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Edited by the House of World Cultures
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Migrating Images

producing ... reading ... transporting ... translating

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Preface

The conference 'Migrating Images' was inspired by the preceding conference 'Frames of Viewing', organized by the Getty Research Center and the House of World Cultures in May 2002, focussing on questions of perception, experience and judgement as practices framing what we might conceive as art today. It looked at different cultural and social practices and institutions as frames, including biological and biophysiological frames. The conference dealt with methodological questions of art history taking into account a wider notion of the image and of imagery.

With a focus on transcultural exchange, the House of World Cultures is interested in cultural practices and transcultural travels and therefore was dedicated to further discuss these issues, especially including non-European theoreticians with regard to non-Western image production, reading and translation.

This publication gathers the contributions of the conference 'Migrating Images', focussing on the issues of the transformations of images in their global migratory travels and what this means for the production, the reading and translation of images. For the House of World Cultures this field remains of crucial importance in that contemporary artistic expressions from 'non-European' artists living and working in a globalized world are presented.

I would like to thank all contributors to the conference for their inspiring contributions, their enthusiasm and for the fruitful discussions, some of which may lead to future projects in the House of World Cultures. I would like to thank Lydia Haustein for her advisory role in this project. Special thanks also to Sabine Flach and Sigrid Weigel of the Zentrum für Literaturforschung for a fruitful cooperation. Special thanks to Petra Stegmann and Peter C. Seel for conceptualizing, structuring and organizing this conference.

Hans-Georg Knopp,
Director

Dirk Naguschewski

Reading Foreign Films: African Images and the German Audience

In December 2002, 'Cinema Africa', an African film festival held at the House of World Cultures, opened with *Sia—ou le rêve du python*.¹ Dani Kouyaté's film tells the story of Sia, a young woman, who is designated to be sacrificed for the benefit of her people, but who resists the ruler's directive. With the help of her fiancé and Kerfa, the fool, Sia is able to escape death and thereby questions the power structures of the state. But when her fiancé eventually replaces the ruler and then attempts to cover up the previous events, namely that Sia was raped by a group of priests, she resists once again. Rather than uphold a network of lies, she falls into silence.

Kouyaté's film is based on a play by Moussa Diagana,² which is in turn based on the widely known West African legend of Wagadu. *Sia* has something static about it, as if he had directed his actors to perform on a theatre stage. Kouyaté prefers full or medium long shots, which allow him to show the characters embedded in their environment. He is less interested in the myth of origin which is the traditional focus of the legend. Instead, he directs his attention to Sia's inner conflicts as she crosses various social spaces and learns to differentiate between individual happiness and service to the community.

The elaborately designed costumes do not permit us to situate the story either regionally or historically. What the costumes do seem to indicate, however, is a vague impression of pre-colonial Africa, as does the Bambara language spoken by the characters. All the same, Kouyaté's new vision of the ancient legend contains anachronistic elements pointing to forms of European influence. The main narrative is introduced by an opening scene in which a group of priests explicitly quote Jean Cocteau: 'It is the privilege of the legend to be timeless.'³ And in the closing scene, Fatoumata Diawara, the actress playing Sia, stalks the rainy streets of a contemporary African metropolis, dressed in the rags of a madwoman and crying

out a warning with biblical overtones addressed at any contemporary African dictator: 'Galère! Galère! Qui sème la galère, récolte la misère.' ('Gallows! Gallows! Who sows gallows, will reap misery.')

It is often the closing scene that determines a film's interpretation. During the discussion with the director following the film's screening, a German woman in the audience asked Kouyaté why he let Sia go mad in the end; she understood Sia to be a strong woman, yet the ending seemed to invalidate Sia's emancipation. Kouyaté replied that he saw Sia's entry into madness as a positive sign. For one thing, he did not take rain to signify 'bad weather', but rather 'fertility'. But even more important, within the film's internal logic, madness can be viewed as a prerequisite for articulating truth. Sia thus takes on an elevated position parallel to Kerfa, the fool, who is the only one allowed to speak the truth to the ruler without being punished.⁴

This confrontation of two very different readings⁵ of the same sequence of images—one by the African director, the other by a German spectator—came to my mind when I first began to think about what is happening when images migrate. It seemed obvious to me that 'migrating images' and our attempt to come to terms with images that do not originate within a context familiar to us, inevitably seem to carry an element of misunderstanding. Motion pictures that are created to convey meaning—no matter whether they are created for educational purposes or for entertainment—have a context that leaves more or less visible traces within the film's images. If a foreign spectator wants to understand their meaning, there needs to be some sort of double understanding: a general understanding of the diegetic world depicted in the film (which may or may not be presented in a realistic mode) seems necessary to follow up on the narration itself, its spatial and social configuration. But beyond this, it is important to understand the context outside the film's narrative, the context, in which the whole production is situated,⁶ in order to grasp the meaning of the film as a social practice. To understand why Sia goes mad, is one thing. Why this would matter to the makers of the film, is another. And what the spectator, bringing in his or her own subjectivity into this cross-cultural communication, will finally make of it all, is yet another matter.

In the following, I would like to discuss the issue of reading foreign films, focussing especially on the situation that arises when African films are viewed by German audiences. This particular constellation here serves as a random example of cross-cultural communication,⁷ characterized by what appears to be a great cul-

tural distance between the two poles involved (Africa/Germany). I would like to begin with a few general remarks on the context in which African pictures are perceived in Germany. I will then proceed to put forth some thoughts on the universality of the 'language' of African cinema (or its aesthetics) and its readability. Most of the issues concerning African cinema that I comment on, have been raised elsewhere, but to my knowledge very little has been said about the reception of African films in Germany.⁸ In any case, I hope my remarks will shed some more light on the problems that migrating images encounter.

Images of Africa

In Germany, Africa remains the 'dark continent' as Joseph Conrad imagined it in *Heart of Darkness*, dangerous and potentially meaningless; a continent 'without a history', as Hegel called it, or, worse yet, a continent without a future. Media interest is stimulated mostly when spectacular catastrophes occur. The German imaginary of Africa is filled with what is perceived as realistic images of starving babies, child soldiers and HIV-infected youths—images that seem easy to understand in their illustration of misery, but whose foremost function is to confirm preconceived notions about the continent. In a way this also holds true for African literatures: while German readers turned a critical account of female circumcision such as Waris Dirie's *Desert Flower*⁹ into a bestseller, there is little interest in contemporary African writing. When the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe won the 'Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels' (Peace Prize of the German Book Trade) in 2002, it was all too obvious from the way in which the news was reported by major German newspapers, that most journalists possessed little prior knowledge of African literatures or Achebe in particular.

Other images of Africa that are not quite as negative serve at best as a background for romanticized, light-entertainment novels and films, in which unfathomably spectacular landscapes provide the setting for White characters in search of themselves. Caroline Link's film *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (*Nowhere in Africa*), winner of the 2002 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, is a case in point.¹⁰ The cover of a paperback edition of the book, an autobiographical novel by Stefanie Zweig that the film is based on, shows a lonely baobab set before sundown connoting an untouched, unpopulated landscape. Almost identical images appear on a number of popular paperbacks that tell stories of White (wo)men's adventures in Africa, such as Ilona Maria Hilliges, *Die weiße Hexe. Meine Abenteuer in Afrika* (*The*

White Witch. My adventures in Africa)¹¹, or Claude Njiké-Bergeret, *Schwarze Weisheit. Als Europäerin in einem afrikanischen Dorf* (*Black Wisdom. A European Woman in an African Village*).¹² If African people appear at all on the covers of such books, they are shown in traditional costume, as on the cover of Corinne Hofmann, *Die weiße Massai* (*The White Massai*)—as if modernity had never taken place in Africa.

It seems as if there is hardly any place for images of a different Africa: a modernized or globalized Africa; an Africa that is predominantly, but not exclusively black; an Africa that shapes its own history and stories. It seems as if these perpetually reproduced clichés—starving babies on one side, knobby trees in the sunset on the other—have obstructed the view of more complex representations from Africa itself. There is, however, ample opportunity—even in Germany—to learn about the other Africa including its creative output: contemporary African books can be ordered in every bookstore. Individual and group exhibitions present the work of African artists,¹³ and major exhibitions have addressed wider sets of issues.¹⁴ But apparently, these images do not always reach a wider audience; only those who already feel concerned will take note of them. The popular perception of Africa remains shaped by sensationalism, exoticism, or lack of interest.

It is barely surprising then, that African cinema does not have a high standing in Germany. Of course, festivals such as 'Cinema Africa' in Berlin or 'Africa Alive' in Frankfurt try to popularise African films, but only few of them find regular distribution, and if they do, then with only a very small number of copies and a minimum run in theatres, usually restricted to art cinemas. In general it proves much easier to catch an African movie on TV: especially the German-French cultural television programme Arte and Tv5, a promoter of *Francophonie* which is available via cable or satellite world-wide, regularly highlight African cinema. On Arte, films are usually subtitled in German. While up to the late Eighties, films such as Sembene Ousmane's *Camp de Thiaroye* (1987) were still dubbed in German, this practice has all but disappeared. Films on Tv5 are only subtitled in French, remaining basically inaccessible to non-francophone German audiences.

Apart from the language issue and monopolistic structures in the movie business that favour conventional movies with guaranteed mass appeal, there are a number of reasons routinely put forward as to why African films do not reach wider audiences: firstly, a lack of interest in Africa, secondly, a lack of understanding of African stories and images, and thirdly, a lesser quality due to smaller budgets and a lack of professionalism in the industry.

Starting with the last point: there is a tendency to present the lack of technical quality (when it occurs) as evidence of a specifically African aesthetic. This type of excuse does a considerable disservice to African cinema. Due to small budgets and an insufficiently developed film industry Africans involved in filmmaking tend to be less experienced and sometimes do produce lower quality at a purely technical level. Dani Kouyaté openly admitted this problem during the above-mentioned debate at the House of World Cultures.

Moreover, I do not wish to join in the outcry about a general lack of attention to Africa. Interest is surely minimal, but other regions of the world also fail to capture the attention of a wider public in Germany.

Instead, I would like to address the readability of African films and their presumed 'foreignness'. Due to Germany's rather short colonial history on the African continent, not nearly as many African immigrants live in this country today as in France or in the UK, where there are large communities visualizing their respective country's bonds with the African continent. Furthermore, Africa has always been of little economic and political importance to Germany. Therefore, factual knowledge of Africa certainly is very scarce, knowledge of Africa's creative output, its conceptions of beauty and aesthetics almost nonexistent.

Now, what about the conditions of the films' 'understandability'? At exhibitions, for example, catalogues and accompanying texts give visitors important background information to the material on display. German publishers of African literature make texts accessible not only by translating them, but also by including scholarly introductions, footnotes, glossaries, and afterwords. Cinema, in general, lacks these means. For the uninitiated spectator who has no further knowledge of an African film's context, its aesthetics and its complex semiotics, the various levels of meaning are difficult to grasp. Successful cross-cultural communication, resulting in a richer understanding, seems more than unlikely. But when it is a film, that is being communicated, we are not dealing exclusively with the passing on of information; Nicholas Mirzoeff has claimed that visual culture is characterized not only by 'information' and 'meaning', but also by 'pleasure'.¹⁵ And even the *mis*-understanding of a film—or to be less severe, a different understanding of a film—can give pleasure to the spectator. So even if pleasure may initially be sparked by a taste for exoticism, I would nevertheless argue that this could eventually lead to a more serious attempt at understanding.

African Cinema?

A list of African films that were given a commercial run in German theatres in the years 2000-2003 displays a remarkable variety both of themes and countries of origin:¹⁶

L'Autre (1999) – Der andere

Dir.: Youssef Chahine (Egypt), Prod.: Egypt, France

El Medina (1999)

Dir.: Yousri Nasrallah (Egypt), Prod.: France, Egypt

Fragments de vie (1999) – Fragmente des Lebens

Dir.: François Woukoache (Cameroon), Prod.: Belgium, Cameroon

Vacances au pays (2000) – Ferien in der Heimat

Dir.: Jean-Marie Teno (Cameroon), Prod.: Cameroon, Germany

La Saison des hommes (2000) – Die Zeit der Männer/Zeit der Männer, Zeit der Frauen

Dir.: Moufida Tlatli (Tunisia), Prod.: Tunisia, France

Ali Zaoua (2000)

Dir.: Nabil Ayouch (France), Prod.: France, Morocco, Belgium

Dôlè (2000) – Dôlè – Das Lottospiel

Dir.: Imunga Ivanga (Gabon), Prod.: France, Gabon

I.T. – Immatriculation Temporaire (2001) – Befristeter Aufenthalt

Dir.: Gahité Fofana (France), Prod.: Guinea, France

Little Senegal (2001)

Dir.: Rachid Bouchareb (France), Prod.: France, Germany, Algeria

Mr. Bones (2001)

Dir.: Gray Hofmeyr (South Africa), Prod.: South Africa

Malunde (2001)

Dir.: Stefanie Sycholt (South Africa), Prod.: South Africa, Germany

Le prix du pardon (2001)

Dir.: Mansour Sora Wade (Senegal), Prod.: Senegal, France

En attendant le bonheur (2001) – Reise ins Glück

Dir.: Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauretania), Prod.: France

Satin Rouge (2002) – Roter Satin

Dir.: Raja Amari (Tunisia), Prod.: Tunisia, France

Amongst other things, this overview may help to illustrate the problematic issue of what is to be considered as 'African Cinema'. My choice was based on geographical criteria (a very weak criterion, I admit): an African film would be a film produced at least in part by a production company working somewhere on the continent. If one were to draw a dividing line between African and Arab cinema, as for instance Armes and Malkmus do,¹⁷ films such as *El Medina* or even *Little Senegal* would not fall into the category 'African Film' at all. Similarly, academic criticism often refuses to take into account films from South Africa, especially those by white directors; thus films like *Mr. Bones* and *Malunde* would also have to be excluded.¹⁸

One might also argue that the director must be born in Africa; this would exclude the films by Nabil Ayouch or Gahité Fofana who were both born and raised in France. On the other hand, a film such as Raoul Peck's *Lumumba*, which takes up a central mythic figure of modern African history, does not appear on this list because the director is from Haiti and the film was produced by France, Belgium, Haiti and Germany. *En attendant le bonheur* (2002), the last African film that made it into German cinemas, was made by the Mauritanian-born director Adberahmane Sissako, but it was exclusively produced in France. This didn't prevent it from winning the main prize at this year's FESPACO (Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou) in Burkina Faso. Given their context of production, it seems as if there is a certain inherent transculturality at work within films from Africa. But for all the apparent fuzziness that characterizes the concept of 'African Cinema', the term does denote a discursive field of its own, with institutions like the FESPACO, which play an important part in defining the cultural role of African cinema. Furthermore, the vast majority of those involved in the making of African films identify with the notion of African cinema. This is why, on heuristic grounds, I would like to hold on to this category and put it at the centre of a discussion of what I have called cross-cultural communication. Because within this frame of thought, African films are read and understood as representing a foreign culture regardless of their actual history of production.

I claimed at the beginning, that a double knowledge of context is necessary in order to come to a richer understanding of a film. Now, while I would claim, that the more knowledge one has about the film-specific context, the richer the understanding will be, I would also assert that any film-literate person is in principle in a position to ascribe meaning to a given film and has a right to do so. I insist on

this point because there are still staunch Afro-centric positions circulating in African studies presuming that African culture will inevitably remain inaccessible to non-Africans. Cross-cultural communication would then inevitably be doomed to failure. One proponent of this fundamentalist view is Nixon K. Kariithi, a South African expert on economic journalism. In his text 'Misreading Culture and Tradition: Western Critical Appreciation of African Films', he criticizes the American reception of the film *Yeelen*.¹⁹ This film by Souleymane Cissé won the Special Jury Prize in Cannes in 1987, and it subsequently ran not only in France but also in Germany and the US. It was a success both with the critics and with audiences. Kariithi reviews this act of cross-cultural communication rather pessimistically:

Yeelen was a product of indepth studies on myth and traditions of the Bambara people, and the narrative was a symbolic representation of the ongoing struggle against repression in many African societies. Cissé's extensive use of symbolism is itself a manifestation of the way African culture was replete with codified messages. The review of the Western reception had shown vividly that the critics not only misunderstood Cissé's text but also went on to make deductions using Western-based theories which were inappropriate in the African context. [...] This absurd textual misreading notwithstanding, the critics go on to shower accolades on the film as 'Africa's best film' and 'a masterpiece'.²⁰

Kariithi's critique is, of course, partly warranted: in their evaluation critics often exclusively rely on theories that originate in their own context. But unless they show downright disrespect for the context in which the film was made, I would not mind all that much.²¹ And certainly, not all critics are so single-minded as they are presented here. On the other side, Kariithi maintains a fundamentalism that sets up a strict opposition between 'African culture' and 'Western reception'. This is based on the assumption that in relation to Euro-America (the West), Africa is the radical Other and thus particularly hard to understand. Although I acknowledge the basic legitimacy of this discursive strategy drawn from identity politics, a discursive strategy claiming not only one's own right to self-representation, but also to self-interpretation, I am critical of the consequences this stance has for larger issues of cross-cultural communication. It is, of course, perfectly plausible to argue that a fundamental foreignness is inherent to language as such and that understanding is therefore never complete.²² This line of thinking is not only rel-

evant for linguistic matters but needs to be taken into consideration for all kinds of communication. Taking this stance, of course, one would also have to question the possibility of understanding 'ones own culture' and any act of communication would have to be looked at as 'cross-cultural'.

I consider 'visual culture'—especially when it comes to film—to consist of a multiplicity of symbolizing strategies and conventions of perception which may originate in different contexts but which may be learned, appropriated and combined. Film itself is always both a hybrid and a collective experience, as such it is already a product of cross-cultural communication. For one, there is the large number of people involved in all stages of a motion picture's production, then there are the individual viewpoints they bring with them, all of which in some way contribute to shaping the film—whether intended or not. Finally, there is the film's reception by different audiences all over the world. Hence, neither in terms of production nor in terms of reception should a film be short-circuited with any idea of authenticity or truth.

Instead, I would argue that the culture of the Bambara (and according to Kariithi *Yeelen* is about the Bambara) can be equally *foreign* to central African pygmies or to a Zulu raised in Johannesburg as it is to American, Japanese or German spectators or critics. Or perhaps: equally *familiar*. Kariithi's insistence on an essentialist concept of 'African culture' banishes the idea of understanding the Other to the realm of the impossible. Moreover, Kariithi's approach underestimates the productive forces of misunderstanding. We can invest this film with meaning, even without any prior knowledge of the Bambara: we can, for instance, reflect on family conflicts, and we need not even rely on psychoanalytical concepts. Furthermore, once a film (and the context it depicts) is viewed with interest and curiosity, this may ultimately lead to a richer understanding. Cross-cultural communication can never do without misunderstandings, they are imperative in a search for mutual understanding.

Negotiating (mis)understandings

To illustrate my point, I want to cast a glance at two German reviews of an African film that were published in the internet. They both address a film taken from the list above, that would seem the least likely to be discussed within the academic discourse about African cinema, given that it is a comedy directed by a White South African: *Mr. Bones*.

The film was directed by Gray Hofmeyr and sold more than 1.5 million tickets in South Africa. In Germany it proved to be a flop with both the critics and the audiences. Decisive for the film's success in South Africa was the contextual grounding of the film, which was apparently missed by most German spectators.²³ In the film, a White Tarzan-like figure named Bones promises the king of a Black people living in pre-modern conditions (there are no televisions, for example) that he will return his lost son to him. The son is believed to be a Black American golfer (modeled on Tiger Woods) playing at a tournament in Sun City, a luxurious South African resort. The context of this romantic action comedy is post-Apartheid, post-Mandela South Africa, a 'together-nation', as the producer Anant Singh refers to his country on the DVD, and a nation still trying to give shape to its togetherness.²⁴

For the sake of clarity it is worth comparing two different reactions here. The review in the *Stuttgarter Zeitung online* focuses on the film's humour:

A crass comedy: 'Mr. Bones'. The rhinoceros from within.

'Whoever won't listen has shit in his face,' says the white Kukuvi medicine man (Leon Schuster), who, in this comedy made in South Africa and very popular with home audiences, is sent out to find the lost son of a native chief. Or, more precisely, he is sent out on a mission to devote himself to the preservation of fecal jokes. Here an arm is entered all the way into the rump of an elephant, there a head is stuck up the butt of a rhinoceros, and then a big, fat Black guy falls into deep sh... Well, boys over the age of three may be able to laugh at this. Boys over four, probably not. Rko²⁵

While this short review only makes reference to the film's humour and its visualization of excrement, completely ignoring the social context and therefore finding little interest in the film, the critic of the magazine *Anders Sehen* at 3Sat tries to substantiate his reading of the film with a consideration of its context:

[...] The South African comedy 'Mr. Bones' is motivated by the contrast between the world of the bushmen and the modern world, a confrontation of cultures that occurs when the medicine man of the Kawukis comes to 'Sun-City', the Las Vegas of Africa mostly frequented by Whites. Leon Schuster plays the medicine man. At the moment, Schuster is Africa's most popular actor and—although he actually looks like a Boer—he is the blackest White in South Africa. Schuster makes fun of everybody, without exception. And South African moviegoers

couldn't be more amused than by the babbling white bushman 'Mr. Bones', who mumbles incantations in a Black African fantasy language. The film was a blockbuster hit even more than 'Star Wars' or 'Lord of the Rings'. The producer is Anant Singh, who is Indian and one of the most successful producers in the country.

South Africa today is a mix of cultures living next to and with one another. Traditional lifestyles and modernity overlap and complement each other, uncountable languages exist. Sometimes this diversity is difficult, sometimes easier, and sometimes simply funny, as it is in 'Mr. Bones'.

But the film also tells us about the social injustices that still exist in South Africa ten years after the end of Apartheid. Sun City, the resort where the medicine man looks for the king's son, is a 'place for Whites'. The segregation of Apartheid law has been largely replaced by economic inequality. The composure with which a South African audience can look at these images of their reality is astounding. Humour is an African virtue. The film, however, also promotes a new African self-awareness. A coloured American golf pro is mistaken for the king's lost son and kidnapped. He is taken to the bush where he can and must learn a lot from the Africans.²⁶

Apartheid, indeed, still looms in the background: an interesting point in the movie is the blurring of the categories 'White' and 'Black'. Not only do we see a White medicineman of a Black people, as well as a Black superstar in a White business, both of them as clumsy as they are well-meaning. The film also puts a lot of emphasis on the colours: as if to illustrate the rainbow nation, the costumes are extremely colourful, Sun City with its smell of plastic also shines brightly. With regard to skin colour, naturally a sensitive issue, it is interesting to see how Black actors were apparently cast according to their skin's degree of blackness, signifying more or less 'Africanness'. The function of the skin colour is partly reinforced by language: while the Kuvuki speak a mix of fantasy language and English, the golf player speaks American English while some White characters have an Afrikaaner accent—subtleties that get lost in the German dubbing. But all these differences are set aside by the fact that everyone enjoys golfing, even the Kuvuki who have a different name for an ancient predecessor of this game.

The second critic's consideration of the context allows for a more comprehensive reading of the film and an appreciation completely absent in the first review.

It is, of course, noteworthy, how he confuses what is shown in this movie with reality: while he would surely not believe the Mr. Bones-character to be a 'real' person, surprisingly, he takes Kuvukiland, which is a pure fantasy of a primitive Africa, to be a real place.²⁷ I suppose this kind of mis-reading—and it is indeed a mis-reading: It is simply not correct to assume that a place like Kuvukiland represents the 'world of the bushmen'—has a lot to do with a tendency among German spectators of viewing movies from Africa (especially whenever they depict Black people) in an ethnographic mode.

One thing should be clear: not only is Africa itself already a construction, but even more, any African who is in a position to make a film has already become familiar with many ways of cinematic seeing. Schooling, the technology, the commercial side of making films, all this means that an African film is not a film that represents any 'authentic' Africa or a primeval African way of seeing. In an interview with a journalist from *Le Figaro*, Dani Kouyaté talks about how his father, the renowned actor Sotigui Kouyaté, taught him to identify the flora and fauna of his country even as he was learning the traditional cultural canon at school; he calls this a 'double enseignement'.²⁸ It is presumably this double education, which is also a two-fold school of seeing, that may cause the images shown to German audiences by African filmmakers to be felt as foreign, without, however, making them completely unreadable.

Kouyaté's experience can be understood in relation to a statement by Manthia Diawara, a film scholar born in Mali, working in the US, who is one of the foremost specialists in the field of African cinema. At a 1995 conference on 'Africa and the Cinematic Ideas', he refuted the idea of an authentic African film language, arguing for a universal readability of film instead:

I do not believe that there is such a thing as an authentic African film language, whether it is defined in terms of commonalities arising from liberation struggles against colonialism and imperialism, or identity politics, of Afrocentricity. I believe that there are variations, and even contradictions, among film languages and ideologies, which are attributable to the prevailing political cultures in each region, the differences in the modes of production and distribution, and the particularities of regional cultures. [...] I also reject aesthetic specificities based on the parameters of the nation-state.²⁹

According to Diawara then, film language cannot be taken as reflecting a continent or some national, racial or ethnic identity, but instead should be viewed as a code which is as much individual as it is universal. Preferring a view that favours the idiomatic, one would assume that in every film there is something that can be understood by a foreign audience even though that understanding might not reach very far. The overemphasis of cultural peculiarities, which at its worst attributes a deterministic effect to languages or images, leads to a fundamental questioning not only of the success of cross-cultural communication, but of communication in general. Kouyaté seems to be well aware of this problematic, as he frankly talks about the different background that distinguishes him from the author of the dramatic source of his film: Moussa Diagana is a Soninke from Mauritania, while Kouyaté is a Malinke from Burkina Faso. But this does not stop him from 'understanding' Diagana: 'Moi je ne suis pas Soninké, mais je rejoins son message.'³⁹ ('I am not Soninké, but I get his message.') At the same time he is aware of the structural similarity of his story with Greek tragedy or machiavellianism. Given this state of affairs, I am convinced there is no reason related to the film's 'Africanness' that should make it unintelligible in Germany. Whatever misunderstandings appear in the process of cross-cultural communication, I would like to believe, can be negotiated.

Translation from the German: Christina M. White

Notes

- 1 Cf. www.sialefilm.com for full credits. The festival 'Cinema Africa' at the House of World Cultures lasted from 28 Nov. to 15 Dec. 2002, presenting altogether more than 20 films. All internet sites were last accessed in March 2003.
- 2 Moussa Diagana's *La légende du Wagadu vue par Sia Yatabéré* was first published in *Théâtre du Sud* 1 (1990) 13–83, where the author gives a brief introduction to the legend (9–11).
- 3 According to the French subtitles: 'Jean Cocteau disait: C'est le privilège des légendes d'être sans âge.'
- 4 For textual evidence cf. Dani Kouyaté, quoted in Olivier Barlet, 'Sia, le rêve du python: l'adaptation littéraire au cinéma. Moussa Diagana et Dani Kouyaté', [Interview], *Africultures* (2003), article published only in the internet [<http://www.africultures.com>]: 'L'espoir est dans le fait qu'il pleut. Sia est là, fragile, mais la pluie tombe.' In an earlier interview, Kouyaté also explained his understanding of madness, quoted in Olivier Barlet, 'Universel comme le conte. Entretien avec Dani Kouyaté', [Interview], *Africultures* 49 (2003) [<http://www.africultures.com>]: 'On m'a parfois dit que le film était fermé dans la mesure où elle devient folle, mais pour moi, la folie n'est pas quelque chose de pessimiste: la folie c'est la survie de la vérité.'
- 5 As a methodological framework, I refer to Keyan Tomaselli, *Appropriating Images: The Semiotics of Visual Representation* (Højbjerg: Intervention Press, 1996), 32: 'The term "reading" is preferred to viewing or watching a film because it implies an active negotiation on the part of the interpreter.'
- 6 Tomaselli defines context as 'the political, economic, social and historical processes out of which specific texts—films, television and radio programmes, print, fashion etc.—arise' (Tomaselli, *ibid.*, 29).
- 7 To stick to the notion of 'cross-cultural communication' implies positing Germany and Africa as somewhat fixed cultures. This of course, is a crass simplification—in general, I think along the lines of *context*: a context does not necessarily represent any given culture.
- 8 With regard to the reception of African literatures in Germany, a considerable amount of work has been done, cf. János Riesz, *Koloniale Mythen—afrikanische Antworten. Europäisch-afrikanische Literaturbeziehungen I* (Frankfurt/Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2nd edition 2000); János Riesz, *Französisch in Afrika—Herrschaft durch Sprache. Europäisch-afrikanische Literaturbeziehungen II* (Frankfurt/Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1998); Albert Gouaffo, *Fremdheitserfahrung und literarischer Rezeptionsprozeß. Zur Rezeption der frankophonen Literatur des subsaharischen Afrika im deutschen Sprach- und Kulturraum (unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der DDR 1949–1990)* (Frankfurt/Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1998); Shaban Mayanja, *Pthwoh! Geschichte, bleibe ein Zwerg, während ich wachse!* *Untersuchungen zum Problem der Übersetzung afrikanischer Literatur ins Deutsche* (Hannover: Revonnah, 1999); Peter Ripken, 'Wer hat Angst vor afrikanischer Literatur? Zur Rezeption afrikanischer Literatur in Deutschland', Susan Arndt, ed., *AfrikaBilder. Studien zu Rassismus in Deutschland* (Münster: Unrast, 2001), 329–350; and Susanne Gehrman, 'Traduction et réception des littératures africaines en Allemagne', Gilles Teulié, ed., *Les littératures africaines: transpositions?*, Actes du colloque APELA Montpellier, septembre 2001 (Montpellier: Université Montpellier III, 2002), 173–189.
- 9 Waris Dirie, *Wüstenblume*, trans. Bernhard Jendricke (München: Schneekluth, 1998), originally published as *Desert flower. The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad* (London: Virago, 1998).
- 10 Cf. http://www.nowhereinafrica.com/for_full_credits.
- 11 Ilona Maria Hilliges, *Die weiße Hexe. Meine Abenteuer in Afrika* (Berlin: Ullstein Taschenbuchverlag, 2000).
- 12 Claude Njiké-Bergeret, *Schwarze Weisheit. Als Europäerin in einem afrikanischen Dorf* (Bergisch-Gladbach: Bastei Lübbe, 2003), originally published in French as *La sagesse de mon village* (Paris: Lattès, 2000).
- 13 Some important artists from Africa were featured at the 'Documenta 11' in Kassel (2002) curated by Nigeria-born Okwui Enwezor.
- 14 Another exhibition curated by Enwezor is, 'The Short Century. Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994', shown in Berlin and Munich in 2001.
- 15 Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'What is visual culture?', *id.*, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 3.
- 16 This list includes only films that were given

- commercial runs, it does not include films presented only at festivals, nor does it take into account films shown only on TV. Unless a German title is given, films were shown under their original title. Director's names are followed by country of birth.
- 17 Roy Armes and Lizbeth Malkmus, eds., *Arab and African Film Making* (London: Atlantic Highlands, NJ, USA: Zed Books, 1991).
- 18 Cf. Keyan Tomaselli, 'African Cinema: Theoretical Perspectives on Some Unresolved Questions', Imruh Bakari and Mbye B. Cham, eds., *African Experiences of Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 165–174, for a discussion of the criteria to be considered. He is particularly interested in the treatment of films from South Africa as 'African films'. A similar discussion has already been going on in relation to African literature and, here too, the problem resists a final answer.
- 19 Nixon K. Kariithi, 'Misreading Culture and Tradition: Western Practical Appreciation of African Films', FEPACI, ed., *L'Afrique et le centenaire du cinéma. Africa and the Centenary of Cinema* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1995), 166–187.
- 20 Ibid., 186.
- 21 Looking from the other side, the Canadian film studies scholar Sheila Petty has criticized a one-sided psychoanalytic-feminist oriented way of reading (which she attributes to the 'West') as inappropriate for a film such as *Hyènes* by Djibril Diop Mambéty; Sheila J. Petty, 'Whose Nation Is It Anyway? The Politics of Reading African Cinema in the West', FEPACI, *ibid.*, 188–193. The same point is made by Tomaselli: 'Increasingly, scholars and film-makers in Africa itself are attacking unproblematized importations of screen theories developed in other contexts. They are especially critical of the assumptions of theory developed to explain Westernized subjectivities applied to societies which can by no stretch of the imagination be understood solely within deconstruction and the parameters of Freudian/Lacanian perspectives' [*my emphasis*]; Keyan Tomaselli, 'African Cinema: Theoretical Perspectives on Some Unresolved Questions', *ibid.*, 170.
- 22 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), and Jürgen Trabant, 'Fremdheit der Sprache', Dirk Naguschewski and Jürgen Trabant, eds., *Was heißt hier 'fremd'? Studien zu Sprache und Fremdheit* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 93–114. Coming from different philosophical directions, both make this claim.
- 23 Cf. Johan Bignaut, 'We Are Who ...? What! The South African Identity in Cinema', Johan Bignaut and Martin Botha, eds., *Movies, Moguls, Mavericks. South African Cinema 1979–1991* (Cape Town: Showdata), 99–110. Bignaut speculates about the success of home-grown comedies: 'Of the following Top Ten all-time grossing films screened on the commercial circuit in this country between 1970 and 1990, six are South African. Apart from the fact that five of the six local films are comedies and/or slapstick, their success can be attributed to their inherent South African identity.'
- 24 For more information on the film cf. <http://www.mrbones.co.za>. Unfortunately, the film's German distributor, Constantin Film, was not willing to answer my request as to how many viewers paid to watch the film in Germany.
- 25 Fäkalklamotte: 'Mr. Bones'. Nashorn von innen. 'Wer nicht hören will, hat Kacke im Gesicht', so spricht der weiße Mediziner (Leon Schuster) der Kukuvis, den diese in Südafrika gedrehte und dort sehr erfolgreiche Klamotte ausschickt, einen verschollenen Häftlingssohn zu finden. Oder eigentlich doch eher ausschickt, um sich auf dieser Mission ausgiebig der Pflege des Fäkalscherzes zu widmen. Also wird hier mal ein Arm bis zum Anschlag ins Hinterteil eines Elefanten eingeführt, dort mal ein Kopf in den Po eines Nashorns gesteckt, und da drüben, da haut es einen fetten Schwarzen jetzt aber mal so richtig in die Sch... Nun, Jungs ab drei könnten hier vielleicht mal lachen. Jungs ab vier vielleicht schon nicht mehr. RKO; <http://www.stuttgarterzeitung.de/stz/page/detail.php/237428?kapitelid=19>.
- 26 [...] Die südafrikanische Kino-Komödie 'Mr. Bones' lebt vom Kontrast zwischen der Welt der Buschmänner und der modernen Welt, vom Aufeinanderprallen der Kulturen, wenn der Mediziner nach 'Sun-City', dem vornehmlich von Weißen besuchten Las Vegas Afrikas kommt. Leon Schuster spielt diesen Mediziner. Schuster ist zurzeit der beliebteste Schauspieler Afrikas und – obwohl er eigentlich aussieht wie ein Bure – der derzeit wohl schwärzeste Weiße Südafrikas. Schuster nimmt alle aufs Korn, ohne Einschränkungen. Und über nichts können sich südafrikanische Kinogänger so sehr amüsieren, wie über den radebrechenden weißen Buschmann 'Mr. Bones', der in einer schwarzafrikanischen Fantasiesprache Beschwörungen murmelt. Der Film war noch vor 'Star Wars' oder 'Herr der Ringe' der Kassenschlager in südafrikanischen Kinos. Produzent ist der Inder Anant Singh, einer der erfolgreichsten Produzenten des Landes. Südafrika heute, das ist ein nebeneinander und miteinander verschiedener Kulturen. Traditionelle Lebeweisen und Moderne greifen ineinander und ergänzen sich, es existieren unzählige Sprachen. Manchmal ist diese Vielfalt schwierig, manchmal leichter und manchmal ist sie auch einfach nur komisch, wie in dem Streifen 'Mr. Bones'. Doch der Film erzählt auch von den sozialen Ungerechtigkeiten, die in Südafrika selbst zehn Jahre nach dem Ende des Apartheidregimes noch bestehen. Sun City, der Vergnügungsort, in dem der Mediziner den Königssohn sucht, ist ein 'weißer Ort'. Die Trennung durch die Apartheidgesetzgebung ist vielfach durch ein ökonomisches Ungleichgewicht ersetzt worden. Es ist erstaunlich, wie gelassen das südafrikanische Publikum in dieses Abbild der eigenen Realität schaut. Humor ist eine afrikanische Tugend. Der Film fördert aber auch ein neues afrikanisches Selbstbewusstsein. Ein farbiger amerikanischer Golfprofi wird nämlich schließlich von Bones irrtümlich für den vermischten Königssohn gehalten und in den Busch entführt. Dort kann und muss dieser von den Afrikanern viel lernen; <http://www.3sat.de/3satframe.php3?a=1&url=http://www.3sat.de/kulturzeit/themen/34341/index.html>.
- 27 The way Hofmeyr uses landscape and architecture, he represents clichés, only to let them collapse in the course of the film, which is, I believe, one of the reasons, why the film was so funny to South African spectators.
- 28 <http://www.danikouyate.com/ft/sitemap.phtml>.
- 29 Manthia Diawara, 'The Iconography of West African Cinema', June Givanni, ed., *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image* (London: bfi Publishing, 2000), 81.
- 30 The quote is taken from an interview with Vital Philippot in January 2002; it can be found at www.sialefilm.com.

