

Wasafiri

Issue no 43, Winter 2004

Global Cinema

Kodwo Eshun	<i>Twilight City: The Archaeopsychic Geographies of New London</i>	7
Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu	Forgetting Anna May Wong	14
S F Said	New Cinema from the Islamic World	19
Iiona Halberstadt	Inconvenient Histories: Anand Patwardhan's <i>War and Peace</i>	23
Richard Dyer	Isaac Julien in Conversation	28
Mark Sinker	Towards a Retrieval of a Memory of a Shape of Things to Come	36
Nirmal Puwar Kuldip Powar	Kabhi Ritz, Kabhie Palladium: Asian Cinema Culture in Coventry, 1940 – 1980	41
Akin Adesokan	Loud In Lagos: Nollywood Videos	45
Milan Hulsing	Ashim Ahluwalia in Conversation Gutter Cinema in Contemporary India	50
Milan Hulsing	Pashto Horror Films in Pakistan	53

Reviews

Mark Cousins	Josef, Gugler: African Film: Re-Imagining a Continent David Murphy: Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction Peter Cowie: Revolution: The Explosion of World Cinema in the Sixties	58
Gareth Evans	Films by Michael Ondaatje, including: The Clinton Special: A Film About The Farm Show; Sons of Captain Poetry; Carry on Crime and Punishment	60
Bilge Ebiri	Turhan Feyizoglu: Yilmaz Guney: Bir Cirkin Kral (Yilmaz Guney: An Ugly King)	62
Jonathan Morley	Lynne Macedo: Fiction and Film: The Influence of Cinema on Writers From Jamaica and Trinidad	63
Dirk Naguschewski	Sada Niang: Djibril Diop Mambety: Un cinéaste à contre-courant Anny Wynchank: Djibril Diop Mambety ou le voyage du voyant	65
Florian Stadler	Vijay Mishra: Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel: Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film	67
Mita Banerjee	Jigna Desai: Beyond Bollywood	68
Satinder Chohan	Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg: Bidding for the Mainstream? Black and Asian British Film since the 1990s	69
Tony Ilona	James Procter: Dwelling Places: Postwar black British writing Sukhdev Sandhu: London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City	71
Steffen Krueger	Yinka Sunmonu: Cherish	73
Michael Niblett	Lawrence Scott: Night Calyspo David Dabydeen: Our Lady of Demerara	74
Neville Grant	Rolf Solberg: South African Theatre in the Melting Pot	75
Devon Campbell-Hall	Feroza Jussawalla: Chiffon Saris Raman Mundair: Lovers, Liars, Conjurers and Thieves	77
Among the Contributors		79

Macedo's work on 'hegemonic imagery' could also aid a reading of the eponymous fireflies, trapped in a jar so that their glow illuminates the books of a young coolie studying to be a doctor. The image is not, it is hinted, a symbol of perseverance, nor a Caribbean resetting of Plato's allegory of the cave, but a myth as alluring and grotesque as any cinematic representation of Indian misbehaviour. Thus, we are given a deeply depressing vision: the futility of hope and betterment in the context of postcolonial history. That is a challenge. More consideration of the 'star-boy' in Lovelace, Hodge and others would be interesting, as would a less hurried application of 'ecocriticism' in the concluding chapter; however these are not Macedo's flaws, but indications of the newness of her work. The paths of exploration she opens up are likely to be fruitful ones.

Dirk Naguschewski

Djibril Diop Mambety: Un cinéaste à contre-courant

Sada Niang

L'Harmattan, Paris, 2002
239pp ISBN 2 7475 2062 5
www.harmattan.fr

Djibril Diop Mambety ou le voyage du voyant

Anny Wynchank
Editions A3, Ivry-sur-Seine, 2003
140pp ISBN 2 8443 6030 0

The Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambety (1945-1998) is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding figures of African cinema. Although he has only seven films to his credit his work is considered Africa's foremost contribution to an avant-garde film aesthetics. Two recent studies by literary scholars have highlighted Diop Mambety's achievements: in 2002, Sada Niang published *Djibril Diop Mambety: Un cinéaste à contre-courant*, and one year later Anny Wynchank followed up with *Djibril Diop Mambety ou le voyage du voyant*.

Niang's study is divided into six chapters: an introductory first chapter is followed by four chapters, each of which deals with one

Anny Wynchank

DJIBRIL DIOP MAMBETY ou le voyage du voyant



of Diop Mambety's major works: *Contras' City* (1968, 17 minutes), *Badou Boy* (1970, 60 minutes), *Touki Bouki* (1973, 85 minutes), *Hyènes* (1992, 110 minutes). Another chapter discusses his last two shorts – *Le Franc* (1994, 45 minutes) and *La petite vendeuse de Soleil* (1998, 45 minutes) – and briefly mentions *Parlons, Grand-mère* (1989, 34 minutes), a documentary for which Diop Mambety assembled material during the making of Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Yaaba*. Besides, the volume contains a bibliography/filmography, although put together a little sloppily, as well as six original interviews with former colleagues of Mambety's. Wynchank's book is set out in a similar way, comprising, as extras, an epilogue, reproductions of film posters and some original photographs of Diop Mambety that were taken during a stay in Johannesburg in 1996. It is noteworthy that neither book contains film stills or pictures from the movies. This absence underscores both authors' somewhat surprising tendency to discuss Diop Mambety primarily as a storyteller, and not as a filmmaker. This stance is furthermore accentuated by both scholars' negligence towards a comprehensive filmography.

Born in Senegal, Sada Niang received his PhD at York, Canada, and now teaches in Canada at the University of Victoria. This background informs his readings of Diop Mambety's films. Reconstructing the historical context, he paints a picture of Dakar in the 1960s as a city characterised by a favourable mood towards the arts. The Senegalese capital is presented as a divided

city, the centre being dominated by French culture, the rest of the city by African lifestyles, languages and religions. According to Niang, Diop Mambety, who was born into a Muslim family, moved constantly to and fro across these 'virtual borders' ('frontières virtuelles', p 28). In 1963, Diop Mambety worked as an actor at the national theatre for a while, but in general he preferred to perform in the more popular *café-théâtres* or in Italian film productions. The insistence on the fact that he received no formal education in the art of film-making is a recurrent topos in the literature on Diop Mambety.

Anny Wynchank, who was born in Morocco, educated in France and who currently works in Cape Town, stresses Mambety's status as an autodidact even more. Her approach is typical of conventional Francophone writing on African film history: African cinema is basically reduced to Francophone West African cinema. Her focus is on the African filmmakers' struggle for self-representation, and the social realism of Sembène Ousmane's films is viewed as a simplistic model that Diop Mambety successfully set out to counter. Moreover, she spends a lot of time deploring African multilingualism and the unfavourable circumstances of film production. This makes for a rather bleak scenario allowing her to glorify Diop Mambety's role even more. From her description, the director emerges as an original African genius, but her attempts to highlight his particular 'Africanness' remain unconvincing. According to her, nine themes are characteristic of his work: money, greed, betrayal, children, the small people, Dakar and Colobane, the sea, the use of music, and the aesthetics of the oral tradition (pp 24-26). While this is one way of describing some basic motifs and strategies that are deployed in his work, her overall view of the relationship between European and African elements in his films is a trifle too simplistic: everything good is African — especially the oral tradition and anything bad is inevitably linked to the influence of European colonialism. Hence she does not mention that his decidedly avant-garde film *Touki Bouki* met with his countrymen's disapproval.

Since, in Wynchank's view, Mambety rejects dominant cinematic models, and since she herself refuses to admit that there is any European influence on his film-making, she declares that the native oral

tradition is the principal source of aesthetic inspiration for his films. Such a view hardly does justice to Mambety's highly original films that make creative use of the sound and montage techniques as championed by the Nouvelle Vague, to his frequent refusal to tell linear stories, and to the many surrealist figures that populate his films. It is hard to imagine that cinema – based on the technical apparatus and system of commercial distribution as it is at present – has really taken over the function of oral literature, as Wynchank claims (p 26). There seems to be little resemblance between the cinematic *dispositif* and a griot's performance. The way a griot interacts with his audience, makes use of his bodily presence, adapts his narratives to local conditions, and reshapes his narrative with every performance is a far cry from the stable product represented by a film. Cinema shares few aspects with oral literature and there are many features that distinguish the two. Interestingly enough, the oral tradition plays only a minor role in Niang's study. Eventually, Wynchank turns out to be yet another proponent of well-meaning Afrocentric essentialism. She does not even miss out the stereotypical remark that Mambety sees himself in the role of a griot (p 26) – a statement that any African filmmaker is bound to make in order to claim his 'Africanness'. Niang, much more to the point, views Mambety as a modernist, 'a filmmaker of Dakar's urban sub-culture' ('un cinéaste de la sous-culture urbaine dakaraise', p 96), representing a 'popular culture that rejects the archaeology of origin' ('culture populaire qui refuse l'archéologie de l'origine', p 94).

This basic difference in their approaches can be exemplified by a comparison of the respective chapters dealing with Mambety's second feature film, *Hyènes*, one of the masterpieces of African cinema. In his adaptation of a play by the Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (*The Visit*), Diop Mambety successfully manages to transpose the parable of an old woman's revenge from a Central European to a specifically Senegalese context, altering style and language, but preserving the characters and the intrigue. Wynchank attempts a comprehensive scholarly reading of the film. Taking into account the original screenplay and the press material issued at its release, she describes the 'curious genesis' of *Hyènes* ('la curieuse gènesè', p 71): Diop

Mambety had written a short story about an older prostitute; a friend noticed a number of parallels with Dürrenmatt's well-known play, and it was only then that Mambety decided to adapt this international stage success. Wynchank suggests that the original idea is all Diop Mambety's and to prove her point retraces every minor detail that had appeared in the short story and was preserved in the film, thereby downplaying the fact that Diop Mambety understood his film as a tribute to Dürrenmatt, to whom reverence is paid at the beginning *and* at the end of the movie. Although structural analogies with the play abound, Wynchank prefers to read the film as a modernised version of traditional folktales, where the hyena is a recurrent protagonist. Niang has a different perspective; he links the aesthetics of *Hyènes* to theatrical modes, graphic arts, and the chanson (p 148). Does Diop Mambety's drawing on European art forms and source texts make him less African? Certainly not.

While Wynchank argues that the film is about 'economic imperialism' ('impérialisme économique', p 89), Niang sees at work the 'grip of globalisation' ('étau de la mondialisation', p 132); both critics charge the West with being responsible for the problems of the fictitious town of Colobane. But this is not what the film shows or tells us. Ramatou Linguère, the recontextualised 'old lady', was betrayed by her lover, it was the people of her hometown that drove her away, and it is now she who is taking revenge for the wrongs inflicted upon her. While the West is ironically represented in the film by a Japanese servant and a plethora of consumer goods that the old lady heaps upon the townspeople, Ramatou Linguère is the driving force of this tragicomic farce. *Hyènes* is not about an evil Occident and innocent Africans, it is about moral decrepitude, greed and revenge – which, I would argue, is what attracted Diop Mambety to Dürrenmatt's play and why its recontextualisation works so well.

In comparison to Wynchank, the strength of Niang's reading comes from his understanding of Wolof culture and language. His interpretation of Diop Mambety's symbolic use of animal images as a form of Africanisation is very enlightening. From a philological point of view, his reading of the film appears much sounder because he understands its original language (although the passage on

'relexification' remains obscure). When Wynchank refers to the screenplay, she leaves unexplained why her quotations are all in French even though the film was made in Wolof.

Niang sees *Hyènes* as 'une œuvre d'anthropologie politique'. Although he cannot deny its Swiss origins, he, too, ultimately feels the need to downplay them. Unfortunately, his rendering of the film's contents is full of inaccuracies. There is a factual error to begin with. It does not make much sense to refer to an English translation of *Der Besuch der alten Dame* because the play was not originally staged in New York, as Niang claims, nor is there any reason to believe that Diop Mambety ever used one, a French translation having been available since 1956. Furthermore, it is never quite clear whether Niang is referring to actual images or fragments from the film's dialogue or whether he is just reconstructing a narrative that he believes the film to be telling. Even if you are familiar with the film it is not always easy to link up his interpretation with actual sequences. For the literary scholar a quotation requires a reference with a page number; so why do Niang and Wynchank assume that they can do without clear references when discussing film? Neither of them develops a convincing system for referencing film sequences, nor do they turn to strategies used in the study of visual culture.

Perhaps the least satisfying of these books' characteristics is that both authors tend to treat their material as though they were dealing with literary texts and not with films, which are, after all, visual works. It is a welcome development that African cinema receives more and more attention from academic criticism. Other filmmakers such as Idrissa Ouedraogo, Souleymane Cissé or Abderrahmane Sissako certainly deserve full-length monographs too, but it would be even more rewarding if African filmmakers were actually treated as *filmmakers* and not as writers or as folkloristic representatives of oral literature.