AF & L WEEK I, LESSON II - THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN CINEMA

AF & L Radio: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLHQ7DGs9pA Alfa Mist - Organic Rust

Rough Guide to the Invention of Cinema:

Question: What do you know about the transatlantic invention of cinema? Do the names Lumiere (French), Muybridge (American), and/or Edison (American) mean anything to you?

Here's a radically condensed version of this history:

Lumiere Brothers - The Kinetoscope as developed by French inventors like the Lumiere Brothers in 1889 - invented and developed the first commercially viable moving image projection machine

Muybridge - An encounter with the work and ideas of photographic pioneer Eadweard Muybridge inspired Edison to pursue the development of a motion picture system. On February 25, 1888, in Kentucky, Muybridge gave a lecture that may have included a demonstration of his zoopraxiscope - a device that projected sequential images drawn around the edge of a glass disc, producing the illusion of motion; largely considered as the predecessor of the film projector

Thomas Edison - Being the tenacious and ruthless tycoon he was, Edison paid notice. The concept of the Kinetoscope was adopted by "the Wizard of Menlo Park" at his laboratory in New Jersey. His company's chief photographer William Dickson developed the base design of the Kinetoscope from 1889 to 1892.

During this period, he and his team developed the Kinetograph: an innovative motion picture camera with rapid intermittent film movement, to photograph movies for in-house experiments and, eventually, commercial Kinetoscope presentations. They charged the general public a nickel to view these initial spectacles, called nickelodeons, which featured footage of cats boxing and a blacksmith's workshop.

Introduction of Cinema on the Continent:

- Thackway (2014) and Harrow (2017) note that cinema on the continent has had a longer history than many might think.

- If you'd read and watched Samantha Da Luz's "What is African Film" (2020), you'd know that "film was introduced in Africa by the Lumière brothers in 1896" (Da Luz, 2020). They were inspired by the 'invention' (more like theft) of the kinetoscope by the so-called and self-styled Wizard Thomas Edison and Eadweard Muybridge

- But while the issues and debates of its introduction by the Brothers of Light are interesting - for example, what is the sociopolitical and cultural situation into which new artistic technology is

introduced - what we want to focus on is the purpose of the medium, or rather, what purposes it has been used for in its specifically African history.

Purpose and Uses of Early Cinema on the Continent :

Da Luz notes that the history of the medium on the content is deeply political. In fact, some of the earliest uses of the medium - its productions and audiences - could be split into two large groups.

1) The medium was quickly adopted to serve the colonial enterprise to supposedly educate Africans into civilized and obedient subjects.

2) Simultaneously it served to entertain and inform settlers and metropole audiences - in this way cinema has always been associated with class as well.

So how is either political?

1) The colonial enterprise was always engaged in definitions.

   It took it as its task to define what a race, identity, history, language, and culture was not and therefore was.

   For example, the definition of a black woman as not a white woman also means that a black woman will now, by definition, be - and *only* be - what a white woman is not: chaste, pure, demure, charming, witty, desirable albeit virginal, defenseless and defensible.

   And while a black woman and a white woman will relate on a great many aspects of their respective lived experiences, the definition of one against the other is designed to establish not only identarian parameters - identity and typology - but to determine the value of the existence of that which is defined. In philosophy this is known as axiology - the study of the meaning and determination of value.

   For this purpose, film is a very powerful medium.

   The immersive and affective aspects of cinema - what is commonly referred to as movie magic - can help reinforce stereotypes through the powerful rendering of images, through performance, location, costume, dialogue, cinematography, direction, and score.

   While we typically think of these things involved in the process of creating the most impressive entertainment experience, it can, has, and still is used to reiterate offensive, politically charged and motivated images and portrayals of cultures, identities, ways of life, histories, places, and people that emphasize a *difference* in their value.

This can cut two ways. Imagine a parlor of colonialists sitting in a drawing room in late 19th century Brussels. The host has just purchased one of the first commercially available cinemascopes, a fantastic piece of technology that allows you to watch moving images. He knows that some of his guests are abolitionists (meaning anti-slavery), while most of those in attendance were profiteering from the colonial regimes in central Africa. He has some raw footage of African people in captivity. He thinks to himself that he will use this footage to convince those who are on the fence about the brutality and inhumanity they feel is a part of the luxury and privilege they enjoy by showing Africans as *less than human*. He reasons that this will also further encourage the colonisers to continue their brutality because blacks aren't really people. Look! Just look at the screen, see for yourself? See? You don't need to feel bad. Now, it could be the case that the individuals the guests see on screen might not even be blacks or Africans. They could be actors in blackface. Cinema allows the *illusion* to work.

Think of this same man showing the same footage to a room full of villagers in Congo. On the one hand, they can see the images of black bodies on screen and conclude that their domination by colonial forces is inevitable and lose hope at changing their collective fates. Others could see the *difference* in the way white bodies are shown on screen vs those of black bodies and conclude that what they are seeing as a true, fundamental distinction between black and white people with the latter being more valid and valuable than the former. And yet others still might watch that footage and be full of rage and a desire for revolution and independence.

2) But what about cinema on the continent?

In the early days of the introduction of cinema on the continent, it was seen as a novel and affluent activity - going to the cinema. It thus became associated with upward mobility, affluence, and refinement and sophistication. So again, having *access* to cinema is a value determination - do you have enough money to go to the cinema?

Likewise, those who did view cinema could have viewed it as a medium of powerful escapism. Imagine watching King Kong for the first time in 1933 as a young girl in a remote African village. The fantastical and glamorous world of cinema would have not only been powerfully entertaining, but also powerfully diverting.

You might think that I'm saying this only applies to colonial-era cinema. But this isn't true. As Da Luz notes: "Didactic films would remain a trend in African cinema. After independence, one-party states still employed film to advocate their causes and promote nationalist sentiments. Filmmakers' "political commitment was based on the perception that cinema, like literature, must be a tool for social transformation" (Tcheuyap, 2018, p. 202)."

However, other artists on the continent had their own purposes for the medium: " Independently, filmmakers were preoccupied with constructing their own image of Africa, restoring African cultural pride along the way (Thackway, 2014). Interestingly, such movies did

not always appeal to African audiences, who like audiences elsewhere, sought entertainment rather than pedagogy (Tcheuyap, 2018)."

This changed over a long period of time until only as late as the 1980s did "Popular African cinema emerged in the late eighties in West Africa (Dovey, 2015). Filmmakers slowly moved away from nationalist political engagement and purely 'African stories'. Entertaining movies with universal themes were able to attract larger African audiences (Tcheuyap, 2018)."

Notable figures, institutions and trends here include but are not limited to: Idrissa Ouedraogo, the thematic and aesthetic diversity of Nollywood alone; Rasselas Lakew; Nuotama Frances Bodomo; Rungano Nyoni; countering afro-pessimism (defined as the theory that nothing about the global black experience is not negatively influenced by colonialism) via positive portryalas of the continent and its people.

Let's now watch FFE's "The History of African Cinema": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djzeu8kSSrM

- Is it not interesting to note how reductive the definition of "African Cinema" was for a long time? As Scorsese says, the entire region and output of Africa was cinematographically associated with one man, the Senegalese great director Ousmane Sembène.

- How does this reductivism relate to or differ from the fact that when we hear of so-called "classic" African literature, we always hear and/or think of Achebe? Or Adichie, as a contemporary example. Are these three not examples of canonical voices of African Film and Literature - past and present?

- But Africans and "blackness" is not a monolith. We are not all reducible to the same set of features and markers - be they social, cultural, ecological, political, linguistic, or historical.

- I'll use myself as an example [Life Story Here]

- My point is that even within my own life, there are an uncountable number of stories and storytellers without which my own story would not exist.

Adichie: "Dangers of a Single Story":

- I'm sure you've seen this talk multiple times, but since we are analyzing *stories* in text and moving images, there are several important things to note in Adichie's talk. I'll draw your attention to a few examples:

  At 00:31, she states:

“I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples,and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.”

> Think about marketing campaigns by large Western conglomerates like Coca-Cola, Nestle, Cadbury, and so on. Think about seeing Christmas adverts depicting snowfall, reindeer, and Santa on a sleigh airing in Africa, being used to sell various products and *ideas* in Africa. The truth is that most Africans will be barbequing meat and complaining of the heat in and around Christmas time, not worrying about the cold and drinking eggnog and toddies. What do you make of the incongruence – the clash – between what you are shown versus what you see? Between the singular, monolithic narrative – a story that presents itself as true everywhere it is uttered or read – versus the diffuse reality of what you see? What space/place exists for individual narratives and subjective experiences within the framework, under the aegis of broader Grand Narratives that seek to act as universals for us all?

At 01:03, Adichie says:

“Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.”

> Think about the idea of *double* or *false consciousness.* The idea here is that the content of the Single Narrative may push all other truths and experiences out, leaving only a Single Narrative that may or may not, either in whole or in part, reflect the real conditions and experiences of the reader. In this way, the Single Narrative threatens to split the reader's mind in two. On the one
> hand, to believe and accept the Single Narrative as definitive and true. On the other hand, to recognize that the Single Narrative is incomplete, exclusive, and violent in the way it prevents all other narratives from being expressed.
>
> Homi Bhaba notes how the monolithic results of narratives and myths of blackness typically articulate blackness in such a way that makes it estranged to itself; caught between the violence of two antipodal extremes. On the one hand, being *told* myths about who and what you are, and on the other hand *experiencing* the reality of who and what you are. For Bhaba, there is a “need to understand cultural difference as the production of minority identities that ‘split’—are estranged unto themselves—in the act of being articulated into a collective body” (Bhabha 3).

At 01:17, she notes:

“My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was.”

> The Single Narrative presents a danger of false consciousness but also false, or at least influenced, *desire.* The reader of the Single Narrative wants things they've never experienced, believe in things they've never encountered, and prize things the narrative describes as greater, and in so doing consider that which they have themselves to be lesser. For example, the

narrative of Western prosperity. Growing up in Africa, one often encounters mythic, grand, epic tales about how perfect, advances, wise, peaceful, and wealthy the West, specifically America and the U.K are in comparison to most, if not all, African countries, let alone the world. Many of us grow up with an indescribable, and indeed indestructible, desire to relocate to these lands, to defer to them, praise them, and think and gazette them as The Standard of living, believing, hoping, and feeling. Whether one gets the chance to experience these spaces and confirm or deny the truth of the Singular Narrative, to taste, see, hear, and feel all the things it describes, the danger of the Single Narrative is that it can make one blind to where they are and what that space and time have to offer.

For Baldwin, this 'split' is a space or experience with emancipatory potential. In his 1962 essay "Letter From a Region in my Mind", Baldwin notes:
"The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honourably with Mexicans and Indians [First Nations People] and all other neighbors and inferiors, that American men are the world's most direct and virile, that American women are pure. Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Americans what parents – or, anyway, mothers – know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way."

At 03:35, She notes:

"Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them."

Adiche draws attention to the fact that Single Narratives exist everywhere. It is not a simple question of oppressive narratives from the West exerting their violence on all others. There are a great many narratives in a variety of spheres, spoken, written, and disseminated by many types of people within a multitude of communities and spaces. Single Narratives are tenacious and easily established, damaging, and limiting.

Lastly, at 09:29, she notes:

"It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power."

Power is an important concept in the Humanities in general. It can be approached from sociopolitical, socioeconomic, sociocultural, and socio-ecological perspectives. These are overarching subjects, but within them, we find analyses of power in relation to government,

discipline, punishment, products, markets, global and local trade, political activity, ideology, science, research and development, entertainment, schooling, environmental issues and debates, resource use and extraction, to name but a few. In each case, as Adiche rightly notes, the flows and lines of power which determine who finds themselves on top and who finds themselves on the downside of advantage in these and others spheres of life on Earth, determine much of what we as human beings understand, see, feel, and/or fear about ourselves and one another.

- But beyond me, it is obvious that there are numerous African voices, identities and stories both told/shown and not.

- So, the question this begs is: how can one be more true or valuable than another?

- Let's see this idea of the interaction and tension between truth, narrative, and experience play out in a satirical short film titled "Alternative Math": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zh3Yz3PiXZw