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This is a report on the 23rd Annual Conference of the African Literature Association (ALA), which was held at Michigan State University, East Lansing, between the 16th and 19th of April this year. The theme of the conference was **FESPACO NIGHTS IN MICHIGAN: AFRICAN FILM AND LITERATURE.**

FESPACO is the acronym for the Federation of Pan African Filmmakers, based in Burkino Faso, West Africa. This small country has become synonymous with its annual festival of African cinema, FEPACI, which showcases new releases by African filmmakers. Every February, the city of Ougadougou becomes the focus of an international pilgrimage by filmmakers, academics and cineastes of various kinds.

The title of the conference thus included the notion of filmmakers and academics as *griots*. Griots are bards who travel and tell stories. In the age of cinema and TV, filmmakers as griots often retain and even mobilise the codes of orality in their visual imaging. One such griot present at the conference was the acclaimed director and former President of FESPACO, Gaston Kaboré.

The meeting aimed to offer a venue for:

- the annual conference of the African Literature Association;
- public screens of current African cinema; and to
- identify US-based scholars with an interest in African cinema, so as to broaden the base of the African cinema object, based at Michigan State University.

The conference was attended by over 300 delegates offering 247 papers from Burkino Faso, Cameroon, Canada, Finland, France, Ghana, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Swaziland, Netherlands, Tunisia, UK, USA, and Zimbabwe. While some non-American delegates were students currently studying in the USA, a significant number of academics, and especially African film directors, made the trip especially for the screenings. This was the first ALA conference in which the study and teaching of African cinema was such a prominent feature. Surprisingly, despite the extent of international interest in African cinema, and despite the number of US scholars, in

particular, studying and teaching this topic, most of the delegates came from a literary perspective. Apart from practising filmmakers themselves, and a few Cinema/communication scholars, most teachers of African cinema in America appear to be located in language and literature departments. (Unless specifically organised on the topic of African cinema, it is my experience that there is little interest in African cinema in American film, media and communications studies.)

Texts on African film Barely eight years ago, only one text in English on black African cinema appropriate for University adoption existed. This was Teshome Gabriel's *Third Cinema in the Third World* (1982), while Roy Armes' *Third World Filmmaking and the West* (1987) offered critical and contextual analysis from the perspective of European scholarship. Few good journal articles were available. But the 1990s changed this paucity with the publication of two further text-books which like Gabriel's, are based on PhDs done at US universities. These have since been supplemented by two additional anthologies. Most significantly, for the first time anthologies are now being published within Africa itself, such as the bilingual *L'Afrique et le Centenaire du Cinéma/Africa and the Centenary of Cinema* (Isepaci 1995).

This growing publishing activity – a number of other books are currently in press – correlates with improved distribution of African made films in the US, Europe and South Africa. The distribution offered by the Film Resource Unit, Johannesburg, and publicity garnered for African cinema via the annual All-Africa M-Net film awards and M-Net sponsored seminars with African directors and free screenings at city cinemas, have been major contributors to a developing critical interest. Major festivals now devoted to African films in North America, Europe and Africa itself have underpinned this growing popularity.

Journals like *Research in African Literatures* (1995), *IRIS* (1995), *CinémaAction*, *South African Theatre Journal* (1991, 1996), *Critical Arts* (1998, 1983, 1993) and *Matatu* (1997), have all published theme issues on the topic of African or South African cinema. *L'Encrans Afrique/African screen*,



Reprinted from *Images of South Africa: the rise of the alternative film*

published by FESPACO in conjunction with Centro Orientamento Educavo, Milano, Italy, represents a popular publishing breakthrough following the sterling critical work done by French language writers in Presence *Africaine* over many years. This publishing activity has resulted in a rapid popularisation of African cinema studies at

colleges and universities, especially in the USA.

What is African cinema? One of the recurring themes at the ALA meeting concerned debates on definitions of African cinema. Manthia Diawara, amongst others, consistently warned of the dangers of nationalism and tribalism in pursuit of

structuralism in US cinema studies was to legitimise film studies in its own right, alongside the study of institutionally acceptable disciplines, like literature. The significance of these issues were succinctly expressed by Trin T Minh Ha in her discussion on film and anthropology. She argued that observers (critics, academics, filmmakers) live in trajectories of mobility,

Trajectories of mobility

Films and travelling academics

definition. Others tackled the issue of expansionism, while some simply assumed these kinds of categories without translating the ideological assumptions of national, race or ethnic categorisations. Where Frank Ukadike, for example, was careful to call for Africanisation in terms of 'critical methodology', some allies rejected the scenes that Africans = Africa = African-ness = African culture (singular) = blood/land ties, and so on. But, as Mineke Schipper pointed out, accident of birth does not make one an expert in the culture into which one is born. She defined African Studies as the study of the 'idea' of Africa; and, referring to Germany under the Nazis, argued that essentialism means massacre. (There are some resonances here too for South Africa under apartheid.) Frank Ukadike concluded that the overarching term 'African cinema' has little more than convenience value.

Some scholars, including Ukadike, expressed epistemological unease at the unreconstituted importation of Western theories into analysis of African films and literature, and called for such critical methods to start from the perspectives of African filmmakers and audiences themselves. Phil Rosen, however, himself a film scholar, explained that the importance of

change and difference, while those they observe, film or write about – the 'natives' – are often easily identifiable because they are relatively immobile and therefore knowable and reproducible in media texts.

Issues of women in cinema and on cinema were prominent throughout the deliberations. The relationship between rural traditions and visual imaging of stories told by Africans remarked on the need for films to retain the depth of the oral content. These were just some of the other issues discussed in other sections of the conference.

Video Discussions on film policy in West African countries were instructive for developments across the Continent as a whole; and a number of speakers emphasised the role of the video revolution in Ghana and Nigeria in particular in the popularisation of production and distribution. Amateurs making video movies exhibited in conventional cinemas have made considerable inroads on more commercial, more culturally remote, imported fare. This occurs in Ghana at precisely the moment that Malaysian investors into the Ghanaian state cinema company stripped it of its full capacity, and set up a TV station (Africanus Aveh).

South Africa How does all this relate to South African scholarship? The study of African cinema (in addition to South African cinema) is becoming an urgent requirement in South Africa because of:

- the cultural and economic integration of South Africa into Africa following the end of sanctions and the cultural boycott;
- the support of M-Net in its all Africa film awards and this station's screening of some African films on TV and in South African cinemas in the major urban centres;

- the intention of the SABC to screen 13 African films;
- the imperative noted in the draft legislation of the Film White Paper to promote African films;

- African films supplied via the Film Resource Unit in Johannesburg, accompanied by viewer guides to assist teachers and viewers understand them, require popularisation alongside other kinds of cinemas.

International trade in film distribution is becoming more important within Africa. South Africa's cinema infrastructure and lucrative TV opportunities, not to mention its sophisticated production and especially its post-production infrastructure, and favourable exchange rates, mean that southern Africa is increasingly attractive to African filmmakers, both as a market and as a production service centre. The again functioning UNESCO Zimbabwe film and TV Training Project, initiated by the International Association of film and TV schools over a decade ago, and the imminent tabling of very similar White Papers on Film Policy by both the South African and Zimbabwe parliaments will boost production, interest and the need for further academic study. I have little doubt that the ALA conference will prove to be a milestone in the study of African cinema across the world, and especially in the USA.

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