

Un-Phased

Many writers and directors creating works dealing with the continent of Africa feel that they have a duty to the people to raise the issues that plague the many nations of the continent today. Films and written works often take on a rather political tone and even when it may seem that they are not doing so, all of these works have a message that is being relayed to the viewing audience. Films such as *Harvest: 3,000 Years* and *These Hands* have obvious messages of simply getting out the knowledge of the conditions under which many Africans still live. Additionally, “The Waldiba Story” and “Slow Poison,” two short stories from Africa, shed new light on the important issues of civil wars and the AIDS epidemic, bringing a new perspective to these ideas that people raised in the Western World cannot easily understand.

But there are also some films and stories that make a sincere attempt to move away from the stereotypical statement-making that seems to be the norm in present day African narrative art. The Zairian film *La vie est belle* and Aboubacar Ben Saïd Salim’s story “The Revolt of the Vowels” both make strides in providing the audience with something that is simply entertainment for the sake of entertainment. However, in the end these works also have a lasting impact on, and take influence from, the political situation of the nations where they were produced as well as Africa as a whole.

As Teshome H. Gabriel suggests in his article “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films” there seem to be three phases of film production in the Third World. For my purposes I will take Third World to be synonymous with African in this essay although the Third World in fact encompasses much more than just Africa. Films such as *La vie est belle* would most certainly fall into Gabriel’s first phase which is “unqualified assimilation.” It greatly models the way that films are created in Hollywood with a real life famous musician playing the lead role and inevitable singing and playing music within the

film itself.¹ Additionally, a film such as *Yeelen* from Mali has a much greater amount of what most westerners would think of as traditional African elements, vast savannah, magical items, and associations with wild animals, but the way in which it is presented is similar to that of a Hollywood production. While Cissé was born in Africa and has done work in Africa, it is suggested that his film training in Russia has a strong influence on the style of his films. Indeed this is the problem facing most African film makers in that the facilities do not currently exist to obtain quality training in film within Africa and therefore, most training in film must be done in Europe or in the United States.

Both film and written narrative, in the form of a novel or a short story, were originally art forms that developed in the Western World. As so many have pointed out, the closest thing that can be found in Africa to any of these is the storyteller or historian in the form of the griot. What some do not realize is that Europe once had its own griot in the form of the travelling bard. The fact that Europeans solidified the stories and history by writing it down and eventually making mass copies of that writing proves that it is possible for the people of Africa to experience a similar growth from oral storytelling. The main problem with attempting to push any form of narrative art onto a continent like Africa is that it is not given the proper development time with those people. Had technologies and ideas progressed at different speeds in different parts of the world, Europe might have been the primitive looking area and Africa the technologized center of culture and industry. However, this is not the case and Africa must adapt to these methods of communication as best it can and as fast as it can and this itself becomes a central part of the discussion about African literature.

If Salim's "The Revolt of the Vowels" were a film, it would fall into Gabriel's first phase as well. The story is amazingly simple to understand and the sole purpose seems to be that of providing a laugh

¹ This would be akin to Frank Sinatra films in the middle part of the 20th century in America or films starring pop music star Britney Spears and rapper Eminem today.

amidst what otherwise becomes overwhelming images of poverty, oppression, and death. However, there is a message here as well, that even the smallest and most taken-for-granted person or thing can have a profound effect on the stability of the world. The loss of the vowels in the story is reflective of the loss of a group of strong laborers on a farm or at a factory in Africa. It's true that we would be able to spell all of our words without these workers, but the factory or farm would shut down and the production would lag, much to the dismay of the capitalist leaders back in Europe or America.

As it seems that as a rule, Gabriel's first phase cannot be looked at so simply as just imitating and mirroring Western film and writing conventions. Things that he would certainly place under the bubble of mere entertainment inevitably have more depth. The overriding idea here at least in the eyes of African film makers and authors is that if you construct a work that adheres to the expectations of the foreign audience (i.e. Americans and Europeans) they will be more inclined to read or view the work and perhaps begin to see the continent in a new light; see things through the eyes of an African rather than through those to which they are accustomed.

Gabriel's second phase is that of "remembrance." He suggests that the central conflicts of these films are those between "rural and urban life [and] traditional versus modern value systems" (Gabriel 32). This can be seen in the films *Keita*, *L'héritage du griot* and even in the documentary film *These Hands* about women stone workers in Tanzania. The images tend to be more striking in *Keita* since the theme of tradition versus modernity is much more central than in *These Hands*. From Mabo Keita's troubles balancing his schoolwork and his interest in the story of his name to the basic visual difference between the city and the town scenes that represent the present day and the scenes in the wilderness that make up the griot's story, each element in this film seems to be reflected by an opposite image intended to play on this conflict.

These Hands almost falls into a grey area between the second and third phase. It also contrasts the modern against the traditional though in this film it is mostly just a visual comparison rather than one of story. The women photographed for the film work outdoors every day at breaking large chunks of rock out of the ground and smashing these into smaller rocks that are the appropriate size for whatever use is eventually made of them.

The contrast comes in the form of the machinery that is also being operated at the quarry site. A Western audience viewing the film is practically forced to think of any contact with a quarry in this country, be it on television, in a film, or in person. No person, man, woman, or child, would be expected to sit with a pile of rocks every day and break them into smaller rocks. Instead, machines have been developed that will break the rock from the ground, pulverize it into smaller pieces and even sort out good pieces from the bad. The machines at the quarry in *These Hands* appear to be similar to those that might be found at a stripe mine of coal in Pennsylvania, and yet these women are still doing much of the work by hand. Additionally, the shots of the women working are almost entirely devoid of plant life. These images are the women and the backdrop is mostly the bland, grey ground. However, in several shots of the machines, foliage and even the beautifully bright blue sky is featured as a background for the steel giants. Is director M'mbugu-Schelling trying to drive home a point here?

But as I noted, *These Hands* can also fit nicely into Gabriel's third phase. In this phase, described as the "combative" one, Gabriel sees films that get down into the dirty truths that are the "lives and struggles of Third World peoples" (Gabriel 33). In this way, *These Hands* is very much a part of the third phase just as it is the second. The film is displaying women who are not actors but who are the actual workers who do the labor at the quarry every day and showing them in their real environment. Additionally, the film shows not only how the women do their work but also shows

them eating lunch, singing songs, trying to help friends in need and what to Western audiences is surely the best part, getting up and deciding to go home for the day.

Gabriel suggests that the film in this phase is seen as “an ideological tool” (Gabriel 34). *Harvest: 3,000 Years* may be the closest African equivalent to date of a Hollywood epic film. The title itself evokes a feeling of strength and durability and it truly represents the strength of tradition. In the film we see a family of what looks like sharecroppers working in the fields day in and day out. While there are elements of the modern world such as cars and trucks, the images that are placed on the screen are meant to show the audience that the world of these people has not changed much in the past 3,000 years. The message here is somewhat different from that of *Keita* however. Whereas the griot in *Keita* came to tell Mabo the story of his name so that the history was not forgotten, in *Harvest* there seems to be a hope for the future generation to finally break out of the vicious cycle that has been going on for three millennia. The opening of the film mirrors the end, both starting and ending with a freeze framed close-up of a male character’s face. This reinforces the cyclical nature of the lives that the film shows us, but in making the face at the end that of a young boy who has just jumped onto a truck that is on its way to the city, it signals that he will go on and bring new life to the village and the farm.

As with Salim’s story about vowels that have run off and gone into hiding, the model that Gabriel uses for film can be applied to other works of written fiction as well. Both Makuchi’s story “Slow Poison” and Hama Tuma’s “The Waldiba Story” retain elements of magic even though they fit best with the structure of this third phase. Again, making the work into an ideological tool, these two stories deal with death on two different fronts, both of which pose a serious problem for the entire continent of Africa and even the world as a whole. “Slow Poison” shows the personal and communal problems associated with AIDS in Africa. Shown from two different perspectives, that of the young boy

who sees himself as a withered old man because of what the disease has done to his body, and from the point of view of his mother, we get parallel insights into the damage that AIDS can and does cause.

As with many things, since the traditions of African cultures are much different from those that Westerners are used to, it may be hard to imagine how a disease like AIDS would be understood in a different culture. This story shows that when something seems to be unexplainable to a people, they will craft their own. However, here arises another difficulty in placing this story accurately since it begins to cross over once again. In playing the explanations of AIDS against one another, the scientific explanation and the more magical definition of it as a curse, we begin to see a conflict similar to those from the second phase, that of tradition (curse) versus modernity (science). So here is an element of the second phase hard at work to help push the ideological message that the story seems to be attempting to get across in the third phase.

“The Waldiba Story” also lies somewhere between all three phases of Gabriel’s design. Addressing the burning issue of civil war and what it can do to a people, it brings in the third phase with an ideological message, the second with the conflict between the young and old, the rebels and the authority, and even a piece of the first phase with mentions of street battle between the warring groups that seem to be very stereotypical of Western portrayals of Africa.² However, while this last item could be seen as a detriment to the portrayal of the African people and could in fact reinforce the idea that they are bloodthirsty and savage people, it is a part of the history and something that cannot be ignored. This too is an important message of the story in that the old monk telling the story on his deathbed was someone who tried to run away from the past. But the moral of the story as he dies is

² A specific example of this would be the graphic representations of the American Black Hawk helicopter crash in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1993 as seen in the recent Ridley Scott film *Black Hawk Down* (2001.)

that they past needs to be dealt with and for African nations that includes such sore subjects as colonialism and imperialism, tyrannical dictators, and the abject poverty of the masses.

Gabriel's three phases seem, when taken at face value, to be a rather neat method for classification of African films. However, as he freely admits, it doesn't work in all cases and as one can see from the examples provided above, his so-called grey areas between the phases almost hold more works than the more clearly defined phases themselves. As many writers and scholars have noted, the life of the written African novel and short story has been quite brief at present and that of African film even shorter. As mentioned above, both of these mediums have not had nearly enough chance to grow and evolve within the existing constructs of the multitude of African societies and until they are allowed to do so it will be quite difficult to fully classify and theorize about them. Chinua Achebe suggests in his foreword to *The Anchor Book of Modern African Stories* that short stories are "a convenient bridge from oral to written literature" (Achebe, Foreword xv) and perhaps this is a valid argument. As seen in *Keita*, the role of the griot is used to tell the story and as the film cuts to the scenes he tells of, his voice fades and the image takes over.³ The griot would certainly not tell novel length stories in one sitting and yet even as he tells Mabo the story of his name it is given in numerous short segments that could each easily be broken down and written as a short story.

So Achebe is right in saying that the short story is a bridge that attempts to fill the gap between the novel and oral storytelling. And what is the novel if not a different form of the film? So then it follows that once the connection is made between oral storytelling and the novel, that film language in Africa can make a change to become more essentially African. It is this essence of being African that has not fully developed as yet and is evidenced by another of Achebe's claims. He claimed that "the English language will be able to carry the weight of my American experience. But it was have to be a

³ For a Western version of this see Rob Reiner's adaptation of William Goldman's fantasy novel *The Princess Bride* (1987)

new English” (Achebe, *The African Writer and the English Language* 103). This applies to the film and the novel as well. The traditional language that is used in European and American novels is the same that African authors are and will continue to use for their own novels, but it will continue to evolve and in the end will become something new and ultimately different. Additionally, the language of films is one that has grown out of the novel in some respects and continues to grow and develop. One might feel that film as it is in Hollywood or in European cinematic development has become stagnant and repetitive and at a time like that, a new perspective (African) is just what the medium might need to make it interesting once again.

So it seems that Achebe would agree with the makers of most African films since they all use a language that exists in the world to put out a message and shed light on important political issues. The important thing is that every film, whether intended or not, has a message that it is getting out to the people of the world. Every story, whether it is told orally by a griot or printed in a book, or shown visually on a screen, has importance in relation to the history of the people of Africa and to the world. To keep the doors shut on these important films is a grave mistake. Let the people know about the injustices that are taking place each and every day and whether they are made fun of or taken seriously, eventually people will begin to get the message, Africa is a place full of life and it has enough stories to keep the world busy for years to come.

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