

**DIAWARA, Manthia. *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*.
Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1992,
192 p.**

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DIAWARA, Manthia. *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1992, 192 p.

Manthia Diawara's study on African cinema has been long awaited. Indeed, few areas as important as African cinema have been so largely neglected by the critical community. We do have Franloise Pfaff's seminal study on Semb ne Ousmane, as well as her work on twenty-five major directors; we also have a series of critical articles and an anthology on black Cinema by Mbye Cham. Major scholars are writing on the topic in French. We have the definitive bibliographic work of Nancy Schmidt. However, Manthia Diawara has staked out a unique place for himself in recent years as the leading theoretician on African cinema; thus, people had been expecting that his book would represent a major critical breakthrough in the field.

Within this context, *African Cinema* is a disappointment. It does not provide us with a coherent theoretical framework, and it fails to develop a critical elaboration or poetics of this naissant film tradition in Africa. Nor does it provide us with political or cultural analyses of most of the films. Rather, it addresses the growth of the film industry itself — a story with political and cultural aspects, but one that might be better described as a history of cinematic production, distribution, and exhibition in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

To be sure, this story is not insignificant, but Diawara's treatment of it is uneven. He is at his best in conveying the impact of the colonial project upon the initial formation of the industry in Zaïre, the Portuguese colonies, Ghana, Nigeria, and the francophone colonies. He details the expansion of filmmaking in the Belgian Congo by Catholic missionaries; the metropole's refusal

to encourage filmmaking in the French colonies and the French government's reversal of such policies after independence; the deterioration of equipment and facilities in Ghana; the collapse of the fledgling filmmaking industry in Guinea after the withdrawal of the French in 1958. Overall, Diawara delineates the recurring patterns of paternalism with precision and insight.

But his chronicling of the situation becomes too intricate after independence. One understands that international distribution networks functioned to the disadvantage of African filmmaking, especially in the Sahel and Cameroon; however, the detailed recounting of each African and European venture is tedious, and lacks the impact of the historical narrative of filmmaking during the colonial period. Finally, most of Diawara's references to the pattern of industrial development stop around 1984, reflecting an unfortunate failure to update what had been an extremely good doctoral dissertation at the time. Drawn largely from studies by Bachy and Rouch, Diawara's data is based on dated information and includes virtually no reference to work that has been done in the last eight years. In a sense, the book defines itself in terms of this flaw. The early chapters are organized according to the Europhone regions of Africa; they describe the patterns of film production in colonial times. Subsequent chapters are devoted to post-colonial film production in anglophone and francophone African countries, film distribution and exhibition in francophone Africa, FESPACO (the major film festival in Africa), and recent films. The sense of discontinuity that one feels in reading *African Cinema* is exacerbated by the lack of information on the film industry after 1984, for many of Diawara's generalizations are no longer valid. For example, Diawara writes optimistically about the breaking of French monopolies on film distribution, and the creation of national film production centers in Africa; however, he fails to mention recent failures in this area, including the most significant of all — that of Senegal.

The unevenness of Diawara's treatment of the subject extends to the brief critical sections of his text. In one of the early chapters, he proposes such categories as "the semidocumentary, the didactic-fictional, and film research." These labels are completely

inadequate. For example, he places Sambizanga in the first group, Touki Bouki in the second, and Jom in the third. The Manthia Diawara of 1992 would never employ such limited concepts; in fact, in his last chapter, he redefines his categories into a “typology of narratives,” employing not only a more sophisticated mode of analysis, but also more useful definitions — including “social realist” films — and more penetrating discussions of such themes as “the return to the sources” and “the historical confrontation between Africa and Europe.” More importantly, his brief interpretations of recent films (essentially limited to those shown at FESPACO in 1987 and 1989) are quite perceptive. Unfortunately, Diawara’s final chapter is all too schematic, offering no more than cursory introduction to contemporary African films for readers whose acquaintance with the field might be limited.

The editorial work on *African Cinema* was particularly shoddy. “Franglais” was often allowed to remain in the text rather than being transformed into English; the same information is repeated in different parts of the book, occasionally becoming contradictory when new time frames are not taken into account. Even errors in fact abound. Christian Richard’s *Le Courage des autres* was not, as Diawara contends, prevented from being shown at FESPACO 1983. Paying homage to cinematic classics that were produced under conditions of extreme difficulty, Diawara does impart the sense of struggle and the determination of African filmmakers who wrenched an important arena of creation out of European hands, and established a new cinematographic aesthetic with an authentic African vision and style. But we need more than a chapter on content or thematics; we need a full stylistic treatment of African film — one that will assure an ongoing dynamic interplay between criticism and film, while promoting the creative process and heightening the general critical awareness of a growing body of highly accomplished and unique films.

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