

# The African Past on Screen

## *Moving beyond Dualism*

Vivian Bickford-Smith

Dualism has been an enduring way in which we have explained the world around us in speech, literature, or film. Historical actors, movements, and ideologies are still readily divided into one of only two supposedly discrete and opposing categories. With regard to African history, this bifurcation has often been into the likes of nationalist and loyalist, traditional and modern, or (in terms notoriously associated with apartheid South Africa) European and non-European. Once such divisions have been made, Manichean judgment of the two camps (supposedly clearly divisible) has usually followed.

In this vein, it has become orthodoxy in academic studies to distinguish between negative film portrayals of Africa's past by "western" outsiders and authentic, "set-the-record-straight," "African" insider history (Armes 1987; Diawara 1992; Cameron 1994; Ukadike 1994; Shohat and Stam 1994; Thackway 2003; Gadjigo 2004; Cham 2004). Western representations of whatever period have commonly been aggregated in a largely undifferentiated fashion and denounced as ideologically unsound, often overtly racist, and inauthentic distortions of reality. They have generally been seen as Eurocentric for telling tales of westerners' adventures or misadventures in Africa. In the case of a more recent take – such as that of *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), which has "black African" protagonists – the main accusation is that the film is Afro-pessimist, on the grounds that it still portrays negative stereotypes of Africa. The fact that black protagonists are played by "western" stars has also been criticized (Evans and Glenn 2010).

In contrast, depictions of the continent's past by filmmakers perceived to be African insiders have usually been lauded as authentic and as setting the record straight for audiences. They supposedly do this because "black African" insiders can provide "counter-memories" that privilege hitherto suppressed voices. These filmmakers, it is argued, also achieve greater authenticity by providing a distinctly African and counter-Hollywood cinematic aesthetics, in keeping with

African oral story-telling tradition. Such historical representation has frequently been deemed to be most effective when untainted by “western” contamination of any kind. Particular plaudits in this respect have been given to filmmakers who have contributed to the emergence of what is referred to as “African” or “Black African” cinema since the 1960s. This cinema has been praised for being authentically “African” and clearly in opposition to “western” ideology, aesthetics, and narrative practice (Armes 1987; Diawara 1992; Ukadike 1994; Thackway 2003; Gadjigo 2004; Cham 2004).

The very title of Thackway’s account of francophone cinema in West Africa, *Africa Shoots Back*, suggests as much. Among analysts of African cinema, Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike has perhaps been the most forceful proponent of “shooting back,” through the creation of “a real national cinema capable of speaking for and to Africans” (Ukadike 1994: 1). Appropriate African cinema must use a “genuine” or “authentic” African film language, which reflects authentic “African values” (6, 90, 95, 103, 196–197). Ukadike believes that Africa’s fear of “cultural pollution is comprehensible” (107). The corollary is that anything not sufficiently African is suspect. Hence films made about apartheid South Africa such as *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Mapantsula* (1988), *A World Apart* (1989), and *Sarafina* (1992) are dismissed as “not deeply African,” presumably because they do not fit Ukadike’s idea of unpolluted (by western influences) African cinema; thus their historical content is not discussed (224).

The purpose of this essay is to explore such assertions, because they have been highly significant in determining how African history on screen has been theorized, practised, validated, condemned, highly selectively analyzed, or ignored. Africa’s history of slavery, white racism, colonial segregation, and apartheid has been a history explicable in large part as a product of European dualist categorizations at the time of colonial encounter: a supposedly superior, “civilized” European “us” meeting a supposedly more backward, perhaps “savage,” African “other.” A counter-dualism – one that still upholds such colonial or apartheid categorizations, while favoring now the idea that only “black African” filmmakers adequately or interestingly represent African history while all “white” offerings are flawed because they reflect, in one way or another, inherited “western” prejudice – is perhaps understandable. As we shall see, “white” or “western” representations before the 1960s are largely guilty of such failings, though sometimes what can be interpreted as racism toward Africans looks very much like British class prejudice toward whites of “the lower orders” in their own society.

Yet considerable change is noticeable in at least some (if by no means all) “western” visions of the past from the 1960s onward: this phenomenon reflects both a changing global historical context and innovation in “western” film language associated with Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, New German Cinema, and their likes. Such change is discernible for instance in political tone, in the use (or not) of African languages, in casting policies, in the editing style, and even (on occasion) in the higher margin of doubt or questioning permitted of the

history on offer (Bickford-Smith and Mendelsohn 2007; Bickford-Smith 2007b). As a result, some “Western” cinematic visions of Africa from the 1960s can be held to constitute cinematic re-visionings – to use Rosenstone’s (1995) term – of African history that deserve to be placed alongside those supplied by “African” cinema. In attempting to understand and evaluate representations of African history on screen, it is highly desirable to move beyond dualism and not simply to dismiss a cinematic history because it is not “deeply African,” whatever that may mean.

In addition, much film history of Africa, especially since the 1960s, cannot easily be categorized as either discretely “African” or “western” in an age of ever speedier transnational circulation of people, ideas, culture, and commodities. “African” and “western” cinematic histories of Africa often appear to be mutually informed in terms of focus on common themes – such as the horrors of slavery and white racism – and of how elements of film language are deployed to represent the past. A simple, bifurcated categorization and judgment of two completely different cinematic styles and of how they represent African history becomes particularly problematic in the second half of the twentieth century, with the coming of international co-productions. Indeed one of the most impressive history films that engage with the continent’s past, *Battle of Algiers* (1965), an Italian–Algerian co-production, falls into this last category.

Even if we accept that categories such as “African” and “western” can be used as rough guides, not only to the different geographical origins of those who directed and produced the cinematic histories but also to the concomitant perspectives deployed in the films, there have been, unsurprisingly, merits and shortcomings in visions of Africa’s past produced at both ends of the spectrum. The point is that Manichean dichotomies usually need to be questioned and modified. Perhaps even some pre-1960s takes on Africa’s past are not without interest, not just because they explain what is revised later in the century, but also because one or two attempted to promote or maintain forms of “white African” nationalism. Some examples will be discussed below.

So this chapter attempts to move beyond dualisms, both by selecting for discussion a certain group of films and by suggesting ways in which some cinematic histories have themselves moved beyond taking simplistic, bifurcated approaches to historical actors, events, and processes. It provides a survey of films about Africa’s past, with occasional thumbnail analysis of particular films, arranged as much as possible in a chronological–thematic order. Because of the sheer number of African history films, the survey cannot and does not intend to be comprehensive. The idea instead is to provide reasonable insight into the range and variety of themes and approaches that have developed in African history on screen over time, as well as into the broad debates that can surround (and have surrounded) them. At the end of our brief analyses readers will be directed to more detailed secondary literature on particular films, where such literature is available.

## The African Past on Screen

Cinema's development coincided with Europe's late nineteenth-century "new" imperialism and with the growth of pseudo-Darwinian racism. Correlating with the development of new travel technologies in the late nineteenth century, cinema offered a form of virtual tourism that provided a mixture of spectacle and education. It "often acted as an agent of imperial obsession [. . .] implicated in the act of 'discovery' and the desire to possess" (Bruno 2002: 77–79). Part of such "discovery" was finding "otherness" and portraying it as "exotic." In the process, both fiction and non-fiction films about Africa drew on earlier representations of the continent in travel writing, painting, and photography. In earlier, pre-cinematic days, these various media had – through a combination of "scientific" information and picturesque Romanticism featuring dramatic scenery, wild animals, and exotic humans grouped in different "tribes" – served to promote African landscapes as desirable imperial possessions (Edwards 1992; Landau 1996; Ryan 1997; Stevenson 1999).

As the Scramble for Africa carried out by European powers unfolded in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, while Britain was greatly increasing its African empire, Rider Haggard reinforced many existing stereotypes through his novels *She*, *King Solomon's Mines*, and *Allan Quatermain*. He also introduced a few enduringly popular tropes of his own. The combined result amounted to what might be termed "Afro-orientalism," or the equivalent for Africa of the western visions of the orient analyzed by Edward Said (1978). Afro-orientalism depicted Africa as "the dark continent" – a place of savage danger and superstition, but also of hidden riches, brave warrior tribes, and glorious flora and fauna. Several tropes distinguished this representation of Africa: the character of the resilient white male loner, the "white hunter" (enduringly personified by Allan Quatermain), who "knows" Africa and Africans and can guide and rescue other Europeans (especially white women); Africans being usually portrayed on the one hand as threatening but easily led barbarian hordes (who, significantly given the long reign of Victoria, are loyal to the white Queen in *She*), on the other hand as faithful and possibly courageous servants of the white man; and the existence of brave warrior "tribes," most commonly described as Zulus. So some stereotypes of Africans were clearly negative; others were more positive, if paternalistic and patronizing.

Several major studies have demonstrated how "western" cinematic visions, including those of history films, continued to reflect these stereotypes well into the twentieth century. Thus one of D. W. Griffith's earliest films for Biograph, *The Zulu's Heart* (1908), which was set in 1830s southern Africa, had a Zulu chief siding with a heroic Boer (Afrikaner) mother to save the life of a white child before its throat could be slit by the chief's followers. As Davis puts it pithily: "Griffith's Zulus either threaten whites or serve them" (Davis 1996: 8). Much the same could

be said of most cinematic depictions of Africans up to the 1960s (and in many cases beyond), if also of depictions of other “non-Europeans” (Shohat and Stam 1994).

Conveyors of popular culture beyond fiction film, such as novels and travelogues, confirmed such stereotypes and provided material for fiction film adaptations. Most notoriously, this process included the Tarzan novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, which were regularly adapted for the cinema, the eponymous hero made into an eccentric version of the “white hunter.” There were also numerous travelogues that featured pristine, wild, and primitive Africa (Edwards 1992; Cameron 1994: 33–44). One disenchanted critic said that these were likely to include “[a] shot of natives listening to a phonograph [ . . . ] scenes of tribal dances [ . . . ] [and] a view of several dead lions, tigers or cheetahs” (Cameron 1994: 50).

No matter that there were no tigers in Africa. In the first half of the twentieth century American filmmakers in particular were not too bothered about accuracy. They happily used the Amazonian jungle as a stand-in for Africa or placed Zulus in East rather than Southern Africa. Indeed an early parody of such films, *So This Is Africa*, released in 1933, populated the continent with bears, had its protagonists captured by Amazons, and had the latter assaulted by a group of singing Tarzans (Cameron 1994: 88–89).

However, films emanating from South Africa and from Britain demonstrated a more enthusiastic attempt at greater realism in mainstream history films aimed at showing either the positive effects of white rule or the heroism that made such rule possible. Feature filmmaking was established in South Africa in 1913, in the form of I. W. Schlesinger’s company African Film Productions (Gutsche 1972). Two of African Film Productions’ most notable early offerings were history films of a cinematically “mainstream” variety, meant to foster white South African nationalism only three years after South Africa had been created out of two British colonies and two “Boer” (Afrikaner) republics and 11 years after the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). *De Voortrekkers* (1916), which was also known as *Winning a Continent*, depicted “Boer” (Afrikaner) pioneers leaving the British Cape Colony in the migratory movement of the 1830s known as the Great Trek, being savagely and treacherously massacred by Zulus under King Dingaan, and then reaping revenge at the Battle of Blood River in 1838. *Symbol of Sacrifice* (1918) depicted British and anglophile white South African heroism and triumph in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. The title is a reference to the Union Jack.

The plots of the two films demonstrated that, even though Afrikaners and Britons had recently been involved in bitter strife – a conflict likely to have been freshly in the minds of many who saw the films – both white “races” had a shared and glorious history in the form of fighting and defeating “savage” black Africans. Both films suppressed the history of Anglo-Afrikaner enmity, despite the fact that an Afrikaner nationalist, Gustav Preller, contributed to the script of *De Voortrekker*. Both films also suggested that black Africans had a potentially acceptable role in South Africa, albeit under white leadership and in suitably subaltern social positions. They did so by featuring black Africans not merely as members of

savage hordes or as “tribal” chiefs, but also as individualized “faithful servants” à la Haggard, prepared to lay down their lives for white characters – like Sobuza in *De Voortrekkers* and Gobo in *Symbol of Sacrifice* (Davis 1996; Maingard 2007). *Symbol of Sacrifice* went further and held out the possibility of political incorporation for blacks (still present in the Cape Province, which retained a non-racial male franchise), by having Gobo buried beneath a Union Jack for rescuing the daughter of a Dutch farmer. This paternalistic portrayal of a black African was very similar to contemporary depictions of (white) members of the British working classes, for instance Cockney Londoners (Stedman Jones 1989).

One can therefore argue that the African Film Productions company was responsible for the first expressions, in a history feature film, of nationalism (or perhaps nationalisms) associated with African territorial belonging. At least, British South African nationalism was not exclusively white; Nelson Mandela recalled that he and his fellow school students saw themselves as “Black Englishmen” in the 1930s, and the evidence for considerable adherence to such identity is extensive (Mandela 1995: 30; Bickford-Smith 2004; Bickford-Smith 2007c). But, for many in the (largely white) audiences who viewed *De Voortrekkers*, the narrative and the iconography of the film – with their Preller-inspired focus on a key moment in Afrikaner historical mythology and in what Preller deemed to be totemic items of Afrikaner material culture such as ox-wagons, powder horns, or women’s bonnets – more probably encouraged republican Afrikaner nationalism (Davis 1996: 129).

In 1938 a further portrayal of Afrikaner struggles and triumphs – *Bou van ’n Nasie* (*Building a Nation*), first released in an Afrikaans-language version – more decidedly did so. The film was directed by avowed Afrikaner nationalist Joseph Albrecht, and its release was intended to mark the centenary of the decisive “Boer” victory over Zulus at the Battle of Blood River in 1838. The date of this film’s release coincided with a country-wide reenactment of the Great Trek mentioned above – the pioneer “Boer” migration into the African interior. The film included negative depictions of the British alongside those of Zulus.

It might be possible, then, to argue that *De Voortrekkers* and *Bou van ’n Nasie*, between them, unequivocally helped foster white African nationalism. Both offered identification with the African pre-colonial past in a semi-mythological form, associated with what Mantha Diawara has described as “the return to the source” genre of West African cinematic histories. *Bou van ’n Nasie* also offered a foretaste of what Diawara, again in regard to West African cinema, has termed the “colonial confrontation” genre. Indeed Joseph Albrecht’s directorial debut, *Sarie Marais* (1931), a ten-minute meditation on the experience of “Boer” prisoners in a British concentration camp, fell into this category. Yet the negative or, at best, paternalistic stereotyping of black Africans in *De Voortrekkers* and in *Bou van ’n Nasie* was in keeping with much contemporary “western outsider” representations of Africa.

For those who saw themselves as British Africans, whether in South Africa or further north, the patriotic equivalent was supplied, after *Symbol of Sacrifice*, by British feature films with pro-imperial themes. These included history films as

well as contemporary dramas like *Sanders of the River* (1935), with its on-screen dedication to “the handful of white men whose everyday work is an unsung saga of courage and efficiency.” The historical biopic *Rhodes of Africa* (1936) was in this vein, the cult of Cecil John Rhodes being a major component of anglophile ornamentalism in Africa (Maylam 2005). The film portrayed its protagonist (and thereby white British Africans) as caring for black Africans, who refer to him as the “Great White Father.” Rhodes’s land-grabbing at black Africans’ expense was portrayed as part of a worthy imperial dream of creating British territory from the Cape to Cairo. When the Ndebele are shown rebelling against British South Africa Company rule, Rhodes responds: “Black children [ . . . ] must be punished.” There was of course no suggestion that Rhodes’s personal ambitions influenced any of his actions, or that the Ndebele might be entirely justified in attempting to regain control of lost land. At the beginning of the film, a caption says that what follows is

[t]he drama of a man who set out single-handed to unite a continent. He spared neither himself nor others [ . . . ] To the Matabele [Ndebele], he was a royal warrior [ . . . ] They came close to understanding him. (Richards 1973: 142)

By the time that *Rhodes of Africa* was released in 1936, for reasons perhaps suggested by its plot line, black Britishness was losing its purchase among middle-class black South Africans. In the same year the South African government had removed black Africans from the common voters’ roll in the Cape. Added to the existence of extensive racial segregation and adverse discrimination, all this was making the promise of “progress” look thinner than ever, despite the efforts of small numbers of liberals and socialists to educate the white electorate away from racism. Along with black elites in other regions of colonial Africa, black South African members of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League, who included Nelson Mandela, were demanding full democracy by the mid-1940s (Lodge 1985).

In the event, of course, independence came first to countries much further north; Morocco and Tunisia (1956), then Ghana (1957) were in the vanguard. The pace of decolonization accelerated swiftly in the 1960s, so that, by the second half of the 1970s, only “Southern Rhodesia” (Zimbabwe), “South West Africa” (Namibia), and South Africa remained under (local) white rule. The emergence of independent African countries opened the possibility for filmmakers in those countries to reflect on their own nations’ histories and on the African past more generally.

Several factors motivated those who did so, including notable “filmmakers as historians” (Rosenstone 1995) – for example Ousmane Sembene (Senegal) and Gaston Kaboré (Burkina Faso). One predictable ambition was to counter prior stereotypical portrayals of black Africans established through films like *Rhodes of Africa*, which either were openly racist or denied that black Africans (in contrast to whites) possessed full humanity. As Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima put it: “Africans are betrayed on the screen [ . . . ] We are never human beings. We are undeveloped characters” (quoted in Pfaff 1977: 28).

Another ambition was to demonstrate that Sub-Saharan Africa had had a history before colonialism – something that was seemingly still being denied in the 1960s by at least one influential British academic, Oxford University Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, who infamously wrote:

Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, and darkness is not the subject of history. (Trevor-Roper 1965: 9)

Trevor-Roper's comment denigrated the history transmitted through African oral traditions; and his mention of "darkness" in relation to Africa recalled uncomfortably the Afro-orientalist image of a "dark continent" of tribes, mystery, and superstition to which Europeans conferred "civilization" – an image still extant today. It is hardly surprising that filmmakers in independent Africa wished to counter such images and to demonstrate to doubters outside and within Africa that the continent had a rich history before colonialism. One of the worthy intentions of films such as Ousmane Sembene's *Ceddo* (1976), Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (1982), Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelan* (1987), and Dani Kouyaté's *Keïta!* (1994) was to demonstrate that Africa had sophisticated societies with complex histories and cultures before the advent of European or Arab "civilizing missions." They did so by portraying pre-colonial history on film – history recovered, at least in part, from oral traditions. If you take the films together, the general effect is that pre-colonial African "superstition" is demonstrably identical with religion, pre-colonial Africa's social systems have comprehensible moral economies, pre-colonial Africa's inhabitants have universal human attributes, and pre-colonial Africa had substantial states and empires (Diawara 1992; Ukadike 1994; Austen 2007; Baum 2007; Saul 2007).

Mantha Diawara, in his groundbreaking account of post-independence African cinema, refers to pre-1990s' visions of an often idyllically depicted pre-colonial Africa (such as in *Wend Kuuni*) by the label "return to the source" films (Diawara 1992: 159–164). He suggests that, apart from the underlying desire to demonstrate that pre-colonial Africa had a "dynamic history," such films could convey covert political messages. For instance, audiences could compare depictions of a pre-colonial "golden age" with the realities of a troubled postcolonial present. In addition, filmmakers investigated the past, in order "to search for precolonial African traditions that can contribute to solutions of contemporary problems" (160). They subsequently discovered and deployed a cinematic aesthetics that suitably reflected the way in which oral traditions related the African past: it was not just a matter of using indigenous languages, but also of matching the slow rhythms of pastoral village life through long takes, slowly unfolding and repetitious narrative, and stories within stories, which gave the audience thinking time and delivered emotional power – at least for some viewers (Ukadike 1994: 201–222).



So far so good – perhaps; yet a closer examination of the selected films suggests that these re-visionings of the continent’s past may not be unproblematic in terms of how pre-colonial history is portrayed. For instance Kaboré’s *Wend Kuuni* – a story about a mute boy set in lands of the Mossi Empire that eventually became Burkina Faso – shows an idealized and tranquil place, of outstanding aesthetical beauty and seemingly of immemorial tradition. Mahir Saul has argued that there “West African village lifestyle was visualized for the first time as chief protagonist, as the essence of cultural identity” (Saul 2007: 16). This identity is given further content by lingering shots of textiles and calabashes, basketry and conical thatched houses, beautifully dressed villagers, and “spectacular vistas of the red-brown West African savannah” (17). The Africa portrayed in this way is not un-reminiscent of many *National Geographic* photographs and documentaries (Lutz and Collins 1993). Accordingly, the understandable desire to counter negative visions of an African culture marred by European interference has led to over-idealization and the brushing-out of any truths uncomfortable from this perspective. Saul, drawing on Rosenstone’s concept, identifies an element of “false invention” in the presence of overly clothed Africans: in this film they are unrealistically covered up so that they may not be objects of the prurient European gaze (Rosenstone 1995: 72).<sup>1</sup> Nor is there any mention in *Wend Kuuni* of political hierarchy or slavery, although both are known features of the Mossi Empire (Saul 2007: 22–23).

Indeed, the village in *Wend Kuuni* seems to represent a pure “African culture” that exists almost outside of history, independently of external forces of historical change. The narrative does, however, implicitly suggest the need for some reform of the “tradition,” by ultimately revealing that the boy’s muteness had resulted from his witnessing his mother’s death after her flight from an arranged marriage. However, this is not a “return to the source” film that shows dynamic history. Others do, albeit in a wide variety of ways.

Cissé’s *Yeelan* is another film that imagines a pure and isolated “African culture” – one almost beyond history. This is a Mande world in what became French West Africa, a world “built entirely upon localized knowledge and rituals,” from before the coming of Islam or of domestic, trans-Mediterranean, or trans-Atlantic slavery – none of which is mentioned (Austen 2007: 35). Although the film is a mythologized story of secret rituals and magical powers, akin to the Arthurian legend in Britain perhaps, it depicts a heroic African past, inhabited by “human and complex subjects” whose knowledge is not seen as superstition, but rather as something akin to a scientific system for its time (Diawara 1992: 161). And the narrative suggests that African pre-colonial societies could change dramatically for the better by internal means – in this case, by relating a son’s eventually successful struggle with his repressive father, possibly another covert political message for the present (Ukadike 1994: 257–262; Russell 1998: 166–168; Thackway 2003: 83–85; Austen 2007: 35–40).

*Keita!* and *Ceddo*, in contrast, examine the effects of external forces on “traditional” African culture, these effects being shown as decidedly negative and

contaminating. *Keita!* (1994), like *Yeelan*, incorporates elements of the Mande oral tradition in the form of the Sunjata epic about the founding of the Mali Empire. This Mande history is related in Jula by a griot, or keeper of oral traditions, to a modern Burkina Faso schoolboy, Mabo Keita, who is taught only European history at his French school. Keita, influenced by the griot's story, starts sleeping in a hammock outside his modern house, eating food with his hands, and neglecting his schoolwork. Although it is not clear whether Keita finally abandons "western" education in favor of the "African," the message of the film appears to be that the citizens of Burkina Faso should learn and be inspired by their pre-colonial past and the knowledge it contains rather than bother with the kind of foreign education that Mabo receives, which teaches about things like "evolution," or the "discovery" of America by Christopher Columbus (Russell 1998: 94–96; Austen 2007: 31–35; Thackway 2003: 62–64).

Sembene's *Ceddo* (1976) portrays the contamination of "African culture" taking place in Senegalese society in the seventeenth or eighteenth century (the precise period in which the film is set is unclear). The "external" factors at work are European slave traders and Christian missionaries. But the main villain of Sembene's film is Islam. An Imam controls a weak king who has converted to Islam; and this Imam is portrayed as the most dangerous threat to communal unity. The Ceddo of the film's title are traditionalists who wish to keep their "African culture" pure – including their own gods. But they are forced to convert to Islam, have their heads shaven, and adopt Muslim names (thereby losing their true identity) once they are defeated by the Imam (who has killed the king and usurped his throne). The Imam's victory is the result of Muslims obtaining European guns in exchange for slaves. The film ends with the beautiful traditionalist daughter of the king killing the Imam (Ukadike 1994: 182–184; Russell 1998: 44–46; Baum 2007: 46–50; Harms 2007: 71–74).

Like many of Sembene's history films, *Ceddo* gives women historical agency – namely through the character of the princess. The kind of covert message for the present that this treatment conveys is also found in the work of other West African directors. For instance, Med Hondo's *Sarraounia* (1986) is a film about the eponymous queen, who fought against invading French forces. In Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni*, the boy's mother similarly decides (albeit with fatal results) to reject an arranged marriage to an older man. In all these cases, the message to paternalistic African societies of the present is that women can and should be able to shape both their own destinies and those of the societies they inhabit.

Robert Baum sees *Ceddo* as Sembene's indictment of the exploitative collaboration between Senegalese Muslims and Europeans that began in the era of the Atlantic slave trade and continued into colonial times. For Baum, the film's false inventions included the idea of an Imam usurping the throne and the suggestion that there was substantial (enforced) conversion to Islam before the colonial period. The true inventions included depicting the Muslims' participation in the slave trade (Baum 2007: 49–50). For Robert Harms, a historian who specializes in the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the film makes a "powerful point"

by focusing primarily on religious issues rather than forefronting slavery. Slavery had already become part of the West African landscape, and in that respect it was unremarkable to say the least.<sup>2</sup>

In both *Keïta!* and *Ceddo*, “foreign” contact and culture is portrayed in highly negative fashion, and so too are class and gender oppression in *Ceddo*. One *Ceddo* declares: “The white man, princes, nobles, and the Imam are all blood lice who feed on us” (Harms 2007: 73). Indeed for Ukadike *Ceddo* is first and foremost “about cultural colonialism.” In this vein, many “African cinema” films up to the mid-1990s have “dichotomous representations of idyllic precolonial life corrupted and destroyed by European colonizers” (Pfaff 2004: 3) or slave traders. Colonized black Africans willingly abandoning their “traditional culture” in favor of French or British identities are also condemned, most single-mindedly perhaps in Ghanaian filmmaker Kwaw Paintsil Ansah’s *Heritage . . . Africa* (1987). Here the leading character, Kwesi Atta Bosomefi, adopts British ways, changes his name to Quincy Arthur Bosomfield, and becomes ashamed of “African culture.” When his son attends a forbidden dance, Bosomfield takes him to a Christian minister who beats him badly, and the son dies from infected wounds – pretty clear metaphors for the damage supposedly wrought by cultural contamination. Christianity itself is condemned for being only concerned with gaining converts and not with the real well-being of the colonized (Ukadike 1994: 297–303; Russell 1998: 28). Tranquillity, as depicted so powerfully in *Wend Kuuni*, only seems possible when Europeans or European culture are absent.

This dichotomous view of the African past also appears in some “western” portrayals, perhaps most famously in the opening sequence of the first episode of Alex Haley’s made-for-television historical drama *Roots* (1977), which was seen by some 130 million viewers. In *Roots*, tranquil West African communal harmony is destroyed by the coming of the slave trade. This trade is depicted as being controlled and conducted by Europeans, with very limited assistance from a few unexplained African underlings – even though, as later film histories revealed and the historical record demonstrates, African participation in the slave trade was extensive. Thus the village of the protagonist of *Roots*, Kunta Kinte, was traced by Haley to an area that had been part of the Mandinka kingdom of Niumi. Here Europeans were confined to the coast, while slave raiding was conducted by Mandinka warriors, generally in regions far to the north, but occasionally within the kingdom itself (Harms 2007: 65–66).

“Western” representations of Africa’s past have produced dichotomies similar to “African” ones, as well as inversions of them. Although in documentary format, renowned French filmmakers Alain Resnais and Chris Marker made possible the earliest argument about black African alienation from its cultural roots after European colonialism; they did so in *Statues also Die* (1953), a pondering on the African past and present centered around the presence of African statues in Europe. Analyses of Jamie Uys’ comedy *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) suggest dangers in such arguments. Though not overtly a history film, *Gods* makes a rather blatant

reference to cultural colonialism (which is frequently designated in academic literature “Coca-Cola imperialism”) by having a coke bottle fall from the sky and threaten the tranquillity and communal harmony of a Bushman community from outside of history, as it were. As several analysts have pointed out, apart from being a false invention (no Bushman community had escaped contact with “western” influence by the twentieth century, and most of them lived in severe circumstances), representing a supposedly pure “African culture” fitted neatly with the apartheid ideology of cultural and racial separation (Ukadike 1994: 54–58; Davis 1996: 81–94; Van Vuuren 2006: 139–161).

Although “return to the source” history is, predictably, absent from most “western” films about an African past, two other major themes, slavery and “colonial confrontation,” have been shared with “African cinema” (Diawara 1992: 152–160). Numerous films from the late 1950s to the near present deal with one or the other of these topics. Similarities can be found in historical arguments, sub-topics, and numerous elements of film language across both “insider” and “outsider” representations. This suggests not only transcontinental cinematic interactions and changes; it also suggests that both cinemas were influenced by the (changing) historical contexts that produced them – not least by the gradual retreat from institutionalized racism in the “West” after World War II; by decolonization from the 1950s on; by youth rebellion and civil turbulence in the 1960s and 1970s; and (from the same decades on) by gradual disillusionment with postcolonial African governance, as well as with the intellectual and cultural interventions of postmodernism.

The slave trade received its first detailed cinematic treatment in the first decade of African independence, in the form of the French film *Tamango* (1958). *Tamango*’s main focus is on a shipboard revolt in mid-Atlantic organized by the film’s eponymous character, a rebellious slave who gains the support of a female slave named Aiche and ultimately dies alongside his comrades. Yet the film refers, like *Ceddo*, to African suppliers selling slaves in exchange for European guns (Harms 2007: 62–63). European–African collaboration in the slave trade is presented in considerably more detail in Werner Herzog’s *Cobra Verde* (1987). This film is loosely based on the exploits of a Brazilian-born slave trader called Felix de Sousa (Manoel de Silva in the film) and on his dealings with the kingdom of Dahomey. Herzog argues that the slave trade was the product of the greed and desire for power of both Europeans and Africans, an argument not unlike Sembene’s. Both films are made in experimental history film language, which includes slow-paced editing and the aestheticism of landscape and human bodies, suggestive of shared counter-Hollywood ideological links between continental European and African cinema.

Such links are also evident in François Woukoache’s *Asientos* (1996), an exploration of memory and forgetting around the slave trade that is highly reminiscent of Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955) or *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and that, like the latter, has elements of both documentary and feature film. In the style of Resnais’s films, *Asientos* deploys non-linear narrative techniques, depicts the built structures of the present, where past horrors took place, and even shows footage

of genocide, albeit from Rwanda in 1994 rather than from Germany in 1945. But, in Thackway's view, Woukache's film is making a particular point about a commercial element to "western" images of the African past and present (whether on CNN (Cable News Network) or in Hollywood films, perhaps) – an element that echoes the commercial incentives of slavery (Thackway 2003: 109–114). If so, it seems that the film indicts the "West" – but not black Africans – in this respect.

"Colonial confrontation" films, history films that related the experience of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized, became a major component of both "African" and "western" cinematic histories of Africa from the 1960s onwards. One of the first of such films, an enduringly powerful examination of anti-colonial conflict, was in fact an Algerian–Italian co-production, *Battle of Algiers* (1965), directed by Gillo Pontecorvo. Pontecorvo was a veteran of the anti-fascist struggle in Italy and a communist, and he had already made a number of socially committed films. Yacef Saadi, a veteran of the battle against the French for control of Algiers, approached Pontecorvo with the proposal of a film about the conflict – a film based in part on Saadi's experiences. The resulting film was neo-realist in style and had real location shooting, documentary-style sequence, and Arabic as well as French dialogue. Pontecorvo used non-professional actors (in "typage" style, cast for their looks as much as for their acting) in all but one role – that of commander of the French paratroops.

Yet, despite the political persuasions of Pontecorvo and Saadi, the film escapes simple Manichean judgments. Certainly the character we first meet and are most likely to identify with is a young Arab called Ali la Pointe, who is the butt of white racism before being recruited into the National Liberation Front (NLF). Equally, the narrative flatters the NLF by a series of false inventions: for example, by failing to reveal that the two Arabs whose execution early in the film sparks off NLF bombings had killed civilians; by showing only unity in the NLF (when there were serious divisions); and by leaving the impression that popular struggle led directly to liberation. But in many other ways the film is surprisingly even-handed: both the NLF and the French troops are shown committing atrocities; indeed more screen time is devoted to the effect of NLF bombs on innocent civilians than the French torturing NLF suspects; and the French commander is not demonized even when he justifies such methods (Russell 1998: 33–36; Harries 2007: 203–222).

Subsequent influential films about "colonial confrontation" include Sembene's *Emitai* (1971) and *Le Camp de Thiaroye* (1987), depictions of two unsuccessful struggles against the French in Senegal during World War II. The causes of these struggles were, respectively, French recruitment in the Casamance region and discriminatory treatment of black troops in the military camp of the title. Neither film history is as even-handed as *Battle of Algiers* in terms of depicting rounded characters on either side of the struggle. In *Camp de Thiaroye*, for instance, "[w]ith their curling lips and bilious racism, Major August and Captain Labrousse are the demons of Dakar," even if another white officer who sympathizes with the complaints of black Senegalese troops is depicted sympathetically (Nasson 2007: 164).

There are false inventions in both films, if perhaps most notably in *Camp de Thiaroye*'s portrayal of the events that led to the massacre of black troops, which makes French actions seem even more appalling (Gugler 2004: 70–74).

Yet the two films serve as memorials to significant sacrificial moments of resistance to colonialism in the 1940s and they have much true invention, including the use of local dialects (Diawara 1992: 153, 156–158; Ukadike 1994: 167–171, 290–297; Russell 1998: 39–41, 53–55; Thackway 2003: 94–96; Baum 2007: 51–56; Nasson 2007: 148–166). *Emitai*, through Sembene's oral history research, preserves a record of women's role in that resistance amid a largely plausible description of contemporary Diola material culture. A major strength of *Camp de Thiaroye* is the fact that it explores the question of cultural change, including French assimilation, in far more nuanced fashion than the dichotomous approach of *Heritage . . . Africa*. It does so especially through the French-educated but empathetically drawn figure of a black Senegalese officer who sides with the mutineers.

"Western" takes on struggles against colonialism, beyond the co-produced *Battle of Algiers*, are far fewer than their "African" cinematic counterparts. One example is *Kitchen Toto* (1987), the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya seen through the eyes of a young Kikuyu servant, colloquially known as a Toto but called Mwangi. This French production directed by Englishman Harry Hook, whose father lived in Kenya, is far more ambivalent about the conflict than the often highly dualistic British and American films of the 1950s (Anderson 2003). *Kitchen Toto* shows Mwangi (who represents the position of many black Kenyans) being caught between two possibilities: either to side with racist white colonials, including the son of his police officer employer; or to participate in Mau Mau violence (Cameron 1994: 175). Ultimately Mwangi (and many a viewer, one suspects) balks at the second possibility and attempts to protect his employers.

Far more attention was given by "western" filmmakers to apartheid in South Africa. Rob Nixon and Peter Davis have condemned such efforts as "Hollywood history" (Nixon 1994; Davis 1996), even though using Hollywood narrative devices may make history films more likely to gain an audience and thus popularize their message (Toplin 2002). Nixon and Davis criticised both *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *Dry White Season* (1989) for giving most attention and screen time to a white male protagonist, in keeping with much of the Hollywood tradition, and thereby devoting insufficient attention to black characters, black perspectives, and black suffering. Nixon and Davis applauded instead the authenticity of what might be described as "state of the nation" depictions of apartheid such as in *Come Back Africa* (1959) and *Mapantsula* (1988), which had white directors but were made in tandem with black South Africans. These films had black protagonists played by South African actors and focused more properly on the trauma of blacks (Nixon 1994; Davis 1996).

The white male narrative perspective of Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* and of Euzhan Palcy's *Dry White Season* may indeed be well worn. But both films, by using the full range of cinema's multi-media language, contain remarkably high

loads of historical information by comparison to the majority of history films about the African past. And much of what they have to say about events surrounding the Soweto uprising of 1976 and the deaths of black South Africans in police detention, most infamously the killing of Steve Biko, can be shown to be true invention (Bickford-Smith 2007a). Both films display what Rosenstone has shown to be many of the strengths of film history (Rosenstone 1995; 2006). They explain the past to the present: *Cry Freedom* by closing with a long list of those killed in detention up to March 1987; *A Dry White Season* by closing with text that reads in part: "1989: The South African government continues to ban, imprison, torture the men, women and children who oppose apartheid." Both films also provide narratives that humanize the (black and white) past, show the possible efficacy of individual human agency, and offer multi-dimensional worlds that combine, for instance, politics with popular culture (Bickford-Smith 2007a).

Yet perhaps a weakness of these two films – and of many others depicting the African past – is that they take the idea of "black" and "white" (or "African" and "European") identities for granted, when "race" and ethnicity are historical constructs. As a result, few question one of the ideological foundations of colonialism and segregation. The same might be said of those films that have argued in favor of pure "African culture" and against cultural contamination. One recent exception to this failing is Anthony Fabian's *Skin* (2008), which explores the real-life story of South African Sandra Laing, the dark "colored" daughter of "white" parents. *Skin* shows the obvious social benefits of being "white" under apartheid, the reluctance of Sandra's parents to accept her classification as colored, their eventually successful attempt to get her re-classified as "white," and her rejection by "white" society on account of her dark skin, which led to her eloping with a "black" lover.

*Skin* demonstrates one of several ways in which cinematic histories from the late 1990s have implicitly criticized previous representations of the African past or offered new historical approaches. Another is provided by Roger Gnoan M'Bala's film *Adanggaman* (2000), an Ivory Coast, France, Burkina Faso, and Swiss co-production, which is the first history feature film to focus on African domestic slavery and slave trading. The fictional king of the film's title is depicted as a tyrannical fool whose female warriors (an allusion to the amazons of Dahomey) slave-raid both for domestic purposes – to obtain slaves for food production and personal services – and for external ones – to sell them to Europeans. Yet the fact that no whites actually appear in the film led to complaints from viewers (when the film was shown at the Ouagadougou festival) that *Adanggaman* absolves Europeans of responsibility for slavery. This is despite the fact that the Atlantic slave trade is referred to several times in the course of the film, as well as in on-screen text at the end. The text reveals that eventually the king was himself sold into slavery and became a cook (called Walter Brown) in St. Louis (Harms 2007: 77–79).

Perhaps because of its criticism of African pre-colonial atrocities, the film is not discussed in Thackway's *Africa Shoots Back*. Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *Guimba*, a

Malian production, also questioned “traditional systems of government that led to abuses of power” (Pfaff 2004: 3). And, in far more virulent fashion than ever before, a number of “western” and “African” co-productions like *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Blood Diamond* (2006), and *Last King of Scotland* (2006) indict both previous colonial powers and the United States for complicity in postcolonial conflicts and atrocities.

*Hotel Rwanda* tells the story of Paul Rusesabagina, designated a Hutu and the manager of an up-market hotel during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, who becomes an African Schindler by sheltering hundreds of Tutsis from likely death. The film has a black protagonist (albeit one played by an American, Don Cheadle), which is unusual for “Hollywood” takes on “third world problems” (Nixon 1994). Like *Skin*, it shows that “racial” difference is socially constructed; it argues that distinctions between Hutus and Tutsis were invented under Belgian colonial rule, even if it is truer to say that the German, then the Belgian colonial governments maintained and reinforced differences already established in pre-colonial times (Evans and Glenn 2010).

On firmer ground, the film indicts the US government and the “West” generally for not moving in to stop the killing. One way it does so is by including a radio broadcast of an American government spokeswoman who uses the semantic euphemism of describing what is happening in Rwanda as “acts of genocide” rather than simply “genocide,” to avoid compulsory intervention. Another way is by having a United Nations Canadian military officer (Nick Nolte) explaining to Rusesabagina that the reason for non-intervention is that “we [the ‘West’] think you’re dirt,” because “you’re black [ . . . ] [and] [ . . . ] an African.”

*Blood Diamond* and *Last King of Scotland* also indict “the West.” In *Blood Diamond*’s case, the appalling Civil War in Sierra Leone is blamed on rebels desiring to profit from gaining control of diamond-producing areas by selling the stones to western markets. In *Last King of Scotland*, Britain is blamed for supporting Idi Amin’s rise to power, and therefore being in part responsible for subsequent mass killings of political opponents and expulsion of Asian Ugandans. The most recent and detailed analyses of these three films still focus on their failings, suggesting that the latter remain typical of “western” representations of Africa. Supposedly all three films contain negative stereotyping of Africa, achieved *inter alia* by depicting violence (with relish) without sufficiently explaining it, by de-historicizing and thus eternalizing events, and by offering little in the way of a socio-economic and political explanation. As such, they are part of an “Afro-pessimism” in the “West” that deems Africa incapable of progress and propagates this opinion (Adhikari 2007; Evans and Glenn 2010).

Yet this is a debatable way of reading the films’ arguments. All three endow black African characters with positive as well as negative historical agency. In each film, Africa and Africans are initially depicted in very positive fashion: the father and son in a fishing village paradise in *Blood Diamond*; Rusesabagina and his family in the fashionable Hotel Milles des Collines, which he manages in highly efficient fashion; “ordinary” and decent Ugandans on a bus and in rural villages. And all



three films do offer at least brief political explanations of why violence comes to Africa.

In *Hotel Rwanda* it is the assassination of a moderate president of Rwanda – unfairly blamed on Tutsi rebels and playing to ethnic sensibilities, which strengthened under colonial rule – that sparks off genocide. In *Blood Diamond*, it is the struggle for control over the diamonds desired by “western” buyers and exchangeable for weapons – as well as averred (but very briefly mentioned) political radicalism – that motivates the violence of rebels, for example when they cut off hands (as the film tells us, an atrocity first practiced by Belgians in the Congo) to prevent civilians from voting for the government. In addition, Danny Archer’s (Leonard DiCaprio) “TIA” or “This Is Africa” explanation of violence is shown as cynicism in keeping with his white Rhodesian character of a mercenary turned illicit diamond smuggler. His views are rebuked both by a woman journalist, who warns against racial generalizations – not all Africans kill one another, just as not all American girls desire diamonds – and by the continued patriotic optimism of the fisherman, Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou), who does rescue his son from excessively violent child soldiering (a process itself explained in some detail in the film). In *Last King of Scotland*, Idi Amin’s violence is shown to stem from his sense of insecurity, which is fostered by real political enemies such as his presidential predecessor, Milton Obote, as well as by his own paranoia.

The conclusion that the West is unfailingly Afro-pessimist seems akin to that of occidentalism, the view that the “West” has inherent, pathologically immoral failings. Like its antonym orientalism, occidentalism was denounced by Edward Said. Careful scrutiny of “western” cinematic histories also cautions against such dualisms. “African” cinema produced Newton Aduaka’s *Ezra* (2007), a Nigerian rather than “western” film about child soldiers, which has considerable on-screen violence. “Western” rather than “African” cinema produced *Invictus* (2009), Clint Eastwood’s entirely celebratory reconstruction of Nelson Mandela’s role in promoting racial reconciliation during South Africa’s rugby world cup victory. There are also international co-productions – such as *In My Country* (2004) and *Red Dust* (2004), about South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or *Goodbye Bafana* (2007), about Mandela’s relationship with a prison warder – that not only contain considerable political analysis but also suggest the possibility of Africa’s positive progress.

It may be argued that this is because such films focus on the partly “white” south; they are not about “deeply African” Africa. On the other hand, existing theoretical literature about the nature of history on film may explain several ingredients of supposed “Afro-pessimism.” Such literature argues that showing “spectacular” violence on screen, with little historical and contextual explanation, is (and has been) typical of “mainstream” history films in general, whatever their provenance. “Mainstream” history films are commonly characterized by spectacle, drama, and emotion, whether they are dealing with Africa, Europe, the Americas or any other place. “Mainstream” cinematic history often plunges the viewer

straight into the past, with little contextual explanation, and it sweeps the viewer through a story, with little room for reflection. “Mainstream” history films relate these stories – stories of equilibrium, conflict, and resolution that leave little room for historical doubt or “maybes” – through the eyes of individuals usually battling against clearly defined evil or oppressive opponents (Rosenstone 1995; Rosenstone 2006; Toplin 1996; 2002; Landy 2000).

It is only what Rosenstone calls “innovative” or “experimental” film history that self-consciously breaks with these “Hollywood” conventions; sometimes it draws attention to the fact that history on screen is a representation rather than the past itself, or it ponders on the nature and purpose of cinematic history (Rosenstone 2006). In terms of this categorization, more of the “African” cinematic history is innovative and may be applauded for being so than its “western” counterpart. Yet if, as appears to have been the stated case, many filmmakers in “African” cinema wished to re-vision the continent’s past for a popular audience (Diawara 1992; Ukadike 1994; Cham 2004), most of their films have failed at least in this respect. They might appropriately be likened to academic rather than to popular historical creations of the written variety.

This difficulty in obtaining a substantial audience may not only have been the result of budget constraints or marketing failures. Modern West Africans have seemingly opted in vast numbers to ignore historical re-visioning created by, and for, a “de-colonizing” intellectual elite, however insightful this may be (and it has been), in favor of even low-budget but overtly culturally creolized Ghanaian or Nigerian video novellas of the present. Apparently these films have spoken more directly to popular concerns, values, and aspirations, which in turn raises the question of who does or should provide an authentic “African” voice or perspective on the continent’s past (Meyer 1999; McClune 2010).

Yet we must, as ever, be aware of an overly dichotomous argument. A few West African history films have gained a considerable audience, at least within one country. For instance, apparently almost “everyone” in Burkina Faso has seen *Wend Kuuni* (Saul 2007). Images of an aestheticized and tranquil African past clearly can have popular appeal in more difficult “presents.” Equally, some “mainstream” cinematic histories can contain elements of more “experimental” film. *Blood Diamond* in reflexive fashion, by drawing attention to the constructed nature of representations, frequently shows photographers intent on capturing horrific images of Africa and refers to CNN squeezing in such images between “sport and the weather.” *Hotel Rwanda*, in similar fashion, shows the viewer images of genocide on the monitoring screen of television journalists, in a room in Hotel Mille des Collines.

Thinking about cinematic histories of Africa with all these considerations in mind complicates the making of any simple bifurcation between insider and outsider depictions of this continent’s past. Just because a history film features a “white male” protagonist, it does not mean that all its arguments and representations are thereby inauthentic, or less valid than those of films with black protagonists, as

some have seemed to suggest, even if a range of narrative perspectives undoubtedly enriches cinematic history (Nixon 1994; Evans and Glenn 2010). Equally “African” cinematic histories should not be ignored, because some appear to essentialize “African culture” or may not have gained a substantial audience. All visions of the African past that engage with historical discourse, or ponder on the nature of history itself, whatever their provenance or popularity, deserve to be viewed carefully and with an open mind by those seriously interested in cinematic visions of this continent’s past.

### Notes

- 1 While all cinematic history has to invent (perhaps some characters, or dialogue or events) when representing the past, Rosenstone draws a distinction here between “true invention” that engages with “the discourse of history” and “false invention” that ignores or violates that discourse (Rosenstone 1995).
- 2 For Harms, the film “brilliantly illustrates how ordinary [African] people in difficult circumstances could face agonising choices in terms of participation in the trade” (Harms 2007: 74).

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