

Prince Bubacarr Aminata Sankanu

## Rediscovering Frantz Fanon at Scotland's Africa in Motion film festival

2016

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3338>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sankanu, Prince Bubacarr Aminata: Rediscovering Frantz Fanon at Scotland's Africa in Motion film festival. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 5 (2016), Nr. 1, S. 265–272. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3338>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://www.necsus-ejms.org/test/rediscovering-frantz-fanon-scotlands-africa-motion-film-festival/>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

## Rediscovering Frantz Fanon at Scotland's Africa in Motion film festival

NECSUS 5 (1), Spring 2016: 265–272

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/rediscovering-frantz-fanon-scotlands-africa-motion-film-festival>

**Keywords:** Africa, festival, film, Frantz Fanon, Scotland

The Africa in Motion (AiM) Film Festival was founded in 2006 by Lizelle Bisschoff as a solution to the marginalisation and under-representation of African films in the UK. Between 2006 and 2015 AiM screened over 5,000 films to a combined audience of 30,000 people in the UK.[1] Since 2006 AiM has been organised and managed by Stop and Stir Arts Ltd, a small Edinburgh-based not-for-profit company created by Bisschoff to oversee the first festival. The company grew out of her passion for and interest in African film and a strong desire to make marginalised and under-represented art more widely available to Scottish audiences. AiM gained charitable status in 2012 and is governed by a formally appointed Board of Trustees.

In order to assess the achievements of AiM in the past ten years one has to understand its close connection to the liberation theory of the Pan-African psychiatrist and revolutionary thinker Frantz Fanon (1925-1961). This review begins with Bisschoff's choice of the name *Africa in Motion*, a tribute to Fanon's theory. The second part offers a case study on the way AiM tried to bring North and Sub-Saharan Africa together as one of the Fanonian ideals for postcolonial African integration. This part also covers the special 2008 programme that provided AiM's audiences with the possibilities of questioning ingrained colonial stereotypes of African minorities, such as the Koisans of Southern Africa. The review also provides summaries of the 2006-2014 festival editions. In conclusion I will look at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition in 2015 that took place between 23 October and 1 November 2015.

## Fanon Dies, Fanon Lives

Marijke de Valck observes that ‘festival programming was put in the service not only of the advancement of cinema as an art but also of cinema as a political tool’.[2] This is certainly the case for AiM. Explaining the choice of the name *Africa in Motion* during an interview with me, Bisschoff narrated how in 2005 she attended an African studies conference in Cambridge where she first heard the Fanonian context of an Africa in motion and decided to use it as her festival brand. Fanon was born on 20 July 1925 in Martinique, one of the former French colonies in the Caribbean. He fought for France during the Second World War. After the war he moved to Algeria to practise psychiatry. His exposure to the crude realities of life under French colonial rule and the resistance of the Algerians to European cultural, political, and economic subjugation inspired him to join the Algerian independence movement, where he served as spokesperson, ambassador and thinker for the anti-colonial struggle.

Fanon died on 6 December 1961 in Maryland (USA). His revolutionary idea of an Africa in motion is that of a dynamic and vibrant continent cooperating with sincere partners in its organisation of postcolonial cultural renaissance.[3] For a better understanding of the Fanonian perspective and its relevance to the programming politics of AiM I would like to explain how film studies identify the geopolitical context and forms of cinema from the so-called Third World countries located on the Southern Hemisphere. Third Cinema is an ideological movement of the 1960s and 1970s that encourages the use of films from Africa, Latin America, Asia and other regions as revolutionary tools against colonialism and neo-colonialism. The case of African postcolonial cinema also involves countering the colonial stereotypes by using film aesthetics and technology to re-validate African cultural identity on the screen and at festivals as theorised by Frantz Fanon:

[a] national culture is not folklore nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people’s true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people... It is around the people’s struggles that African-Negro culture takes on substance and not around songs, poems or folklore. [4]

By aligning herself with the Fanonian perspective on an Africa in motion through the annual exhibition of African cinema in Scotland, AiM founder Bisschoff has added value to the adaptation of the cultural dimensions of Fanonian revolutionary theory to the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. AiM has

proven to be revolutionary with the way it has presented African cinema and culture in Scotland between 2006 and 2015. The programming format of the maiden edition in 2006 has been preserved for subsequent editions. The criteria for selecting films have consistently been quality, pluralism (genre, theme, country, gender balance), and covering as wide a variety of films as possible. With these criteria AiM aims to give audiences a sense of the diversity of filmmaking from across the African continent. Each of the festival's editions had film screenings, academic symposia, country specials, performance arts, and exhibitions on its schedule. There were variations that reflected the themes selected for a given year based mainly on the cinematic and political developments on the African continent.

From 2007 onwards master classes with invited African filmmakers became part of the programmes; screening tours across Scotland and the UK have been integrated into the schedules since 2008; competitions were included as of 2009. AiM also celebrates the political anniversaries of Africa. For instance, when 17 African countries celebrated 50 years of independence from colonialism in 2010 it was reflected in the AiM programme of that year. In 2012 AiM grew beyond Edinburgh by making Glasgow the second host city for the festival. The popular uprising or Arab Spring in North Africa was highlighted in the 2012 edition, mainly with documentaries from Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. From 2013 the University of Stirling became its third venue for film screenings and master classes. This move brought AiM to audiences in Central Scotland. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of apartheid in South Africa was covered in the 2014 edition of AiM with film screenings, music, symposia, exhibitions, master classes, and tours across the UK.

## **Bringing North and Sub-Saharan Africa together**

The geo-political division of Africa between North and South resonates in African film cultures. Film scholar Frank Nwachukwu Ukadike distinguishes two historical circumstances that fed the division:

[f]irst, Europeans were not interested in sharing film technological know-how with black Africans; second, Arabs in North Africa, who were privileged to learn from European technologists and from their Muslim 'brothers' north of the Mediterranean, did not cooperate with other African neighbours outside the Maghreb, nor did they advocate a renaissance of technological and industrial revolution reminis-

cent of the Euro-American initiative. Although northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa are geographically mapped as belonging to the same continent of Africa, its people are distinct – the Arab-inclined North Africans and the blacks of sub-Saharan Africa. [5]

However, in 1973 postcolonial African filmmakers tried to challenge this division when the two leading African film festivals – Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) and Carthage Film Festival – agreed to cooperate and alternate their events. The North and Sub-Saharan parts of Africa have a long history of cultural and commercial integrations. The Trans-Saharan trade routes across the pre-colonial empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai facilitated trade between Black Africans and Arabs. Remnants of those routes provide orientation for contemporary African migrants travelling to Europe through the Saharan desert towards North African shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

The people of North and Sub-Saharan Africa also share a common experience of colonialism; they inspired one another in their struggle to free themselves from colonial rule. In his book *Pour la révolution*, Fanon noted that the Algerian people knew that the peoples of Africa south of the Sahara were watching the struggle against French colonialism with sympathy and enthusiasm. The Algerian people were quite aware of the fact that every blow struck against French oppression in Algeria dismantled the colonialist power.[6] AiM has shown its ability to promote more integration between North and Sub-Saharan Africa through the celebration of the cinematic diversities and commonalities of Blacks and Arabs from the continent. Audiences in Glasgow and Edinburgh were provided with the standard programming mix of film screenings and discussions on the events from North Africa. The subject of modern African identities beyond the North and South divide, the diaspora, languages, mixed-race, and sexuality was explored and debated during the 2012 edition.

### **A voice for the African minorities: The Koisan of Southern Africa**

The precarious state of the indigenous Koisan natives of Africa demonstrates the devastating impact of colonialism on the native African way of life. Ukadike observes that films like:

*The Gods Must be Crazy* (1984) by Jamie Uys gave large audiences from around the world the unprecedented enjoyment by ridiculing Africans. The film portrays them as incompetents who are unable to take their destiny in their own hands. But it is the Broederbond (white Afrikaner mafia, and authors of apartheid doctrine) that is denying the world the truth about the displaced Koisian people (Bushmen) whose tragedy Uys turned into comedy. [7]

AiM took a unique step in challenging the stereotypes propagated in *The Gods Must be Crazy* in its 2008 edition. Through the screenings of *Legends of the Bushmen* (2006) and *Bushman's Secret* (2007) by Rehad Desai and the panel discussions on the Voices of the Bushmen, AiM created an innovative awareness tool against the ingrained stereotypical presentations of the colonised African minorities. This special programming on the Bushmen (Koisian) gave audiences and critics the possibility of a critical viewing of Jamie Uys' 1984 film.

His cinematic caricature of the indigenous Africans can be traced to the legacies of colonialism that presented Africans in a racially de-humanised context meant to valorise imperial superiority over the conquered subjects. The exhibition of film during the colonial era had a paternalistic civilising mission. The stereotypes were literally canonised by the British Commission on Education and Culture report 'The Film in National Life' (1932), calling for the production of documentary films in great mass of local and traditional practices and conventions which made up the daily life of the primitive, barbaric people and to preserve them for future record. The needs of the backward races within the Empire were more difficult to satisfy. Such races could gain more and suffer more from the films than the sophisticated European; the conception of white civilisation which they were receiving from third-rate melodramas was seen as an international menace.[8] There followed the expansion of American films into the colonies that exposed characters like Charlie Chaplin to the natives. Chaplin's comical performance did not fit into the colonial doctrine of the sophisticated European and the Christianisation agenda of the missionaries. The colonialist Bantu Educational Kinemantic Experiment (BEKE) and the Colonial Film Units had the instructional mission of engraving the superiority of the British way of life and consumerism on the African psyche. The ingrained stereotypes and loss of agency had a dramatic impact on the narrative texts of African films like *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1984), which were being screened to suit the gaze and taste of the Western audience. With the 2008 programme AiM has demonstrated its political will to not just counter

the under-representation of African cinema in the UK but also question the presentation of Africans in Western films that certain film festival programmers would select as emblematic representations of the entire African continent. This concern was raised by Mahen Bonetti, founder of the New York African Film Festival. In her chapter on programming African cinema at the New York African Film Festival she says there is often a tendency for festival programmers to fall into the trap of perceiving certain films as emblematic of what they consider to be African cinema – in other words, of essentialising the continent and presenting what is predictable or even stereotypical.[9]

### **AiM's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary**

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary had an innovative programming format with three strands. The first strand 'From Africa, with love' was dedicated to the themes of passion, desire, love, and sensuality in Africa. The opening night featured the classic film *Hyènes* (1992) by Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambéty. Screened on 23 October 2015, the film comments on the post-colonial impacts of materialism on the African psyche. The second strand was on the 'Nigerian-Scottish Film Odyssey' that highlighted one of the phenomenal developments in African filmmaking in the digital era. The success of the home video phenomenon across the African continent and African Diaspora communities abroad is a potent example of the willingness of Africans to cooperate beyond their colonial legacies through the informal popular digital cinema culture. In crossing over to televisions the AiM TV Lounge presented African TV shows for festival audiences. The histories of slavery, colonialism, and contemporary challenges of Africa were presented through the third strand 'Unprepared Past'.

In conclusion, AiM has within its first ten years of existence achieved its primary objective of addressing the under-representation of African films in the UK. In its desire to gain a Pan-African cultural solidarity appeal AiM adopted a broad approach of presenting a variety of African films by Africans or persons of African descent to its audiences. Notwithstanding this approach the festival's method of selecting films is open to the general criticism of applying a paternalistic programming model that reflects the neo-colonialist structures of the contentious Anglophone, Franchophone, Lusophone, and Arabophone linguistic blocks and politics seen as obstacles to

African regional integration. AiM might counter this criticism by initiating an annual competition for films made in indigenous African languages. Such films would be appealing to the increasingly diverse audiences of persons of African descent – particularly in the diaspora – who are longing for authentic cultural inspiration from the ‘home’ continent. This linguistic contest, in its programming politics, will further enhance the status of AiM as a formidable voice for African cinema outside the continent.

Prince Bubacarr Aminata Sankanu (University of Stirling)

## References

- Bonetti, M. 'Programming African Cinema at the New Work African Film Festival' in *Coming soon to a festival near you: Programming film festivals*, edited by J. Ruoff. St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Books, 2012: 189-200.
- Fanon, F. *The wretched of the earth*, translated by C. Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1968.
- . *Toward the African revolution*, translated by H. Chevalier. New York: Grove Press, 1970.
- Iordanova, D. and Rhyne, R (eds). *Film festival yearbook 1: The festival circuit*. St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2009.
- Murphy, D. 'Lost and Found: Screening the "Lost Classics of African Cinema at the Africa in Motion Film Festival"' in *Film festival yearbook 5: Archival film festivals*, edited by A. Marlow-Mann. St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Books, 2013: 177-188.
- Notcutt, L. and Lantham, G. *The African and the cinema: An account of the work of the Bantu educational cinema experiment during the period March 1935 to May 1937*. London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1937.
- Sankanu, P. *The politics of programming African festivals outside Africa: The Africa in Motion film festival*, unpublished MLitt Thesis. Stirling: University of Stirling, Master of Letters in Film Studies, 2015.
- Ukadike, F. *Black African cinema*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- . 'Video booms and the manifestations of "first" cinema in Anglophone Africa' in *Rethinking third cinema*, edited by A. Guneratne and W. Dissanayake. New York-London: Routledge, 2003: 126-143.
- <http://www.africa-in-motion.org.uk/2008/> (accessed on 5 June 2016)
- <http://www.africa-in-motion.org.uk> (accessed on 4 June 2016)
- <http://2012.africa-in-motion.org.uk/films-and-events/films-and-events/?eid=55> (accessed on 31 May 2016)
- <http://www.2011.africa-in-motion.org.uk/news/index.html> (accessed on 31 May 2016)

## Notes

- [1] <http://http://www.africa-in-motion.org.uk> (accessed on 31 May 2016)
- [2] de Valck 2012, p. 31.



- [3] Fanon 1970.
- [4] Fanon 1968, p. 233.
- [5] Ukadike 1994, p. 34.
- [6] Fanon 1998, p. 104.
- [7] Ukadike 1994, p. 223.
- [8] Notcutt & Latham, p. 244.
- [9] Bonetti 2012, p. 196.