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Olivier Barlet: Les Cinémas d'Afrique Noire

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V Fotografie und Film

Olivier Barlet: *Les Cinémas d'Afrique Noire*

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Les Cinémas d'Afrique Noire is a dense and fascinating read; whilst the book contains a wealth of information, its author stays away from jargon and adopts an unconstrained style which suits the multifarious aspect of its subject and encourages in its reader the openness of mind necessary to appreciate a different cinematic culture.

Olivier Barlet devotes the first part of his study to an evocation of the cinemas of black Africa in their variety, underlying the common elements as well as the diversities. These cinemas share in common the similarity of the historical circumstances of their beginnings: for most countries, it starts with the political independence, as an expression of post-colonial Africa. However, the medium was approached in different ways, both depending on the country and the director and on the evolution in time. From the rejection of the prejudices and essentialist ethnography reproduced or created by the films circulated under the colonial powers, Barlet analyses ways in which African film-making has evolved to a complex interrogation on issues of identity, which looks critically at the idealisation of a pre-colonial period, questions the relation and opposition of past and present, of traditional values and modernity, the relation between the genders and the generations, and also attempts to take stock of the colonial heritage: which, if any, of the occidental modes of interpretation, expression and production should be integrated, and which should be rejected? Barlet shows how the different approaches adopted by directors who reflect on the construction of new African identities in their work is in turn reflected in the variety of the genres -from a militant cinema, which was sometimes envisaged as an 'evening school', to the sagas, comedies, satires and intricate self-explorations of the most recent production.

In his second part, Barlet studies in greater details some of the specific aspects of African film-making from the point of view of its aesthetics: the composition of the image, ways of reflecting the relation between the human silhouette and its environment and of filming the landscape, the importance of orality, symbolism, and the specificity of the narrative structures. After describing the problems inherent to the making and distribution of films across borders on a continent which boasts a huge variety of languages and dialects, the author evokes the difficulties of distribution outside of the African continent: with their often loose, circular or repetitive narrative structures, their particular rhythm, and their wealth of metaphors and symbols, African films can seem difficult to audiences used to Hollywood or European film-making. But Barlet also underlines the short-comings of an occidental school of criticism, which overlooks these potential aesthetic and cultural differences and tends to hide its misunderstanding behind familiar labels and designations such

as 'bewitching', 'fresh', 'naïve' or 'beautiful images and superb landscapes'. It is crucial, Barlet insists, that a proper body of critics establishes itself in the African countries, and defines the tools necessary to propose a proper appraisal of the films produced in black Africa.

The concluding part of the book gives an overview of the material conditions of production as well as an interrogation on the future of the African cinemas. In general, the conditions of production and of distribution remain understandably difficult and uncertain, with the majority of the directors engaged in other professional pursuit for their living, and endless delays due to the difficulties in gathering funds and in finishing the shooting or the editing in the face of budget shortages and lack of facilities. If he remarks on the importance of the occidental involvement, and the fundamental role played by some of the French ministerial agencies in particular, in funding and insuring the post-production, on the basis of his discussions with directors and producers Barlet clearly considers that the development of African film-making relies on a more stable and more independent environment of production.

The book underlines preconceptions and expectations which inform the gaze of an occidental public unfamiliar with African cinema. An occidental critic himself, Barlet adopts the best possible strategy to undermine conventional attitudes to African film-making: he never ceases to quote, at length, African directors – women and men from a variety of countries. When reading the testimonies, comments, criticisms and critical self-appraisals of these film-makers, it becomes impossible to retain the view of African film-making as naïve, unprofessional practice, and Olivier Barlet's book thus spurs curiosity and creates in its reader a strong desire to be given a chance to see the films evoked.

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