterns and structures of communication to attempts by filmmakers, among others, to reverse and break out of these patterns. Thus, the dependence of filmmakers in francophone West Africa on the Coopération Française was long perpetuated by the Coopération's strategy of providing only certain forms of aid, and only to selected filmmakers. The persistent claim by African filmmakers that they do not seek handouts, but exchange and dialogue, indicates that they have a much clearer appreciation of the term "cooperation" than the organization whose namesake it is.

The international structures and ideologies that support such a uni-directional flow of aid reminds us once again that cultural concerns cannot be isolated from the larger domain of "development" and the relations it encompasses. The quest for a New International Economic Order, as for a New World Information Order, have been premised precisely on the need for cooperation and dialogue, rather than handouts. The similarities between this rhetoric and that of filmmakers goes beyond the analogical to situate culture squarely within the domain of development and, more importantly, to redefine and broaden the terms within which development is generally understood. As the films that flood African screens are predominantly projections of the Western imagination and of its industrial mode of production, so African "underdevelopment" is largely the projection onto African societies of a western vision of what development should be, a perceived more than an objectively verifiable "lack". As real and intractable as the problems faced by the "developing" world are, they are compounded rather than addressed by being filtered and framed through western assumptions, values and language, or to use Said's more encompassing term, discursive systems. By providing African audiences with self-

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representations, and by producing non-colonized images of Africa, filmmakers play a profoundly "educational" role, challenging dominant and dominating discourses with the possibility that it is "we" and not "they" who are in need of development. The difficulty of effecting such a perceptual transformation is patent, given the revolution in entrenched practices, institutions and ideologies that it implies. As Trinh Minh-ha so eloquently puts it:

> "What is at stake is not only the hegemony of Western cultures, but also their identities as unified cultures; in other words, the realization that there is a Third World in every First World, and vice-versa. The master is made to recognize that His Culture is not as homogeneous, not as monolithic as He once believed it to be;..." (1986-87:3)

CHAPTER IV

AFRICAN CINEMA AND THE LIVING TRADITION

"African tradition does not cut life into slices and the knower is rarely a specialist...What is involved is a science of life in which knowledges can always be turned to practical use."
(Amadou Hampaté Bâ,1982:10)

"La culture est l'aspect la plus noble de la politique."
(Med Hondo, 1987: 27)

The image of African cinema painted in the foregoing discussion, as a product of structural and historical contingencies, clearly remains a very partial and exploratory step in the project of "defining" African cinema. The present chapter will therefore continue and complement that project by focusing on that which gives African cinema its substance - its theoretical bases, themes, and formal aspects. In other words, it will consider how the cultural-technological medium of film, though western in origin, has been appropriated in ways that challenge western hegemony as much in the spheres of aesthetics and film language as in those of production and distribution.

In attempting to penetrate the codes of African cinema, I am sensitive to my own "otherness" in particular, and overall to the limited relevance of the "universal categories and modes of apprehension" of western criticism (Irele, 1981: 2) to an understanding of African artistic and cultural expressions. The lack of an experiential vocabulary for translating images presented on the screen is compounded with the specifically linguistic problem of fully grasping the nuances of spoken dialogues through English or French subtitles. Several other levels of possible mis-apprehension propose themselves if we take into account film languages, the development of aural and visual techniques in specifically African ways. However, it might be said

that such a view only diminishes the intention of African filmmakers to make works of both culturally specific and universal appeal. As Abiola Irele maintains: "...a... work need not be dissociated from its reference to a particular context of life and experience, of existential awareness, to have a general human relevance and application." (ibid.: 3) Irele further argues that it is not necessary to participate directly in the worlds evoked by unfamiliar cultural practices and styles, or to share the social values they embody, in order to derive meaning from these works, to appreciate "...the intense quality of their imaginative engagement with the issues of social and moral life." (ibid.)

Complementing Irele's view that we can "read into" a culture's consciousness through its creative expressions, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the "dialogic encounter of two cultures" produces new and mutually enriching forms of understanding. The apprehension of meaning and value in "other" cultural idioms begins with recognition of the act of communication, the need for dialogue, before the details and specific content of those languages can be understood. Though constructed on a radically different epistemological basis, Bakhtin's argument with respect to the relation between observer and observed is similar in intent to Irele's:

> "In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding - in time, in space, in culture. In the realm of culture, outsidedness is a most powerful factor in understanding [...] We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture *responds* to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths."
> (Speech Genres and Other Essays, cited in Willemens, 34)

As useful as the above may be in allaying any personal reservations I have about this project, they leave open the question of a theoretical ground or paradigm which might provide an entry into the African cinematic imagination. A closer look at Abiola Irele's view of the contemporary importance of African literature will serve as an excellent point of departure

insofar as it is founded in broad, experiential claims rather than narrow aesthetic ones. Its relevance therefore goes beyond that of literature per se to encompass many forms of artistic and cultural expression:

> "It is perhaps not too much to say that if modern African writing has any value at the present moment, any *significance*, it is essentially as a function of the comprehensive testimony it offers of the turns and patterns of an unfolding drama of existence in which we have been and continue to be involved....imaginative writing in particular stands both as a direct representation of the concrete facts of our collective experience and as a reconstruction, in the forms of images, of the states of consciousness induced by that experience:..." (1981: 1-2)

Irele's position suggests close affiliation with the phenomenological tradition; in the present context, one might be tempted to invoke the Bazinian "myth of total cinema". Its origins are widely scattered, and can be located in such philosophies as existentialism, imported into Africa during the colonial period, as well as in indigenous modes of apprehending and expressing the world. The former, mediated through such American and European figures as Edward Blyden and Jean-Paul Sartre, brought universalistic notions of "African personality", and "black consciousness" to Africa where they received more complex elaboration in the theory of "négritude", a "fully-fledged theory of African being". (Irele, 1986: 125) During the period leading up to decolonization, négritude became the ideological rallying point for many African intellectuals and cultural _ alists. Léopold Senghor, the movement's founder and most prolific exponent, both in poetry and philosophical writings, went on to become Sénégal's first President, and négritude Sénégal's official State ideology. (Soyinka, 1976: 135)

Irele distinguishes between two acceptations of the theory of négritude: a first more general term referring to a global phenomenon of black awakening, an affective attitude or subjective disposition based on apprehension of the historical conditions of racial oppression. This assignation (attributed to Sartre) of a universalizing purpose and historical consciousness to negritude contrasts with the narrower conception

formulated by Senghor, and which he termed "objective negritude". Senghor sought to grasp "...an underlying principle which may be said to define a common spirit of African civilization...", suggesting ultimately the ascription of unique racial, ethnic and cultural endowments to black civilizations.

Though paying lip service to the idea of a pan-negro culture, the existentialist quest embedded in négritude's literature and drama was an individual one, a reflection on questions of identity and alienation that was itself imbued with the assumptions and values of a culture that was being rejected. Irele discusses this in light of one of the earliest post-independence novels dealing with the westernization of Africa and the conflict of values that this entailed in individuals caught between two worlds.

> "...the trauma of European conquest in the various areas of life and expression within an African social formation is perceived ultimately in sole relation to a disruption in the hero's being and consciousness; thus, his existential plight represents the thematic focus, the significant structural level of the novel."
> (1986: 123)

This focus is also evident in many early African films that dealt with similar questions of identity and alienation, and can still be found in many director's first films.

This existential quest spoke directly to the acculturation of an embryonic African bourgeoisie into the values and philosophies of European, and particularly French culture. However, insofar as it articulated in philosophical terms the nature of alienation being experienced by African intellectuals, négritude was important in consolidating the drive to independence. As Irele states:

> "The political and cultural aspects of nationalism in Africa must be taken together, in their intimate association, to achieve a full appreciation of the nationalist phenomenon itself, because the drive for political autonomy reflected the growth and consolidation of a confident awareness of the self. The specific contribution of Négritude to this development was to articulate, in the form of an all-encompassing concept of black identity, the sense of the African's separate cultural and spiritual inheritance." (1986: 129)

Wole Soyinka essentially reiterates this view in the following:

> "Both for Africans on the mother-continent and for the black societies of the diaspora, Négritude provided both a life-line along which the dissociated individual could be pulled back to the source of his matrical essence, and offered a prospect for the coming-into-being of new black social entities." (1976: 64)

The limitations of négritude can be located in its failure to speak to a more collective experience of colonialism and in its fomenting of an African bourgeoisie with an incrementalist approach to independence and a greater interest in consolidating its own power base than leading militant, popularly-based nationalist movements. (Markovitz, 194-5) It has continued to act as an important ideological reference point for African intellectuals in the post-independence period.

Following independence, a second generation of intellectuals and artists in francophone Africa emerged whose views on culture and identity were distinctly more "revolutionary" in their implications. Négritude was attacked on a number of counts, particularly for its endorsement of a non-rational image of Africans, for its essentialism, and for a static, homogeneous conception of what were in fact dynamic and diverse African societies and cultural realities. (Irele, 1986: 136) The gauntlet was taken up by such political figures as Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral whose ideas had been influenced by marxist ideology and forged through personal involvement in revolutionary struggles. While culture was still at the center of preoccupations, it was dissociated from its racial characteristics and placed within the compass of a political and economic analysis of conditions in Africa. The recovery of cultural identity thus became contingent on the liberation of Africa from imperialism and neo-colonialism. In the same period, one notes the emergence of artists sharing this critical perspective, among them Ousmane Sembene whose experiences as a laborer and as a film student in Moscow directed him towards the class-based analyses of African societies characteristic of both his novels and films.

These new perspectives further shifted questions of identity and

culture from the individual to the collective realm, transforming the search for cultural identity and authenticity from a personal, psychological quest into a collective enterprise "...involving the historical fortunes and destiny of the people." (Irele, 1986: 140) Endowed with the rational and historical impulse that are at the core of marxism, négritude's individual self-realization became "...self-realization of the historical subject...a vision of man (sic) creating (his) own identity in the effervescence of a progressive movement in history." (ibid.: 139) It might be said that cultural nationalism inspired by Marxism redeemed the rational kernel already present within the African world view. For Cabral, culture was a weapon in the liberation movement, even as liberation was an act of culture. (Cabral, 1979: 141-3)

The above are little more than indicators of what has become an increasingly complex range of approaches to the themes of culture and identity taken up by successive waves of intellectuals and artists in the post independence period in West Africa. They do however point to the intimate coexistence of theoretical and practical concerns in contemporary African thought, and, in Irele's terms, to the profoundly experiential basis of art and culture in Africa. A third moment in this evolving cultural and philosophical ferment has been a growing interest on the part of artists, writers, historiographers and social scientists in the oral tradition of Africa. This interest is motivated by the urgent necessity of preserving knowledge of African traditions and history, while making a statement against the prevalent western notion that peoples without a history of writing are somehow peoples without any culture at all. (Bâ, 166)

If, as Hampaté Bâ tells us, African oral tradition is "total knowledge", it is also a "system" of knowledge, a way of acquiring and transmitting knowledge that confers on it the status of a specifically African epistemology. The term ascribed to it by Hampaté Bâ - the living tradition - is perhaps a better rendition of its comprehensiveness as a system guiding both spiritual/moral and practical/social conduct. Its significance to the present study will be considered in these dual aspects, as an ethical and aesthetic

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system that informs filmmakers' attitudes towards culture and, more specifically, approaches to their craft.

The foundation of oral tradition as a moral system resides in the sacred bond that is seen to exist between a person and their word:

> "Where writing does not exist, man is bound to the word he utters. He is committed by it. He *is* his word and his word bears witness to what he is. The very cohesion of society depenos on the value of and respect for the spoken word." (Bâ, 167)

Beyond this moral value, the spoken word also posesses a sacred character associated with its divine origin and with the occult forces deposited in it. The secular or exoteric aspects of the oral tradition reside in its link with the everyday behaviour of people and their community, its engagement of people at an experiential level. Thus, writes Bâ, "[The oral tradition]...is at once religion, knowledge, natural science, apprenticeship in a craft, history, entertainment, recreation,..." (168) It is synonymous with African culture which, as Bâ continues, "...is not... something abstract that can be isolated from life...[but]...involves...a particular *presence* in the world - a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together and interact." (ibid.)

This dialectical uniting of spirit and matter may be seen as the fundamental building block of African epistemology and as such to pervade all forms of social and cultural behaviour. In traditional African society, a practical function always inhered in ritual and magical activities, just as practical crafts, or the "artisanal function", had a sacred or occult character and was linked with esoteric knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. (Bâ, 180) Though certain hierarchical (or caste) distinctions did exist, knowledge was in principle available to anyone, depending only on initiation in one or another occupational or social category. Education was not a specialized activity but was acquired through apprenticeship and participation in family and community life. These aspects of the acquisition and transmission of knowledge point to one of the supremely important

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aspects of oral tradition, its function in guaranteeing the continuity of African history and culture. As the above makes clear, the oral tradition does not dissociate culture, history and knowledge. Loss of traditional forms of knowledge, or of the "memory" of history thus becomes a loss of culture - hence the contemporary importance of the oral tradition as a means of reclaiming culture. This is not négritude's essentialist "return to origins" but a desire to connect current realities with past traditions.

If the oral tradition may be seen to inform general attitudes towards contemporary culture, it also bears specific meaning for the position of the filmmaker in African society and for the practice of his or her craft. As touched upon earlier, the traditional crafts in Africa were vectors of the oral tradition, partaking both of sacred and secular realms and associated with rituals and gestures that were seen to constitute a precise language. (Bâ: 180) Each craft, and indeed each caste or social category, carried with it a code of behaviour, a set of "...moral, social and legal codes peculiar to each group, faithfully handed down and observed by means of oral tradition." (ibid.: 184) The principal castes in Africa included smiths, weavers, woodworkers, leather workers and public entertainers (djeli in several African languages, griot in French). While speech was clearly the preferred domain of the latter, in their various incarnations as singers, poets, story-tellers, historians and spokespersons, oral artistry was practiced by all members of society in the transmission of traditional forms of knowledge. A fundamental distinction however did exist between traditional crafstmen and djelis : while the former had a responsibility to speak the truth and render their knowledge in all its authenticity, the latter had not such prohibition and could boldly distort or embellish the facts in the interest of diverting their audience. This freedom of speech allowed the djeli seems to have been a way of institutionalizing lying in a society that otherwise considered it the worst form of moral leprosy. (ibid.: 172)

On this basis, it is difficult to distinguish the positions of "artist" and "craftsman" in African tradition, and to ascribe strictly utilitarian or aesthetic

functions to the objects each produced. The masks, statues, items of personal adornment, songs and poetry prized in western cultures for their aesthetic or entertaining qualities, in their original contexts most often combined these attributes with utilitarian and ritualistic functions. Oral artistry in general served a triple purpose as ritual, entertainment and education, (Boadu, 85) and all art forms were intimately associated with daily, communal life.

> "This integrity of art and life meant, among other things, that the artist was also a citizen, a member of the community with normal responsibilities alongside the imperatives and burdens of his creative gifts. And even in the creation of art, the artist was seen as a conduit for tradition, the vehicle through which the collective wisdom and experience of the community was transmitted." (Thelwell, 51)

Finally, the measure of oral artistry was closely dependent on the relationship between the story-teller and the audience, on the former's ability to recount an event integrally while making it relevant to events in the present. As Hampaté Bâ writes:

> "It is a matter not of remembering, but of *bringing up into the present* a past event in which everyone participates - the person who is reciting and his audience." (199)

This relationship eliminate.. ..rriers between makers and consumers of art, which is seen to belong to all and be a "function" of society. (Thelwell, 52)

The role of the filmmaker in modern Africa may be likened to that of the traditional artist-craftsmen, a role carrying with it as much responsibility towards truthful and authentic speech as towards the entertainment and amusement of audiences. Ousmane Sembene's now classic contention that the film-maker must be the mouth and ears of the people, a role corresponding to that of the griot in traditional Africa, takes on added meaning when we consider in more detail what this traditional role consisted in.

Bâ distinguishes three classes of *djeli* - musicians, ambassador-courtiers and genealogist-poets. He also notes that the word *djeli* in Bambara means "blood". Like blood, the *djeli* "...circulate in the body of society, which

is cured or falls ill accordingly as they temper or exacerbate conflicts with their words and songs." (188) Thus, many *djelis* travelled widely and acquired a broad range of knowlege, often acting as spokespersons, mediators or ambassadors between families, communities or ethnic groups. Others acquired extensive knowledge of genealogy and family history in their travels, enabling them to exert considerable power and influence over the noble or ruling classes. (ibid.: 187-92) The role of the filmmaker as modern "griot" similarly goes far beyond those of storytelling or entertainment to include a responsibility toward the preservation and interpretation of African cultural history. As part of a new intellectual class positioned at the meeting of "traditional" and "modern" worlds and value systems, the filmmaker becomes a mediator of the complex and often contradictory tendencies engendered in this encounter.

Of course, filmmakers are not themselves immune to this "cultural shock" which is often taken up in their films in terms of personal, existential crises as well as for the broad social and cultural dislocations that it entails. This quest for personal identity is in a sense fundamental to the filmmaker's ability to understand and render the collective project of identity formation. Many filmmakers have recognized this quest for self-identity as primordial to the task of creating authentic, indigenous film cultures. Gaston Kaboré calls this the search for an "authentic inner self...an endless and troublesome quest that require's) the artist to constantly look for him/herself and his/her culture." (cited in Diawara, 1987: 36)

Of course, the insights and practices of the oral tradition cannot be applied integrally to modern conditions - the contemporary artist is linked with the life of the community in quite different and less intimate ways than in the past. Nor can one ignore the fact that new art forms such as cinema were imported along with their own aesthetic, linguistic and "ritualistic" regimes. However, the adoption of new idioms, and their accompanying outlooks, also makes possible the emergence of new and original means of commenting on African realities. (Irele, 1981: 15) Adoption of a received

European form - cinema - does not preclude filling it with images of indigenous culture and history, the forging of an instrument "...flexible and powerful enough to bear the density of the cultural inheritance, while penetrating the center of contemporary necessity." (Thelwell, 48) If the oral tradition provides a normative and creative framework that will allow filmmakers to make works that are meaningful to contemporary African audiences, it provides, for the outsider, a key to their interpretation that goes beyond the confines of the text.

It is in the light of this encompassing epistemology provided by the oral tradition as it has evolved under contemporary conditions that the remainder of this chapter will consider the theoretical/critical, thematic and formal discourses of African cinema. Of course, the very suggestion of three discrete categories of analysis is itself at odds with the wholistic universe posited by the oral tradition. The reader should bear in mind that theoretical, thematic and formal considerations are not independent parts of the filmmaking process, but are rather closely inter-dependent. For example, use of the oral tradition of storytelling in a film might be, simultaneously, a formal device, a theoretical concern (with the reclaiming of culture and history) and a thematic choice (the place of tradition in contemporary African societies).

Theory & Criticism

As the oral tradition endows all forms of artistry in Africa with simultaneously practical and aesthetic functions, it likewise resists the notion of a specialized role for the critic, or of a purely theoretical approach to the interpretation of particular art forms. Against the scientific, empirical basis of theory in the literate tradition, and its rational-purposive motivations, "theory" in an oral context has all the attributes of a moral and spiritual code, a system for re-establishing order and harmony in the universe. (Bâ, 171) As an encompassing normative system, oral tradition eschews the extreme specialization inherent in western film theory and criticism which allots

respectively active, mediating and passive roles to the positions of film-maker, critic and spectator. Instead, it suggests a process in which all three participants simultaneously act as observer, creator and critic of a work's meanings. This wholism is at least partially dictated by circumstances analogous to those existing in the area of production. In the absence of a highly specialized and standardized critical universe operating through journals and universities, the critical task falls to those practically involved in all the stages of film production and consumption. Even after 30 years of independent film history, there is no widely established tradition of film criticism in Africa, separate from its practice, or comparable to that obtaining, for example, in the realm of literature.[1]

The following discussion will therefore not be one of academic discourses or narrowly theoretical positions on cinema in Africa, but will seek to determine how contemporary African filmmakers perceive their role and the place of cinema in the "development" of their societies. The views of a selection of individuals involved in the production and criticism of African cinema will be considered in relation to those domains of immediate concern to the present essay, notably the inter-dependent realms of audience, popular culture, language and national identity.

Relative to the recent burgeoning of western research and theor... .cal inquiry, perceptions of audience remain broad and amorphous in the African context. General shifts in these perceptions over the history of African cinema follow the same contours outlined in the previous section's discussion of the evolution of contemporary African ideologies. Proponents of négritude considered their primary audience to be an international one, one of the principle objectives of the negritude movement being to assert the

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1. This model does not preclude the invocation of, for example, western structuralist or aesthetic paradigms in the analysis of African films - as Asante notes, African art exists as pure forms into which successive artists breathe new life. What it does suggest is the limitation of text-based or formal analyses that leave out consideration of the larger context or frame of experience within which they reside.

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"African presence" in the world. Culture was defined primarily in terms of race and environment, and colonial languages were used to diffuse its message. Later interest in the oral tradition and the infusion of cultural nationalism with more rational motives brought an authentic, less idealistic vision of the past, one which revalorized indigenous history without overly romanticizing it. Contemporary forms of cultural expression in Africa thus address themselves primarily to local and indigenous audiences, even as they try to reach a more heterogeneous Africa-wide and international public.

The strategies deployed in the search for indigenous audiences have been more practically than ideologically motivated. For the majority of African filmmakers, ideals are often secondary to the task of reaching audiences, accessibility on a formal level being a fundamental criterion in this task. Respect for the audience and a sense of public accountability are nonetheless fundamental, as is expressed in Férid Boughedir's statement that "...le cinéma africain doit se poser avant toute question celle du public auquel il destine ses films." (1976: 27) The primacy accorded to audience may be seen as inspired by a tradition in which the community was primordial and the audience was not only a consumer of works of art, but also their primary critic. (Amela, 13) In the oral tradition, the audience established canons of meaning, interpretation and judgement and critics generally based their judgement of a works value on its public reception.

Clearly, this general notion of the public as creator and critic needs to be brought in line with the present reality of African audiences if it is to be anything more than a romantic allusion to the past. Cinema is not traditional theatre. It is a mass medium whose product largely addresses itself to an urban, educated and youthful population, a situation that has less to do with the inherent appeal of films than with the urban location of cinematic infrastructures, despite the fact that African populations are overwhelmingly rural. Almeida cites studies showing that the rare screening of films in rural milieux will draw people from great distances, and that illiteracy does not seem to be a factor in dissuading attendance. Lack of innovation in the area

of distribution, underestimation of potential markets and of their variety is compounded by a lack of knowledge concerning the nature of audience tastes and demands. Legislators, distributors and exhibitors largely assume that audiences have been conditioned and that they therefore continue to want imported "action" films. (D'Almeida, 143)

If filmmakers are constrained by a lack of concrete knowledge about audience demographics, they nonetheless recognize the heterogeneous nature of the people they are addressing, "...a fluctuating conglomeration of ethnic, regional, religious and class groups." (Barber, 1987: 6) Considerations of audience invariably shade into definitions of popular culture, again entailing various ideological positions and aesthetic strategies. Thus, while Joseph Ki-Zerbo may be said to represent the views of a certain school of African filmmakers in his denunciation of western cinema as "...la dose d'opium qui guérit provisoirement l'ennui par le saut vertigineux dans l'abîme de l'inaccessible:.." (159), others have precisely exploited this compelling and enchanted universe in their appeal to African audiences. In general, the search by filmmakers for popular forms that will awaken and renew their audiences' attachment to indigenous culture and civilizatioi does take into account "cultivated" sensibilities, the conditioning of audiences by a "cinema of distraction" (Martin: 84). Boughedir for instance argues against any purely formal experimentation that might appeal primarily to a European critical elite, and for a practice of selectively appropriating elements of western cinema that will render films "readable" and "visible" to their African publics. (1976: 30)

Boughedir's view, expressed 15 years ago, that the distinction made in western criticism between "commercial" and "art" cinemas (cinéma d'auteur) is irrelevant to the effort to create a distinctively African cinema, clearly must be re-interpreted in the light of current conditions. However, it remains an accurate indictment of the tendency to see commercial cinema as escapist, and authored films as progressive, without problematizing either of these categories. It also speaks to continued efforts by filmmakers to define the

terrain of the popular, to marry commercial success with socio-political objectives. Even the most avowedly commercial and populist of contemporary African filmmakers, Ola Balogun, argues that African cinema cannot be only a means of expression for filmmakers but must primarily seek to establish a rapport with the public. (Martin, 88)

These two approaches can be seen as polar extremes in the body of African film praxis and in relation to which a diverse range of views can be situated. As such, they do not so much represent mutually irreconcilable positions as tendencies existing in a relation of dynamic or dialectical tension. Underlying them is a common belief in the value of culture as that which transcends or encompasses narrowly-defined political and economic objectives - a common purpose of engaging an audience by valorizing indigenous culture, by connecting with the realm of "common sense" and popular ideologies. From this perspective, cinema (as a cultural good) becomes a precious factor of development, a means for the diverse peoples of Africa to know each other, to learn of their common histories, their common social and economic difficulties and their similar political realities. (Hondo, 1987: 27) The primacy of culture over purely political considerations is also stressed by Ferid Boughedir:

> "Qui est de gauche, mais n'est pas enraciné dans sa culture, ne peut être utile à son pays. Au contraire quelqu'un qui n'est peut-être pas encore éveillé politiquement, mais qui est enraciné dans la culture de son pays peut toucher son peuple." (1976: 30)

For the majority of African filmmakers and critics then, culture is the basis from which political action springs. Representations of indigenous cultural forms and practices in films go beyond a purely aesthetic or ethnographic function to become means of resistance against colonialism and neo-colonialism, in all their manifestations.

Perceptions of popular culture, national identity and language have been articulated by many individual filmmakers. Ousmane Sembene, as "elder statesman" of African cinema, has been among the most assiduous

and passionate. The respect that Sembene has earned both within and outside Africa testify both to his skill as a craftsman and to the uncanny ability of his works to straddle the great divide between popular appeal and revolutionary intent, and between local and universal significance. Sembene was also among the first wave of African artists to reject the claims of négritude, and its racialist, essentialist tone in favor of a more materialist understanding of the quest for indigenous cultural identity. As discussed earlier, this borrowing from marxism helped reinsert a rational impetus within the African world view, as against negritude's claim that the specificity of the African personality rested in its essentially emotional and spiritual attributes. Indeed, Sembene's films have all contained a strong critique of négritude which he considers a "mystificatory ideology". (Martin, 108)

The trademark of Sembene's films can be seen as an uncompromising treatment of the way his people have been exploited and victimized, whether by external colonizing forces or by indigenous, neo-colonial classes. His films are designed to encourage identification but also to engender a process of self-reflection - a notion of the popular that appeals directly to the audience's familiarity with mainstream film language yet also employs certain distancing devices. Sembene's first major works, Borrom Sarret (The Cart-driver, 1963), Black Girl, 1965 and Mandabi (The Money Order, 1968) all deal with the exploitation, humiliation and ultimate dehumanization of individuals in a world from which they are fundamentally alienated. Sembene's guards against too close an identification of the audience with these characters by constantly referring, through various filmic and symbolic devices, to the social causes of their alienation. The audience is encouraged to reflect on the reasons for their docility or powerlessness in given situations which, while perhaps exaggerated for dramatic effect, are never far removed from daily reality. This didactic intent is expressed by Sembene in his discussion of Mandabi:

"Effectively I showed a Senegalese man like many others who

remains passive in a situation they (the audience) believe to be inevitable. The usefulness of the film is to draw out debate on this character's attitude." (in Martin, 107)

In three later films reconstructing episodes in colonial history, Emitai (God of Thunder, 1972), Ceddo (1978) and Camp de Thiaroye (1987), Sembene emphasizes the role of popular culture as a factor of resistance against religious, political and economically-motivated incursions. He is concerned to show the heroism of everyday life, the engagement of ordinary people in the anti-colonial struggle quite independently of the formation of "movements" such as négritude. (Ghali, 41) These films also evidence his didactic intent, to "...dramatize history and to teach it so as not to let others teach it to us." (Pfaff, 165), as well as his firm belief in the importance of what history can teach and of the necessity of understanding popular traditions before any self-understanding can be reached. (ibid.: 141) We might summarize Sembene's understanding of popular culture as something that is experienced in daily life and springs from the people, rather than being imposed; a source of empowerment rather than a means of escape. The role of the filmmaker is to tap the potential already existing within the popular realm for resisting the imposition of alien and alienating forms of identity.

All of Sembene's films are quite precise investigations of the nature of contradiction from a marxist perspective. Conflicts or confrontations are never motivated by ethnic, racial or purely religious factors, but always by underlying factors of class divisions and socio-economic injustice. Though the dichotomous tension between wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, foreign and indigenous elements, etc. is always invoked in very precise images and symbols, the analysis Sembene brings to the causes of modern alienation or historical conflicts is never simplistic. Rather, he seems to have a high regard for his audience's ability to understand the complex motivations that lie behind such phenomena. Sembene's films are by no means dry and humourless, but strongly project the sense of "great responsibility" he claims filmmakers bear in educating the people and generating public dialogue:

"Film...serves as a canvas on which to reflect together with each other. What is important is that the cinema becomes eye, mirror and awareness. The filmmaker is the one who looks at and observes his people, to excerpt actions and situations which he chews over before giving them back to his people..." (cited in Ghali, 46)

In keeping with his marxist principles, and his criticism of bureaucracy and the authority exercised by neo-colonial states, Sembene's notion of national identity and culture bears little resemblance to officially sanctioned versions. This is demonstrated in his use of indigenous "national" languages (Wolof) and local dialects in all his films since Emitai, with the exception of the French spoken by colonialists or by the African bourgeoisie as a symbol of their alienation from their own cultures and people. Sembene's use of language testifies to the cultural and political significance he attaches to it, its role in fomenting new identities and homogeneous national cultures. (Boughedir, 1983)

Turning to the Malian director Souleymane Cisse, arguably the rising star of contemporary cinema in West Africa, one finds as many points of intersection as of divergence from the views of Ousmane Sembene. Many similarities might be traced back to their common film training in Moscow and the influence exerted on them by the classics of Soviet revolutionary cinema and their authors' theories of film syntax. Both use dialectical montage to carefully construct their films' meanings and to involve the audience in their evolution; in this respect, they share a didactic purpose, a concern that spectators become increasingly conscious of their own situation by relating it to the films' fictional events. Like Sembene, Cisse's films are concerned with the exercise of power, both in traditional African societies and in modern, neo-colonial contexts.

The features that distinguish these two authors' works are less precisely definable, and may be seen to arise from their differing cultural backgrounds and experience. As part of France's colonial hinterland, Malian society was less permeated with French culture; traditional languages, customs and values still provide strong points of identification for the Malian

people. Tradition may therefore be said to lie on the surface of Cisse's films, both as an elemental aspect of his existential and creative vision, and as sources of inspiration for events in his films and the actions of their characters. While Sembene's task may be seen as one of excavating or unearthing instances of popular resistance and indigenous culture, for Cisse it is rather a case of witnessing to these evident truths.

It would be wrong however to suggest that Cisse is only concerned with ontological truths and self-expression. Though less evidently didactic that Sembene, Cisse's films are nonetheless driven by a precise social, political and cultural intent. With Sembene he shares a strong critical view of the State, seeing the Malian nation as coterminous with Bambara language and culture. As one of the strongest proponents of independent filmmaking in Africa, he has claimed that cinema can as legitimately claim to represent a country as the State can. (Boughedir, 1983) In its ability to help people develop self-perceptions and self-understanding, and make them conscious of Africa's great cultural riches, Cisse believe cinema to be as necessary as books and bread to the continent's evolution. (Senga, 136)

Cisse's most original contribution to African cinematic praxis has been the attempt to discern commonalities across cultural differences, the meeting points that allow for cultural exchange, a quest that has spawned eulogistic reviews of his films as contributions to the "universal language" of cinema. (Khelil, 1988) Cisse is careful to specify that this does not entail compromise, giving the West the images that it wants or has come to know, but rather the production and dissemination of images that are indigenous and have integrity with respect to one's own culture. (Senga, 136) (The internationally favorable critical reception and local commercial success of his most recent film, Yeelen [The Light, 1987] seems to presage that his views will take on more than theoretical currency.) Cisse's views undoubtedly take some of their cues from those transcendent philosophies that seek the universal in the particular. However, his particular skill has been in achieving a synthesis that expresses his own creative vision as much as it speaks to the collective

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concerns of his people, and that explores the dialectics of cultural solidarity and inter-cultural dialogue, both within Africa and internationally.

Cisse is not alone in considering film as an important means of promoting the cultural unity of Africa, a sense of solidarity that can counter its political fragmentation and the difficulty of reconciling national differences. The political and economic failure of the Pan-Africanist movement points, not necessarily to the dismantling of national entities and economic blocs, but rather to the construction of cultural bridges that will initiate broader levels of understanding and cooperation. Culture must be understood not only in formal or aesthetic terms, but as a whole "way of life", the Gramscian realm of "common sense" that comprises historically sedimented common knowledge and popular ideologies. As such it is not removed from political and economic concerns, but rather closely integrated with them. As Med Hondo puts it:

> "Les peuples africains s'ignorent les uns les autres, pire, ils ne connaissent pas leur histoire commune. Or le cinéma est un facteur inégalable de rapprochement, d'inter-connaissance et de solidarité entre les peuples africains, car ils affrontent les mêmes difficultés sociales et économiques, la même réalité politique." (1987: 27)

This view, coming from one of Africa's most uncompromising, left leaning filmmakers, again reveals the extent to which politics and culture are perceived to reside on a common front. Cinema is an explicitly political tool, a means of promoting African unity and of correcting the image of Africa produced through external agencies.

Finally, it is worth considering the position taken by Gaston Kaboré, a filmmaker from Burkina Faso who also has extensive experience working in his government's Ministry of Information and who is currently Secretary General of FEPACI. This triple incarnation as artist, State bureaucrat and representative of independent filmmakers that would seem to entail a set of contradictory aims and positions, has instead allowed Kaboré to articulate an encompassing as well as a personal ethic of African cinema, best rendered in his own words:

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"Mon choix politique nécessite que je participe à la lutte pour rétablir notr> personnalité, la dignité de l'homme africain, de l'homme voltaique. En ce sens, le cinéma a un grand rôle à assumer. Comme moyen d'information dans les tâches de développement, et également comme moyen de réhabilitation de notre culture. Non pas d'une façon manichéenne en encensant la culture africaine, mais en y puisant des forces vitales, car notre culture contient, comme toutes les cultures, les ferments de sa propre évolution. Il nous faut sortir de l'aliénation par laquelle les pays dominateurs nous imposent un mode de vie que nous avons fini par considérer comme le seul valable." (1984: 57)

Kaboré's view of culture, as expressed in his films, is of the elements that make up an entire way of life, particularly among rural and peasant populations: values derive from the community and from the land which sustains it. These popular traditions are to be safeguarded, not for their anthropological value, but for the thread they provide between past, present and future. He does not present an idealized image of traditional society, instead showing the forms that oppression as well as resistance took in the past and therefore their value as ongoing sources of resistance. For Kaboré, "the revolution" is ineluctable, inscribed in the logic of history and existing as a potential within the realm of popular culture and ideologies. The filmmaker's task, simply put, is to position him or herself within that popular domain, to put his/her creative abilities in the service of the people. (1984: 56-7) Kaboré's notion of the revolution is hardly one of dismantling the nation-state, which his position has forced him to recognize as, among other things, a crucial support to the efforts of filmmakers. Though he is perhaps less antagonistic to the State than many of his colleagues, his films demonstrate that he shares with them a view of the nation as coterminous with ethnically and linguistically distinct cultures rather than as a homogeneous comingling of many ethnicities. Indeed, in Kaboré's view, a cultural map with its own shifting and somewhat amorphous borders overlays the familiar political map of Africa, producing separate, though not necessarily irreconcilable versions of national and cultural identity.

In conclusion, it might be stated that a certain concensus exists among

African filmmakers, a shared perception of themselves as both artists and socio-cultural mediators, irrespective of the formal and aesthetic attributes of their work. This concensus is expressed in a commitment to audience as creator of a film's meanings, a desire to forge direct, "organic" linkages with their publics, to tap the potential existing within the popular cultural realm, and to maintain independence vis à vis official or institutional definitions of culture and development. While explicit ideological, social and political projects may underline their work, there is little to be found in the way of abstract speculations on the nature of filmic expression. The adequacy of what I have labelled "theory" resides not in the internal consistency of its speculations, but rather in its concrete relevance to the needs and concerns of the community it serves. In Wole Soyinka's words: "The ontology of the idiom is subservient to the burden of its concerns;..." (1976: 64) There can be no theory of film divorced from its practical repercussions; no film practice without consideration of the wider social, political and cultural context. What might, in Gramscian terms, be called a "philosophy of praxis" is in effect deeply anchored in an (indigenous) oral tradition in which all forms of artistry exist to preserve historical memory and ensure cultural continuity.

Themes and variations

If the foregoing discussion might be seen to respond to the "why" of African cinema, the following focus on themes seeks to uncover "what" it is that moves filmmakers to tell the stories that they do. Without diminishing the imaginative and formal range and originality of works, there is no avoiding the co-existence of common themes in African cinema, as well as their persistence through time. Ferid Boughedir claims that this similarity of themes across the spectrum of African cinema derives from the defense of common causes, among others those of decolonisation, independence, exodus/exile and the condition of women. The persistence of such themes testifies to the ongoing nature of these struggles and problems in African societies, albeit in changing circumstances and contexts. Boughedir further

argues, following certain tenets of "Third Cinema", that a commonality of interests extends beyond the borders of Africa, uniting all Third World filmmakers around the struggle for an "artistic" and "auteurial" cinema that reflects, in a broad sense, the cultural realities of their nations and peoples. Memory, identity, and ancestry are among the universal themes taken up in specific cultural contexts. (1986a)

Because all the arts in Africa are rooted in a pervasive oral tradition, these common concerns have also been articulated by African artists working in media other than film. Nadine Gordimer expresses the intimate association between life and art, or between reality and its representation, when she says that while African writers may choose their plots, characters and literary styles, "their themes choose them." These themes consist in "...statements or questions arising from the nature of the society in which writer finds himself immersed, and the duality of the life around him." (cited in Potholm, 108) Boughedir reiterates this in the following passage, where he also defines what has become the dominant theme in contemporary African cinema:

> "Les films africains sont tous des enfants de cette période...où
> les nations africaines subissent d'intenses mutations sociales et
> culturelles subséquentes aux bouleversements politiques et
> économiques qui agitent le continent.[..].Ces mutations, les
> cinéastes les vivent à ce point quotidiennement qu'ils ont fait
> du choc de l'ancien et du nouveau le sujet presque unique de
> leurs oeuvres." (1986b)

It is important to recognize, as Boughedir does, the multiple ways in which this overarching theme has been articulated, and to avoid the suggestion that African cinema expresses a fundamentally polarized or dichotomous world-view. While this may have been the case in a period when a concern with modernization was paramount, the discrediting of developmental paradigms has occurred in tandem with the realization that tradition and modernity exist in a dialectical, not a purely oppositional relation, one of mutual complementarity rather than mutual exclusion. Gaston Kaboré argues that the complex relation between tradition and

modernity is not necessarily one of contradiction. He cautions against considering tradition as philosophically opposed to change and for the status quo, or comparing tradition and rationalism in a manner that implies the fundamental irrationality of traditional societies. The latter, he claims, offer perspectives on human relations that must be carefully preserved and invoked in the process of change:

> "...[La] génie de notre peuple, de nos cadres, de nos artistes, devra justement s'exprimer en s'attachant à comprendre nos traditions et nos valeurs propres, pour puiser en elles-mêmes cette faculté d'insurrection, de goût du changement." (1983: 16)

Contemporary African films interpret the tradition/modernity dialectic in ways that idealize neither the past nor the future, weaknesses inherent in, respectively, the philosophy of négritude and theories of modernization. In their function as cultural observers and mediators, African filmmakers have been in the forefront of attempts to articulate the relation between past, present and future in ways that more accurately gauge contemporary realities. In this respect, it is perhaps fair to say that the most constant theme in African cinema has been that of change, the attempt, through different formal and narrative strategies, to come to terms with past history, present conditions and future possibilities. It is this profoundly existential nature of African cinema, its rootedness in specifically African events and traditions that, paradoxically, allows it to transcend its location in time and space and connect with a broader human experience.

As with the broad notion of tradition-modernity, the singling out of particular themes in African cinema tends to reduce to apparently clear-cut categories, for the sake of ease of analysis, what are often complex multi-dimensional issues. In fact, African films rarely explore issues from an individual, psychological perspective, a single subject position, but rather tend to adopt a collective point of view. Thus, for instance, a film whose central theme is the institution of marriage in African societies, including such aspects as polygamy and arranged marriages, might use this theme to further explore the position of women, Islamic law, kinship structures,

problems of caste, the family, rural and urban value systems, or the nature of love. Insofar as African cinema is inspired by transformations occurring across the social and cultural spectrum, stories rarely follow a single thread: even when a central narrative can be detected, it is usually interwoven with several parallel or tangential stories, this central thematic thread functioning as an over-determining factor feeding into a variety of related themes. Central narratives are not pursued as relentlessly as in Western films but serve to focalize and expose a larger network of concerns.

The Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Dikongue-Pipa articulates this phenomenon of multi-layering, the existence of narrative within narratives, in a discussion of his ground-breaking film <u>Muna Moto</u>, a complex tale of modern love set in the context of traditional social and moral values and taboos:

> "For me the question of bride-price is only the first step in reading the film. Behind this element, which to my mind is not central, there are several others to be perceived. In effect I'm conducting an investigation into a whole society - a society whose values have become alienated. <u>Muna Moto</u> is concerned to reflect on the dominant power in Cameroon which is mortgaged with such inauspicious morals as those of tribalism. Hopefully it's clear to the viewer that I'm evoking a whole community in the family of the despotic uncle. Beyond these two levels....my film also has a third level of reading: history. Through what happens to the young woman, I'm introducing the whole question of money. Money has deformed people's thinking:...Now, this reign of money was introduced by colonialism. <u>Muna Moto</u> allows the impact of Wetern intrusion into traditional African society to be read through numerous signs. Finally, my film has a fourth dimension: the cultural. The contrast between our traditional culture and European culture has created in many minds a great confusion of values...." (cited in Martin, 92)

This eclecticism also reveals the extent to which thematic content and formal choices are interdependent and both closely associated with the oral tradition. What might elude the understanding of western viewers accustomed to tightly organized stories with a central, linear narrative is quite familiar to audiences schooled in a more wholistic world view and

culture. In terms of the oral tradition, c .e might speak of a single problematic (disturbance or absence of harmony in the world) with multiple instanciations, often accompanied by a tendency to drift uncannily from the plane of reality to that of spirituality, or, in psychoanalytic terms, from the surface to the deep structure of consciousness.

In the remainder of this section, a closer look at several of these "instanciations", will further clarify the way African filmmakers have articulated the pervasive phenomenon of social, political, economic and cultural change in their films. Themes that emerge repeatedly across different styles and genres of filmmaking become key focal points, so many sites where these issues and their perceived causes are crystallized. They also shed further light on filmmakers' own perceived roles as artists and mediators, their position on the threshold of tradition and modernity, of "official" and "popular" definitions of culture.

As noted above, African films rarely adopt single subject positions, psychological points of view; their concerns tend to be collective ones, their perspective that of the community. The theme of alienation is perhaps the closest one gets to an individual point of view though it too is causally related to a broader context of disturbance in the social order. Alienation being a common malaise in societies undergoing rapid, fundamental change, it is present as a thematic undercurrent in the majority of African films. There is however a whole body of films whose dominant theme is that of alienation. Often autobiographical inasmuch as they allude to the alienation of the artist/intellectual vis à vis both indigenous and colonial culture, these films constitute a sort of obligatory rite of passage for many first time filmmakers. From Paulin Vieyra's Afrique sur Seine (1956), considered the inaugural film of West African cinema, through such "classics" as Tam-Tam à Paris (Cameroun, 1963), Concerto pour un exil, (Ivory Coast, 1967), A nous deux Paris (Ivory Coast, 1970), Et la neige n'était plus (Senegal, 1965), to recent works such as Le Prix du Mensonge and Saaraba (Senegal, 1988), these films mark the initiation of filmmakers into their mediating roles and speak to

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their attempt to reconcile conflicting cultural affinities. Though they may be partially understood as personal, existential quests, they also express the anguish of entire cultures undergoing crises of identity.

As persistent as this theme has been in African film history, a gradual shift in the manner of its expression reveals analogous changes taking place at the meeting point of African and western cultures in more recent times, and pointing to the growing complexity of that encounter. Where early films clearly demarcated these two realms, showing French or European culture at its source or in urban African settings, or as something super-imposed on and quite separate from traditional African culture, this separation is less clear-cut in more contemporary films Whether situated in Europe or Africa, western values are seen to have permeated African consciousness and culture both in its center and at its peripheries. No longer do we find simple choices and clear-cut solutions. Le Prix du Mensonge is a story of two Sahelian brothers living in Paris, one having maintained contact with his family and ultimately, his culture and values, the other having severed his formative relationships and whole-heartedly embraced Parisian life. While apparently straightfoward in its presentation of moral imperatives and in the juxtaposition of cultural integrity with its abandonment, the films also suggests that immersion in a dominating culture does not in itself guarantee the loss of root values. Traditional African values attached to family, community and memory, are seen as important means of survival in a modern context and are contrasted invidiously with the more ephemeral pleasures and resources of western life: the consumption of drugs, sex and material goods. These values can in turn be extrapolated to the larger community, explicitly pointing to the moral degeneration and bankruptcy of western culture and the return to sources as a remedy for alienation.

Saaraba, meaning "earthly paradise", explores the question of alienation from the perspective of a Senegalese man who returns from a long exile in Europe to reclaim his heritage and reconnect with his past - a classic motif in African cinema of alienation and the subsequent quest for

authenticity. He finds that the "saaraba" he is searching for has given way to a country that has lost its identity in the emulation of European lifestyles. At the same time, the heart of traditionalism, village life, is shown as something less than paradisical, a combination of regressive, feudalistic laws and modern corruption. Saaraba is thus revealed as an illusion, a myth harbored by those who have become alienated from their culture. Between false traditionalism and empty modernism are those who endeavour to make traditional values relevant to contemporary needs, and the figure of the griot who observes, sings and comments that it is better to resemble the times than to resemble one's father.

As the theme of alienation has been taken up in ways that preclude simplistic causal interpretations, so other questions of enduring concern to filmmakers have come to reflect increasingly complex forces at work in African societies. Of these, perhaps none has so preoccupied the cinematic imagination than that of political culture and the wielding of power. As cultural and psychological alienation seems to be the inevitable by-product of rapid social change, so the abrupt implantation of western political institutions and ideologies on African soil is seen to have generated complex problems and contradictions. Like alienation, corruption and the abuse of power constitute principal thematic undercurrents in many African films and are closely intertwined with the dialectic of tradition/modernity.

In common with colleagues the world over, African filmmakers must generally disguise their views and criticisms of contemporary political regimes, either by making these seem incidental to the film's (less controversial) story, or by proposing them in the form of historical allegories. Ousmane Sembene, arguably the most politically explicit filmmaker working in Africa today, has become a master of such surreptitious discourses. In Xala, (a Wolof term meaning "impotence"), Sembene targets the new African bourgeoisie, a largely Islamic, mercantile class closely affiliated with bureaucratic and governmental elites. It is personified in the film by El Hadji, a prosperous middle-aged businessman recently elected to the Senegalese

Chamber of Commerce, and who is rendered impotent by a beggar's curse on the wedding night of his third marriage. El Hadji's life and business are soon in ruin as he frantically seeks antidotes to the curse. The fragility of wealth and power that is revealed are those of the national bourgeoisie whose apparent power lies in its relationship with former colonial metropoles and whose dictates it must endure. (Pfaff, 150) Couched in satire and sexual metaphor, Xala is in fact about the financial, social and moral bankruptcy of the modern Senegalese ruling class, the collusion of economic, political and religious power, and their abuse.

In Ceddo (1976), Sembene depicts the forces seeking ascendancy in West Africa during the time of the slave trade, a period when traditional African rule was being challenged by European economic interests as well as Islamic and Christian expansion. Though set in the 17th century, Sembene clearly intends his film to have contemporary relevance, both as a lesson in history and in its symbolic and allegorical content. As with Xala, his purpose is to denounce corrupt leaders and their collaboration with colonialism, slavery, and in today's context, foreign imperialism. For Sembene, the investigation of past events and movements exposes the lie that Africa has been the perpetual victim of foreign incursions, instead revealing

> "...those legitimate power structures which permitted and in
> some cases invited foreign powers to enter the African
> continent and carry out the relentless exploitation of its human
> and material resources." (Pfaff, 168)

It also precludes a simplistic or dualistic understanding of the nature of political relations in post independence Africa. Sembene's most recent film, Camp de Thiaroye, along with Med Hondo's Sarraounia and Souleymane Cisse's Yeelen provide other instances of the use of historical allegory to comment on contemporary political realities in Africa, and particularly, to denounce the abuses of power.

A quite different approach is found in films that investigate political culture through its impact on particular individuals, groups or communities. These films commonly denounce the modern African State for its

incompetence, corruption or ignorance of the real needs and concerns of its citizens. In his 1986 film, Nyamanton (The Garbage boys), Cheick Oumar Sissoko expresses these through the plight of a family victimized by the inadequate provision of health care and educational resources. For Sissoko, the measure of political corruption is the social injustice suffered by the poor and powerless, in this case children and displaced peasants. The State's insensitivity to rural problems is also a predominant theme of many African films. One of Saaraba's storylines concerns the requisitioning of village land by the State to build a salt factory. Negotiations take place strictly between the village Imams (Islamic religious leaders and major landholders) and the State deputy, who also lusts after one of the Imam's beautiful daughters. The land question becomes secondary to the deputy's obsession with reaching an agreement on a bride price, and both are settled irrespective of the wishes of the girl or the plight of local herding and agricultural populations being decimated by drought.

In Gaston Kaboré's Zan Boko, the condition of rural populations is taken up in the context of urbanization - the steady encroachment of the city on traditionally held lands. The film is foremost an indictment of the State's embracing of modernization, its willingness to sacrifice the peasantry in order to maintain its urban power base. Again, collusion, graft, and a materialist ethic are shown as the glue of a predominantly bureaucratic elite, in contrast with the more deeply rooted values associated with traditional lifestyles, with land and family. While both these latter films privilege tradition in the form of village life, their purpose is not to represent rural utopias, but rather to point to the social and economic consequences of myopic and unjust development policies.

Indeed, it would be false to suggest that African films predominantly criticize the abuses of modernity, leaving aside instances where tradition becomes simply a way of holding on to power in rapidly changing social, political and economic circumstances. Filmmakers are not ignorant of the Janus-faced quality of tradition, on the one hand a source of continuity in a

sea of change, on the other, a conservative force that often sustains repressive social practices and institutions In their majority, African filmmakers seek to portray a progressive liaison between traditional and modern orders, between continuity and change. Two themes present themselves as particularly important in this difficult endeavour: the practice of polygamy and, as sub-themes to this, questions of sexuality, caste and the condition of women; and secondly, religious practices and the role of spirituality in the modern African context.

Though they were customs found in many indigenous West African cultures, polygamy and the practice of arranged marriages were strenghthened with the adoption of Islamic religious and legal tenets. Situated within patriarchal Islamic culture, polygamy's status as a male-regulated institution which commodified women and eliminated any possibility of choice of marriage partners was amplified and extended to become part of a much larger and more complex system of power, wealth and privilege. The arrival of western, urbane, consumer culture further altered traditional practices and the position of women, to the extent that these now must be understood as among the central problematics of contemporary African societies It is therefore as political and social issues, questions of freedom, power and autonomy, as much as how African cultures view "love", that these issues become the subjects of films.

Filmmakers are faced with difficult, if not impossible choices if they wish to represent women's situation with any degree of optimism. While, on the one hand, there is little difficulty in showing such practices as polygamy and arranged marriages as anachronisms in societies where sexual freedom and the rights of women can no longer be ignored, their alternatives are less clear cut. Where sexual freedom has supplanted such practices, primarily in urban settings, women must still contend with profoundly patriarchal and sexist cultures, and suffer fates often worse than their less emancipated rural sisters. With certain exceptions, the modern, urbane African woman is seen to have entered a higher stage of objectification,

where beauty and love are mere commodities in a vast circuit of production, marketing and exchange.

Given the multiple forms of their oppression in both traditional and modern sectors of African societies, it is interesting to note that women have predominantly been represented in films as sources of strength and resistance to this oppression, rather than its victims. It is further worth noting the association between this strength and elements "traditionally" ascribed to women, elements pertaining to the continuity of culture, both in its physical and symbolic senses: earth, family, community, fertility, harvest. Through these associations, women stand as metaphorical representations of their societies, both of the conditions that oppress them and of their sources of liberation. Women's creative use of traditional resources in the service of continuity, but also of change (the ability to respond to changing circumstances), is contrasted with a superficial adherence to rituals and customs that only serve to uphold class and sexual privilege and that, in effect, spells the death of culture.

The leadership role played by women in fighting contemporary forms of enslavement has been the primary theme of such films as the earlier mentioned Muna Moto, as well as the more recent Djeli (Ivory Coast, 1986), Histoire d'Orokia (Burkina Faso, 1987), and Love Brewed in an African Pot (Ghana, 1986). All these films tell the story of young couples who defy established customs of polygamy, arranged marriage and the constraints of the caste system. In all of them, it is the woman who is the central protagonist, the initiator of change and the most courageous in standing up against community opinion and sanctions. It would be erroneous to suggest that these films merely represent the rebellion of youth against tradition in order to embrace modern (i.e. western) values. The marriage customs that are rejected are not simply portrayed as backward; they are morally and rationally deconstructed as traditions which commodify women and are tainted with corruption and paternalism. Refuge is as a rule found within the traditional community, not outside of it. And the community that has

been a source of support is in in the final analysis changed and revitalized by this infusion of youthful vitality and integrity.

Finally, representations of the sacred are ubiquitous in African cinema, as both thematic and symbolic elements, and their treatment reveals much about filmmakers' perceptions of the role of magic, spirituality and religion in the evolution of their cultures and societies. Along with other intellectuals and artists, filmmakers are in a unique position with respect to their religious environment. Their wordly, educated status has the effect of distancing them both from indigenous animistic beliefs and from implanted Islamic and Christian religions. At the same time, they are unable to entirely remove themselves from what are, in effect, fundamental elements of their culture. In oral cultures, religion does not act only as a belief system or serve a purely ritualistic function; rather it is an intrinsic part of the social and political life of the community. It is therefore not surprising that few filmmakers have taken up or questioned the nature of belief systems as explicit themes, as activities separate from secular concerns. Rather, religion is a transcendent presence; metaphysical forces are as integral to the life of the film as they are to everyday "real" life. Ngwewa Pokam discussed the ubiquity of sacred manifestations in African cinema:

> "Elles transparaissent tant bien que mal dans plus d'un film africain, que ce soit de façon vraiment explicite ou sous la forme de symboles représentant l'idée que l'Africain se fait du sacré. Issues de croyances mythiques, ces manifestations religieuses sont des survivances culturelles symboliques que l'auteur traîne avec et souvent malgré lui dans ses films. C'est la manifestation d'un imaginaire qui, à première vue, semblerait individuel mais qui, finalement, se révèle collectif." (115)

It is, however, precisely at the meeting point of spiritual and secular worlds, where religion has been invested with secular power, and can engender important social, political and cultural consequences, that it is is taken up as an explicit theme. Filmmakers have for example engaged in critical evaluations of the way Islam and Christianity have influenced the historical development and contemporary condition of African societies. In

virtually all the films mentioned so far, institutionalized religion acts as an aggressive or oppressive force, either in the colonization of Africa, or in the perpetuation a patriarchal social order. Religion here loses its sacred quality to become, in Ngwewa Pokam's words, "the opium of the people". (ibid.)

Because of the tremendous spiritual, economic and political power wielded by Islam throughout West Africa, it is most often the target of criticism. Having first itself colonized Africa, Islam later served as a stepping stone for French colonialism. The Senegalese filmmaker Mahama Traore Johnson describes this process:

> "It should not be forgotten that the Muslim religion was not, in the beginning, an African religion, it's a form of spiritual colonization which came to us through the Arab countries, as political and economic colonisation came to us through France. France bribed the marabouts in order to be able better to enslave the people. On the surface these marabouts weren't (and aren't) part of the commercial and industrial structures, they belong to the spiritual order, but in fact colonialism only had to issue the orders; they carried them out....the Muslim religion is one of the most solid pillars of African states." (cited in Martin, 112-3)

In N'Diangane, (meaning Koranic school novice), Traore brings into question the nature and extent of this power by looking at the way the conservative and regressive aspects of Islamic religious ideology are transmitted through largely autonomous Koranic schools. As Traore specifies, his purpose is less to question Islam's religious content than it is to analyse religion as a socio-economic phenomenon. (Delati, 1975) Sembene Ousmane's Ceddo takes a critical look at Islam from a historical perspective, showing its usurpation of native African rule, its denial of religious and social freedoms, and its assignation of inferior social roles and status to women. (Pfaff, 172, 174) However, as noted earlier, Sembene does not use criticism of foreign religions to idealize indigenous African belief systems. In an earlier film, Emitai, Sembene reenacts an episode from colonial history when French authorities, after forceably recruiting young African men to fight their European war, tried to levy an exorbitant rice tax from the villages.

The film turns on the resistance of villagers to this attempt, particularly focusing on the ineffectiveness of the response of the male elders of the community, who retire to their sacred lair to consult appropriate gods, spirits and ancestors. While Sembene admits that religion served as a refuge against oppression, he also emphasizes that the spirits generally preached resignation.

> "The gods never prevented colonialism from establishing itself; they strengthened us for inner resistance but not for an armed resistance." (Ghali, 48)

Finally, mention should be make of Souleymane Cisse's film Yeelen, one of the rare African films to focus almost exclusively on indigenous religious practices. The film takes us into the intimate workings of a Bambara initiation society and attempts to render both the cosmogonical and cosmological theories underlying this most ancient of Malian sects. Cisse's intent in making this film was partly anthropological, to preserve little known aspects of the culture for future generations. (Senga, 134) Set in a indefinite, pre-colonial past, the story told is of a father's jealous holding onto the sacred knowledge that he has inherited and which he must rightfully pass on to his son, and of the earth's destruction that results from this jealousy. Cisse's film clearly has allegorical references to a modern political "priesthood", bureaucratic, military or statist, and to the social and environmental costs of its obsession with power.

While the thematic elements that have been the focus of this section constitute only partial aspects of the films in question, they nonetheless suggest themselves as among the most important. The vast majority of African films evidence clear social, political and cultural concerns, irrespective of the forms or styles used to translate them. If African filmmakers have adopted the role of the griot or "djeli" in modern Africa, then it follows that the function of their story-telling is not simply to amuse or entertain their audiences, but also to provoke and inform them. Indeed, their purpose goes beyond the restoration of tradition to advocate the creation of a new order. One might therefore say that the spirit of oral culture

impregnates the works of African filmmakers, that which confers on all art forms a moral function, an ethical responsibility towards the community as a whole.

Form & Style

In this final section, consideration will be given to the way formal and stylistic strategies support the socio-political project evident in the themes and issues taken up in African cinema. Having stated at the outset of this chapter that the filmmaker's position in African society is analogous to that of the traditional artist-craftsman, a role comprising both ethical and creative dimensions, the following is primarily concerned with the latter impulse, namely the tools and symbols that make up the filmmaker's language. The task of the filmmaker does not, in essence, appear substantively different from that of the weaver whose craft, Hampaté Bâ tells us, "...is linked with the symbolism of the creative Word deploying itself in time and space." (181)

However, beyond adherence to a certain moral or ethical regime,the position of the filmmaker differs from that of the traditional craftsman in one important respect: in this particular craft, there is no body of indigenous knowledge transmitted through generations that s/he can draw on, no set principles, no rituals, no body of elders to guarantee the authenticity of works. A formal vocabulary remains in its embryonic stages. The urgency and responsibility of film in the African context, and the lack of resources at its disposal, has meant African filmmakers have had to forego formal experimentation as a discrete project, at least in the sense normally attached to structural, concrete or avant-garde cinema. However, the particular sense of social responsibility attached to their works, and the many indigenous artistic forms and symbols that have inspired them, including music, dance, sculpture, story-telling and theatre, have conspired in the invention of a new and authentically African film language. One can speak of the entire history of African cinema as an experimental project, without limiting the term to its more formalistic meaning. It is no longer appropriate nor possible to

overlook what Manthia Diawara calls "a dynamic aesthetic proper to Africa", to evaluate African cinema through the prism of Western film language, to assume a lack of mastery of the medium or a "primitive" camera style on the part of African filmmakers. (1988: 6)

While formal and structural devices particular to oral culture have become important in constituting a specifically African cinematic language, it is also true that these forms have needed to be adapted to changing contexts and subject matter. The search for indigenous forms, styles and symbols should not conceal the fact that many filmmakers have been educated in European, Soviet or American film schools, belong to a westernized elite, must work with the exigencies of the medium, and make films that appeal to contemporary African audiences. As with the thematic content of films, their formal aspects are a synthesis of both traditional and modern resources. Perhaps the most prevalent representation of this synthesis is found in the griot who is present in a great many African films, either in the disembodied voice of the filmmaker/narrator, or as a character, in both cases a key figure in structuring the filmic narrative. The griot, story-teller or public entertainer thus stands as a transcendent element in African cinema, alternatively structural, symbolic and stylistic. It is in the light of analogous efforts on the part of filmmakers to synthesize an indigenous film language that the following will examine the elements of narrative construction, style and symbolism in African cinema.

In the effort to distinguish the specific or "different" features of African narratives, it is easy to overlook some of their more universal characteristics, the traits they share in common with narratives the world over. In his study of folkloric history, Vladimir Propp makes clear this universal process of narrative construction, a historically generated dialogue between reality and fantasy fundamentally similar to that which informs African cinema:

"A broad study of folklore in its historical development shows that whenever historical change creates new forms of life, new economic conquests, new forms of social relations, and all of

these filter down into folklore, what is old does not die out, nor is it always entirely replaced by what is new. The old continues to exist along with the new, either parallel to it or combining with it to bring forth several associations of a hybrid nature..." (cited in de Lauretis, 1984: 113-4)

Each such hybrid formation, Propp continues, forms the basis of a new story, new plot types and motifs. In his writings, Propp argues for a close relationship between a society's folklore, the stories it tells to and about itself, and its socio-economic order. Narratives does not merely reflect the society, as de Lauretis elaborates,

"...but rather emerge out of the conflict, the contradictions, of different social orders as they succeed or replace one another; the difficult coexistence of different orders of historical reality in the long period of transition from one to the other is precisely what is manifested in the tensions of plots and in the transformations or dispersion of motifs and plot types." (ibid.)

Jurij Lotman also provides essential insights into the nature of narrative construction, referring to plots as the product of two universally valid "text-generating mechanisms". The most primordial of these mechanisms is that which engenders myths and whose temporal frame is that of the cyclical processes of nature. The stories generated do not have a beginning and end, but are part of a recurrent, self-repeating cycle which can be told starting from any point. Partaking of immanent and inherent laws, these texts serve an important regulating function in the world. The second mechanism is the counterpart of the first, fixing not laws but anomalies, generating tales about specific incidents and occurrences:

"If the one mechanism fixed the principle, the other described the chance occurrence. If historically from the first there developed statutory and normative texts of both a sacral and a scientific character, the second gave rise to historical texts, chronicles and annals." (cited in deLauretis, 117)

If African film narratives lend themselves to such a universal structural analysis, their specificity might be located at the nexus of conflicts and contradictions being generated within the concrete realm of social and material conditions - or in Proppian terms, in the anomalies and "excesses"

that disturb the mythically established order of things. (ibid.) Just as these contradictions over-determine the thematic content of African films, so they provide their narrative driving force. In Gaston Kaboré's recent film <u>Zan Boko</u>, this contradiction is situated at the intersection of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production where the slow cyclical movement of time and unity of space of traditional, rural life meets the frenetic pace and space of modern urban culture. The dynamic created in this encounter supplies the film's linear plot as well as the tension that makes the story so compelling. In Souleymane Cissé's <u>Yeelen</u>, this dynamic tension is generated in an inter-generational power struggle, while the central drive in most of Ousmane Sembene's films is provided by the meeting of indigenous and exogenous forces, creating a dialectic of oppression and resistance; and in films such as <u>Muna Moto</u> and <u>Djeli</u>, a complex range of social, sexual, religious and generational conflicts advance and support central, linear narratives.

Indeed, the analysis of African film narratives reveals the presence of both linear and cyclical elements: stories involving defined characters and precise events and an epic quality that evokes a larger, atemporal order. Their uniqueness is found in the co-existence, on an equal footing, of several narrative lines within a single film, without the necessary privileging of one predominant story over another. As Michel Larouche observes, these narratives work through motifs that correspond to a predominant theme, differently from western narratives that emphasize rapidly succeeding events reinforcing and embellishing a central story. Thus, emotions may be revealed without a necessary or direct connection with the central motif, and may even supplant the latter. The result is a fragmented narrative structure whose complexity emerges in the knitting together of a simple linear narrative story-line, repeated digressions, and a continual return to the realm of the concrete. (Larouche, 78) The lack of a strong central thrust so characteristic of mainstream cinemas the world over should not be seen as problematic; such an approach is eminently suited to the complex,

multi-dimensional nature of African social and cultural realities, and testimony of the impossibility of reducing them to any single dimension.

Another feature that African film narratives share in common with more universal narrative forms is their embodiment of a passage or a transformation, which, as Manthia Diawara tells us, constitutes the structural cell of oral literature. (1988: 12) These often take the form of a journey of initiation or an educational quest, a search for authenticity, power, knowledge, identity and selfhood, and/or truth. What makes this universal theme and structuring element particularly African is, once again, its elaboration within the context of contemporary African realities, whether they be realistically or allegorically portrayed. As well, the obstacles that need to be overcome in this journey, and the manner in which this is accomplished, fundamentally express African moral and social values. (Pfaff: 36) As is often observed, African films rarely focus on the psychological or existential intricacies of individuals; characters are developed as "social types" whose quests, problems or situations are representative of those of the community at large. Individual self-interest is often presented in a negative light, as a loss of reference to the community's needs and problems, and thereby a loss of tradition, memory and culture. If the quests embodied in African films can generally be said to mirror the filmmaker's own search for selfhood and identity, then that quest may also be understood to be on behalf of the larger community to which s/he belongs.

A final note needs to be made regarding the function of cinematic narratives in comparison with that of traditional forms of story-telling. As discussed earlier, the oral tradition served to transmit knowledge and thereby ensure the continuity of culture; the griot and other traditional craftsmen were the repositories of culture, conservative forces insofar as their mandate was to reinforce traditional values and preserve the status quo. In the changing context of modern African states, the job of the artist-filmmaker has also changed: while not all posit revolutionary upheaval, most seek to change the social order rather than perpetuate it. The oral tradition occupies an

ambiguous position in this regard, as source and symbol of cultural continuity and change, both a conservative and a revolutionary force. As Manthia Diawara suggests:

> "...the functions from the oral narrative are used less to achieve a traditional/nostalgic closure and more to enunciate a new narrative posing the conditions of resistance to traditional order and the creation of a new one." (1987: 44)

In their majority, African filmmakers are concerned to challenge regressive and unjust features of their societies, both in their "traditional" and "modern" sectors. This is expressed substantively by the refurbishing of oral narratives with contemporary issues and concerns and structurally in a greater open-endedness of stories, greater ambiguity and latitude for interpretation, and forms of closure that do not reaffirm the status quo but instead advocate change.

This anchoring of filmmakers' concerns in socio-political realities also determines the predominance of realism as a stylistic choice in African cinema. As noted above, only rare examples of experimental or structuralist film exist, although the heavily symbolic content of films, and the ease with which works may drift from reality to fantasy often may seem quite avant-garde to the western observer. Together, symbolism and narrative progres. ion produce the allegorical impulse found in a wide range of African films. These aspects of African cinema can only be understood within the framework of a naturalistic world view, what Wole Soyinka calls "the metaphysics of the irreducible". What is irreducible in this case is the close conjunction between the individual the social community and Nature:

> "...knowledge of birth and death as the human cycle; the wind as a moving, felling, cleansing, destroying, winnowing force; the duality of the knife as blood-letter and creative implement; earth and sun as life-sustaining verities, and so on. These serve as matrices within which mores, personal relationships, even communal economics are formulated and reviewed." (Soyinka, 1976: 53)

Nature is, in short, fundamental to the moral order, any breakdown in the latter implying a rupture in the body of Nature. It is hardly surprising given

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this close interdependence of morality and nature, that naturalism dominates the stylistic, symbolic and aesthetic organization of African cinema.

As with other terms borrowed from western literary or cinematic analysis, that of "realism" must be re-evaluated in the light of African culture and traditions. In African cinema, realism is only partially expressed in the manipulation of time and space for realistic effect - a strategy that, in Western cinema, allows the most futuristic scenarios to be constructed in ways that make them seem entirely plausible. No attempt is made to dissimulate the metaphysical or fantastical, to have these conform to "normal" perception since, in effect, supernatural occurrences do occur within the realm of the real, and correspond to religious beliefs ingrained in people's thoughts and lifestyles. (Pfaff, 59) The realism of African cinema has an almost documentary quality, perhaps akin to the very thin line between literature and ordinary functional language, or between prose and poetry that Abiola Irele claims is inherent in the oral tradition:

> "...the basic dichotomy between prose and poetry is not
> perceived in the oral tradition with anything like the same
> degree of clarity as in the Western tradition nor indeed is it felt
> that such a dichotomy has any real significance." (1981: 18)

The "realism" of African cinema might therefore be seen to emerge from the close correspondence that exists between African "realities" and their representation, from the melding of documentary, fiction and fantasy in a way that, in European or North American cinema, would be considered experimental or overtly self-conscious.

Among the strategies used to render this realistic quality, none is more striking than the clear or implied presence of the filmmaker, a feature that for some critics confers an auteurial quality on African cinema. (Diawara, 1987: 38) This presence is a direct legacy of the oral story-telling tradition. In a film such as Gaston Kabore's Wend Kuuni, a straightfoward adaptation from the oral tradition, the story is told by the author in the voice of an outside narrator. In Saaraba, the filmmaker is present in the film in the figure of the griot, or traditional story-teller. The filmmaker's narrative authority is

enhanced by the use of shots (predominantly long) and framing that privilege the author's, rather than the characters' point of view, or techniques (close-ups, flashbacks/forwards) that have a descriptive function rather than rendering subjective points of view. Manthia Diawara's statement, made in reference to the film Nyamanton, might be generically aplied to West African fiction cinema:

> "Instead of effacing himself and realizing the story through different characters' narrations, the director...always carries the camera on his shoulder, and like the griot, dominates the narrative with his presence. (1987: 46)

The documentary quality of African cinema is also evidenced in what may have begun as a financial constraint but has become a stylistic choice, the use of real settings and locations, both urban and rural, and of non-professional actors. Both these strategies are related to a desire for authenticity, to a naturalist ethic and aesthetic that seeks to render the world as it is, with all its beauty and its flaws, rather than as an ideal reality. Both entail a willingness on the part of the filmmaker to accept the unexpected, to cope with unplanned contingencies. Both prone audience distanciation from pro-filmic events, yet also invite the audience to identify with familiar places and characters. For Sembene, professional West African actors are simply not convincing as ordinary human beings, because they have trained in classical French theatre and become saturated with Western culture. (Pfaff, 53)

Realism is further emphasized through temporal frameworks that support what is being represented: long, slow takes for rural settings, faster pacing in urban locations. Pacing is underscored and reinforced by techniques of framing and editing. The slow pace of rural life is enhanced by a predominance of long shots over close-ups, a framing which most closely approximates what the eye naturally sees, and a preference for mise-en-scène over editing in advancing the story. In urban settings, tighter framing suggests the city's denser, more claustrophobic environment, faster pacing its rhythms, and editing the juxtaposition of its many realities and contradictions. The soundtracks of African films likewise serve to heighten

their realistic/naturalistic qualities. Sound effects and music are predominantly intra-diegetic, their use for emotional effect much less common than in mainstream cinema. Where extraneous music and sound are heard, they often have a narrative quality, for instance folk themes that support or add extra dimensions to the story or whose words are directly related to a film's actions and images. The use of sound to enhance the realistic quality of African films should not be taken to imply its absence as an aesthetic or symbolic element, nor its subservience to dialogue and image; rather, it is inscribed within a set of formal strategies that together generate the film's meaning.

This latter point seems an appropriate starting point for a discussion of symbolism in African cinema, and particularly, of its intimate association with the elements of realism and naturalism discussed above. Symbols are the basic structural units of film language and, as Faik Madiya observes, a particularly important point of reference in African cultures:

> "Pour les sociétés de l'Afrique noire, l'une de ces manières de singulariser leurs cultures et leur manière d'appréhender le monde réside...dans l'usage intense des symboles." (1983: 217)

Francoise Pfaff's remark concerning Ousmane Sembene's symbolic use of natural settings may thereore be seen as characteristic of African cinema as a whole:

> "...(N)ature is not merely a setting but a world in which man feels at ease and in harmony with the land, sky, waters, and trees around him....In *Emitai*, for example, the rivers, sun, and sky symbolize the eternal strength of nature through the ritualistic merging of rice and waters in a timeless cycle of cosmic fecundity. On several occasions, birds disperse in a cloudless sky as the messengers of a new era *(Niaye)* or danger *(Ceddo)*, while water is perceived as a symbol of purification and renewal..." (69)

A discussion of a selection of these symbolic references will add to our understanding of African film languages and help clarify the way African filmmakers express, in filmic terms, the processes of continuity and change at work in their cultures. Two symbolic paradigms or registers may, for

analytical purposes, be discerned: those partaking of nature and/or associated with traditional, rural life; and those contained in the acoutrements of modern urban life. The former may be seen to establish a basic reference point, the measure of order and harmony in the universe; the latter signifies rupture of the natural order. Together, they provide some of the most evocative and aesthetic moments of African cinema, as well as its most characteristic images. These symbols are firmly rooted in "reality", their metaphoric properties coexisting with their function as precise cultural markers that invoke the audience at the level of experience.

Perhaps the most prevalent and powerful symbol, found across the spectrum of African films, is that of the ritual sacrifice, the generally graphic slaughter of an animal as an offering to the gods and to mark important occasions and passages. On the one hand, this ritual is part of the normal cycle of life in rural society, a quotidian gesture; on the other, the spilling of life-blood onto the earth, itself the primordial symbol of life, is a powerful evocation of the inseparability of life and death, of the rebirth that can only come through death. In the context of films whose primary concern is with the reality and process of change, this symbolic reference becomes a way of invoking traditional values and understandings in the service of change.

Trees are another powerful and ubiquitous symbol of tradition in Africa and while their significance depends partially on the context in which they are presented, they are broadly associated with knowledge and wisdom. An ancient and imposing tree acts as the seat of government in each community, sheltering important village reunions, meetings of elders or sites where various forms of instruction are conducted. Trees also act as the earthly abodes of gods and ancestors, either as permanent, known residents or unexpected visitors. In the range of their representations, trees symbolize nature as the source of knowledge of both social and sacred worlds.

Food is a central reference point in African film symbolism and, particularly in rural settings, detailed attention is given to its growth, harvesting, preparation and consumption. Though its primary association is

with the cycle of life, it is also be used to represent conviviality, social status, hierarchies and customs, and economic conditions, in addition to posessing magical properties. (Douce, 1983) Through the elaborate activities associated with the production and preparation of food, we learn much about community life in Africa, and about the division of labor according to gender and age. It is therefore also an important indicator of the position of women in African societies, of their responsibilities as nurturers and life-givers, as well as of their separateness from the patriarchal domain of power. Among the activities of women and girls in preparing food, perhaps ncne is so rich in its symbolic range as the use of mortar and pestle to pound grain, roots and seeds. More than any other single object, the mortar and pestle signifies at once the rhythmic and the dialectical movement of life in Africa. In its universal dimension, it represents duality and complementarity, the union of male and female principles that is the source of life and the essence of nature. However, in its almost exclusive relegation to the woman's domain, it becomes a more precise reference to her power over life, her role as the keeper of tradition and transmitter of cultural knowledge. Sembene Ousmane speaks of this communicative function of the mortar and pestle in the following passage from his novel, God's Bits of Wood:

> "In the old days, the singing of the pestles had begun even before the morning star disappeared in the first light of dawn. From courtyard to courtyard the women had exchanged their unceasing, pounding rhythms, and the sounds had seemed to cascade through the smoky air like the song of a brook rushing through a deep ravine. To the sharp rap of one pestle against the rim of a mortar, another rapping had answered. The women at work in their homes in the early morning greeted each other thus, in a dialogue only they understood; and the same echoes which announced the birth of the day presaged a peaceful day They had both a function and a meaning." (97)

In contrast with the normative or regulative function of traditional symbols, those associated with modern urban life generally represent a rupture in the natural order of things, a loss of authenticity. However, they should not be seen as a stark refusal of modern values and lifestyles, as

against a utopian celebration of rural culture. Rather they constitute an admonition against the seductive power of modern, in this case western/colonial, culture, against the loss of indigenous values and sources of knowledge and renewal. The city is symbolized, as with the country, by the objects, activities and people that regulate life within it. Dress and hair-styles, buildings, uniforms, cars, attaché cases, money, food, and figures such as bureaucrats, policemen and beggars, all become so many represention of corruption, materialism, greed or alienation. Such symbols are further distinguished from those of the traditional milieu by their heavily ironic, satirical or political tone, in contrast to the almost transparent quality of the former. The separation of traditional objects from their usual function and their location in urban settings may also be used to represent cultural alienation. For example, such artefacts as masks lose their ritual or sacred character to become items that can be bought and sold, symbols of the plundering of African culture and of the materialist ethic that is slowly consuming it. The same is true for traditional music and dance, or figures such as the griot or traditional healer, which frequently become tainted through their association with urban life.

As with the objects and activities represented, symbols in African cinema have a precise function and meaning, what might, in Barthian terms, be called first and second orders of signification. They are, on the one hand, prosaic references to daily realities, on the other, practices and objects invested with ideological and cultural significance. If the first acts to promote audience identification with familiar worlds, the second has a normative function, a purpose of teaching audiences about the deeper cultural importance of both traditional and contemporary signs and symbols. If, in these symbolic evocations, African filmmakers are creating an authentic, indigenous film language, they are also engaged in the subversion of forms of cinematic representation which render African culture as exotic or "other".

Conclusion

Abiola Irele's claim, cited at the beginning of this chapter, that imaginative expression serves as a "testimony" of contemporary African experience can perhaps now be better understood, at least as it applies to the domain of cinema. Clearly, African cinema does not merely reflect collective experience and concerns, but rather emerges from of a dynamic interplay between the artist's creative vision and the world which inspires it. This chapter has pursued, at a substantive level, what the preceding one began in structural terms - a goal of attesting to the revolutionary role of African filmmakers. This is manifested in their attempt to tap into the realm of popular culture, to cultivate a popular-critical discourse, and to place culture at the forefront of contemporary discussions of "development". Re-cognition of the oral tradition, that is of African history and culture, has led to rediscovery of instances of popular resistance to colonialism and other forms of invasion, and to a notion of tradition that is not static but dynamic, not fixed in a romantic past, but relevant to present contexts.

Thus, in countries where cultural alienation is a constant threat, African cinema has been instrumental in fomenting a contemporary, indigenous cultural dynamic, in establishing a dialogue between past and present, country and city, tradition and modernity. African filmmakers have also been outward looking; in seeking markets outside national and continental borders, they have taken initial steps in generating inter-cultural dialogue and so in eroding the hegemony exercised by the international, market-driven production and exchange of mass culture. Admittedly, this dialogue often seems to fall prey to market imperatives. However, the theoretical, thematic and formal strategies of African cinema are inscribed within a larger body of independent cultural practices which trace out the lines of a "different" global cultural map, an alternative diaspora to that implanted in the colonial period. Such ideas as wholism, the experiential basis of art, the past as source of contemporary meaning, or of the thin line separating fiction and documentary, are not particular to African cinema.

Indeed, they are common to many other cultural activities practiced by a wide range of socially, sexually, racially, or otherwise marginalized groups. A particularly striking affinity is expressed by Ruby Rich in her definition of feminist cinema as a historically-situated cinematic field founded on a "...recognition of the links tying a film's aesthetics to its modes of production and reception..." and in which "...filmmaking-exhibition-criticism-distribution-audience have always been inextricably connected.". (Rich, 198: 210)

This investigation into the formal, thematic and theoretical aspects of African cinema suggests, finally, that a "universal language of film" is possible, that behind the specific content of African films exists a familiar world of shared symbols, values and experiences.

CHAPTER V

DIFFERENCE, DIALOGUE, DEVELOPMENT

"Pour moi l'Afrique est le centre du monde. L'Europe est limitrophe. J'ai dialogué avec les Grecs, les Français, les Allemands. Ils ont leur culture et j'ai la mienne. L'Afrique est le centre du monde parce que c'est mon continent."

<div align="right">(Ousmane Sembene: 1979)</div>

"The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."

<div align="right">(Antonio Gramsci)</div>

Rather than concluding this essay with a summary of what has already been repeated and re-emphasized, I will simply add a short epilogue, discussing some of the larger questions of framing not fully treated within the preceding chapters. The reader will be justified in complaining that I have circumvented the crucial feminist contribution to cultural studies, mentioned in the introductory chapter. The following will partially redress that imbalance, not by tracing out systematically feminist contributions to cultural studies, but by addressing questions of representation, subjectivity and "otherness". These issues have received their most insightful articulation within the context of feminist research. In a sense, it is an attempt to step out of the earlier discursive framework, to adopt a reflexive position and to assess the overall significance of this study - the factors motivating it, its status as "knowledge" and as discourse on "the Other", and the possible connections invoked with other marginal discourses. I will use this as a free thinking space, following rather than directing my thoughts as they suggest new patterns and associations.

The issue of representation, of clear importance in an essay that purports to address both cinema and inter-cultural communication, has been largely implicit in the discussion so far. Several dimensions of this question

coexist and demand our consideration: that of the quality and quantity of representations of other cultures in western media; that of the extent to which self-representations of other cultures are allowed to filter through into "our" imaginary space; or the perhaps more crucial question of access of indigenous populations to self-representations. While the importance of this last permutation is widely acknowledged in the West, tied up as it is with emotionally and politically-charged questions of national and cultural identity, it is treated in a rather cavalier fashion in the highly competitive context of international cinematic production and distribution. As with other instances of First and Third World relations, altruistic motives often must capitulate to hard realities and self-interest. If such self- representations of the Third World are necessary in order to challenge the stereotypical images produced by First World media, they are equally bound up with questions of development, where self-esteem and self-knowledge are as crucial as economic factors to the process of self-determination.

The issue of self-representation, or more accurately of its absence, is eloquently captured in Edward Said's discussion of "Orientalism":

> "The Orient that appears in Orientalism...", Said tells us, "...is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness and later, Western Empire." (1978: 202-3)

Said is careful to avoid the thorny question of "truth", or a comparison of "oriental" and "oriental-ized" representations. Orientalism is not seen as a mere collection of myths or lies against which may be posited some essential oriental truth. Rather, it constitutes "a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient", "a created body of theory and practice", "an accepted grid" for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, with close ties to enabling socio-economic and political institutions. (ibid.: 6) Said's documentation and consideration of Western discourses on the Orient provide valuable insights into the nature of Western perceptions and attitudes toward the Other, of the "...discrete ways in which it is taught, researched, administered and pronounced upon." (ibid.: 202)

This then constitutes a broad entry into the nature of knowledge and interpretation, and specifically the type of knowledge the present study can offer, and into the related question of subjectivity. Clearly, this essay must be identified with "textual knowledge" and must, by its very nature, consist in what Said might term the "African-ization" of African cinema. It is also clearly bound up with my own contradictory subjectivities: on the one hand, a certain identification as a woman with marginality; on the other, a desire to know, manipulate, explain and perhaps defuse a fear of the Other - a fascination as closely bound up with that exotic Other as it is with the cinematic process. With respect to the possible affinities which may exist between "Woman" and an African Other, it is difficult to resist invoking Freud's characterization of woman as a "dark continent". Said as well points to this affinity in discussing visions of the Orient/Other as

> "...(keeping) intact its separateness, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine impenetrability, its supine malleability." (ibid.: 206)

Colonies were by definition places requiring progress (the Enlightenment project) and redemption (the civilizing mission), while their inhabitants became linked to

> "...elements in western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien." (ibid.: 207)

The second dimension of subjectivity, that of my own "desire to know", to circumscribe knowledge within defined and familiar borders, has been addressed by Valerie Walkerdine in what she terms the voyeurism of the social theorist, "...in whose desire for knowledge is inscribed a will to truth of which the latent content is a terror of the other who is watched." (1986: 167) Our respective situations are markedly different: she is engaged in ethnographic research and direct participant observation, while my observations are confined to textual sources and the already mirrored reality of cinematic representations. Despite different methodologies, objectives and sites of analysis, our projects share this common problem that "(h)owever

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disguised, the observer's account is a <u>regulative reading</u> which pathologizes the participant's actions." (ibid.: 190) Inasmuch as this practice is inscribed within the very desire to know, in the act of objectifying and intellectualizing pleasure, there is little to be done beyond taking into account this complex play of power, desire and knowledge, and colluding with the pleasures and fantasies which inform one's own actions. Walkerdine's project suggests possible avenues out of the theorist's quandary. In her work, she develops the notion of "recognition" to describe a relationship between observer and observed based on recognition of respective subjectivities and experiential backgrounds. This notion thus engages the positive aspects of recognition as against Althusser's concept of mis-recognition "...with its negative connotations for the study of ideological (i.e. always already distorting) interpellation." (ibid.: 191)

A central implication of the above for any reading of the Other off the surface of texts or discursive practices is that it disrupts the split between reality and fantasy, between "true" and "false" consciousness. It is precisely the polarization of science/observation/reality/truth and culture/ experience/fantasy/ideology that this endeavour has tried to avoid. Such a dichotomy loses sight of the complex regimes of representation and subject positions inscribed within each of these polar extremes. As Walkerdine puts it:

> "What is important in (this) respect...is the production of a <u>sign</u>
> - i.e. how we enter as "a relation" and how in actual social practices and cultural forms we become "positioned"." (ibid.: 198)

The question, quite simply, is whether my observations on African cinema, couched as they are in a rhetoric of theory, are less of a fantasy, less experiential or culturally-bound, than the fantasies they describe, or any more attached to a concrete verifiable truth.   In fact, it is not elusive truth that this paper is in pursuit of, but accessible experiences and cultural insights. Against what Gayatri Spivak has called "...a masculine radicalism that renders the place of the investigator transparent", this project seeks to open up a space

within which First World theorists can speak "to" (rather than "for") the "historically muted" Third World subject, a space of dialogue rather than confrontation. (1988: 295) It also asserts that to harbour a view of fantasy and the Imaginary as ideological "snares" is to exclude all but a select few from any possibility of "real" experience.

Thus, we rejoin the earlier outlined problem of development discourses, and two of the central issues needing to be addressed in this respect: that the theory and practice of contemporary international cinema indeed excludes a majority of the world's population (except as recipients of others' fantasies) and that it is precisely to this and other lacunae that African cinema attempts to speak. Of primary importance in this regard is a more precise locating of points of intersection between questions of representation and subjectivity and the larger question of development and international cultural relations discussed at the beginning of this paper. This meeting-point in part rests on an understanding of how communications, under the chimera of ideologically neutral technology transfers, breathe new life into colonial relationships precisely at the level of ideology and consciousness. (Schiller, 1976) A second point may be found in the decentering of the (western, white, male) subject as a metaphor for the decline of unitary centers of power and the fragmentation of a bipolar world into multiple centers and forms of power. This suggestion of a crisis in western culture and ideology is neither fortuitous nor original - it is a theme which emerges repeatedly, whether in the esoteric abstractions of post-modernist though, or the more pragmatic concerns of international relations.

Likewise, this essay wants to encompass both the theoretical and the practical. Its purpose, as already stated, is less to validate western discourses in the light of Third World culture and ideology than it is to open up a dialogue with the discourses of "Others" and to the political and aesthetic insights these may offer to western critical theory and practice. These discourses exist within structures of feeling that, quite differently from what we are familiar with, offer new ways of theorizing the relation between the

individual, the social and forms of representation. If western culture has indeed reached critical internal limits in its ability to generate meaning, this "...signifying culture which has eclipsed genuine social solidarities..." (Kroker, 1985: 173) may locate new sources of meaning in Third World cultural practices which intrinsically "...recognise a world outside individual subjectivity...and affirm the social possibility of improvement." (Burton, 1985: 21) Thus, while this project is grounded in a rejection of post-modernism's dark vision, it recognizes the need for responses to the paradoxes and crises of post-modernity.

Beyond a cure for post-modern alienation however is a sober assessment of the future. Where western hegemony is increasingly being challenged and racial and ethnic homogeneity being superceded by a radical heterogeneity, it is quite simply imperative that dialogue replace domination as a "modus vivendi" and that new ways be found to accommodate cultural specificities. As romantic and idealistic as this may sound, it harbours no illusions that African film or its aesthetic or political message will substantially displace the authority of Hollywood. It does however assert that by according culture a weight and specificity of its own, we are perhaps better able to appreciate the creative impulse that marginal cultural forms have always afforded to more entrenched ways of representing the world.

Having stated my initial problematic to be the relation between culture and development, it seems fitting to close with an assessment of cultural studies and its ability to articulate this relationship. Clearly, nothing has been proven in the intervening pages. Cultural studies cannot provide empirical evidence that something like development is occurring in some Third World nation. Instead, it reveals the term "development" for its ethnocentric bias, substituting the broader idea of "change", the notion that meanings are not fixed but relational, and are constantly being dis- and re-articulated. The view of culture inherent in cultural studies, as a "whole way of life" encompassing social, political and economic, as well as artistic/creative dimensions, seems ideally suited to the task of generating

alternatives to the currently impoverished notion of development. If we are to keep the term, then we must at least recognize its qualitative as well as it quantitative dimensions; we need, in other words, to locate the "Third World" where it exists, both in "developed" and "developing" nations. Indeed, it is by focusing on this broad notion of culture that "Third World" is revealed as something desirable, a source of creativity, innovation, ideas and solutions to the problems and dilemnas of contemporary international development.

The insertion of development within a cultural studies perspective does no more than reiterate what has been put forward in calls for a New World Information Order - the need for international structures of communication to facilitate dialogue and exchange, to counter entrenched, hegemonic patterns. Cultural studies does not provide answers; the very term connotes a non-regulative, non-deterministic framework that seeks to explore the far reaches of cross-cultural communication. It allows the whole discourse on development to be infiltrated and inhabited by such unquantifiable issues as representation and subjectivity.

This study of African cinema has likewise shown that perceptions of development or progress in this domain require taking into consideration the many dimensions of that change process. It has led to the discovery that for all its "difference" and specificity, African cinema shares much in common with independent cinemas the world over, an impetus that defies economic and political constraints in the service of a new ethic and aesthetic of cinematic practice. It can only be considered marginal if we perceive mainstream commercial cinema as the cultural center, rather than or the more limited market predominance that is its defining feature. The marginality of African cinema must be balanced against its centrality as a model of autonomous and progressive development. Far from being peripheral, African cinema exists on the leading edge of a movement whose impulse is the elaboration of art forms that go beyond narrow aesthetic claims and individualistic forms of pleasure.

Though I have emphasized the importance of African cinema as an innovative resource for western theory and culture, it is patent that this influence is not uni-directional, but reciprocal. The dialectical process works to transform both western critical theory and African cinematic practice, allowing for assessment of the former's blindspots while opening up a new critical space for the latter. This space is important insofar as the growth of film industries in the Third World, under the uniformizing exigencies of mass cultural production, will necessarily entail a degree of compromise in socio-political projects. African cinema will have to reconcile its struggle to carve out a space for itself with that of a constant reaffirmation of the social bases of desire and pleasure, of the interchangeable roles of audience and critic, and of the interwoven nature of textual criticism and extra-textual discourses. This excursion into marginal cultural practice therefore seeks to contribute to a greater appreciation of African cinema as art and artefact, and to add its voice to the wide-ranging debate and dialogue currently being generated within cultural studies.

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