Perspectives

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION THROUGH FILM

Heike Vornhagen

“Neocolonialism is passed on culturally, through the cinema. And that’s why African cinema is being controlled from Paris, London, Lisbon, Rome, and even America. And that’s why we see almost exclusively the worst French, American, and Italian films. Cinema from the beginning has worked to destroy the native African culture and the myths of our heroes. A lot of films have been made about Africa, but they are stories of European and American invaders with Africa serving as a decor. Instead of being taught our ancestry, the only thing we know is Tarzan. And when we do look on our past, there are many among us who are not flattered, who perceive Africa with a certain alienation learned from the cinema. Movies have infused a European style of walking, a European style of doing. Even African gangsters are inspired by the cinema” (Ousmane Sembène, Senegalese filmmaker, in Busch & Annas, 2008: 43).

Introduction

The Galway One World Centre together with the Huston School of Film and Digital Media and the Galway Film Society set up the Galway African Film Festival in 2008. This was due to a number of factors including the desire to see African-made movies in Galway and the belief that films made by African directors could contribute to challenging stereotypical perspectives about Africa and its people. The festival partners were also driven by a conviction that feature films could be educational by themselves and contribute to the wider development debate. The festival organisers were aided by the availability of funding from Irish Aid’s Africa Day Initiative which specifically highlights the cultural contribution of African countries.

Since 2008, the festival has become a feature on the Galway cultural calendar, screening an average of 14 films each year including documentaries, shorts and feature films covering a variety of genres. About 100 films are reviewed by a small team which proposes a shortlist to an advisory board.
consisting of the aforementioned partners, interested individuals, and representatives of National University Ireland (NUI) Galway’s Community Knowledge Initiative, developmenteducation.ie and the Galway Film Centre.

African cinema
“African cinema isn’t an also-ran in film history, a marginal thing, something to be patronised or accommodated. It’s splendidly central to the movies: luminous, inventive, revealing and unpredictable” (Mark Cousins, Irish director and film critic).

African cinema developed alongside many of the independence movements in Africa. Despite some exceptions (there was a movie studio in Egypt from the 1930s), Africans were prohibited from producing movies by colonial powers. The man considered by many to be the ‘founding father’ of African cinema, Ousmane Sembène from Senegal, was a novelist concerned with social change who realised that his written works would reach only small cultural elites, but that films could reach wider African audiences. Other notable filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s included Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal), Souleymane Cissé (Mali) and Gaston Kaboré (Burkina Faso). In the 1990s, funding stalled, but video brought new ways of making and showing African films. Nollywood took off in the 1990s partly due to a reduction in production costs and digitalisation. It is now the second largest film industry in the world after India’s Bollywood.

The first African film festivals were set up in the 1960s (for example Burkina Faso’s Panafrican Film and Television Festival [FESPACO], the largest African film festival on the continent, was set up in 1969) with aims that included to ‘contribute to the expansion and development of African cinema as means of expression, education and awareness-raising’. This statement recognises that film can be a powerful medium to inform and educate. However, who has actually made the film and what agenda is being pursued are important factors that influence the eventual impact of the film as much as its quality or story. Furthermore, when it comes to education, documentaries are often preferred, as they are more factual and real than feature films. The issues covered tend to be negative, as the educational impact of positive documentaries is somewhat limited – there is no action that needs to be taken. In the context
of development it is perhaps unsurprising that documentaries deal with, for example, horrific human rights abuses (for example female genital mutilation, genocide, etc.). Unfortunately, very often this supports a negative picture of the people concerned (especially if the perpetrators are black or Moslem), or, at a dubious best, a patronising attitude towards the victims: ‘Oh those poor people...’ This is not to discourage the use of documentaries in educational settings, but serves as a reminder that documentaries can often contribute to rather than challenge stereotypes.

Feature films can provide a broader picture though not necessarily a factual one. In feature films, the story arc is all, and facts are somewhat secondary. However, they can shine a spotlight on a myriad of human situations that – while sometimes specific to locations - are dealt with similarly irrespective of culture or social background. Emotions such as grief, anger and love are universal and can serve as connecting points to other people. But still, both who made the film and who are the active agents in it (including complexities of central characters) frame the way we as an audience see it. Too often, Africa serves as a kind of exotic backdrop to a narrative featuring white heroes (or white villains). Looking at the presentation of African countries or peoples in mainstream cinema highlights this issue very well. Films such as *The Constant Gardener* (2005) or *Blood Diamond* (2006) focus more on the redemption of their white characters than on deeper engagement with the complexities of issues raised. Or, as the blog ‘Africa is a Country’ states: ‘Africa: helping white people who’re a wee bit down-in-the-dumps feel better about themselves since 1884.’

In Ireland, Ade Oke set up the first African Film Festival in Carlow in 2005 while the Galway African Film Festival (GAFF) was set up in 2008. Similar to FESPACO, GAFF sees educational value in screening African films in that we see African films as a means of providing different perspectives on Africa and thereby countering stereotypes about Africa and its peoples. At the same time, there is a danger of elevating African cinema to a truer vision of African reality without at least acknowledging that there are many different ‘African’ viewpoints – or as Piers Armstrong (2009: 85) says: ‘American and European perception of creative art from the developing world is usually framed by the assumption that it has testimonial value and points to a collective

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condition.’ Equally dangerous is the idea that African directors can only comment on African stories – or, to be more precise, on those stories we see as African:

“I do sometimes feel that there is an expectation that, as an African director, I must focus on certain social issues deemed as ‘African’, and that other content beyond this scope is seen as not ‘African enough’. I can understand why this pressure would exist, but I feel it limits our creativity and even our own understanding of ourselves as citizens in this urbanizing and multifaceted context we call Africa” (Mukii, 2013).

The tendency to group African cinema into world or art house cinema raises further interesting issues. For a start, one could argue that all cinema is world cinema though this broad viewpoint would miss the fact that power and perceptions play a role in how we view films and, maybe more importantly, what choice of films we are offered. Films with a predominantly black cast (never mind an exclusively black cast) are seen as not reflecting mainstream society and therefore not worth screening to European audiences (which already presumes an all-white Europe). Equally, foreign language films are rarely considered for wide distribution unless they come with some sort of international recognition (for example the Best Foreign Language Oscar), are made by a celebrated director (for example Ang Lee) or from countries currently considered cinematically fashionable (Denmark – *The Killing*, Brazil – *City of God*, etc.). However, it is worth pointing out that the foreign language film market is dominated by European countries (fifty-two of the sixty-five awards handed out since 1947 went to European Countries). So, for example only three African countries have ever received a Best Foreign Language Film Oscar: Algeria for *Z* (1969); Ivory Coast for *Black and White in Color* (1976); and South Africa for *Tsotsi* (2005).

Another problem with classifying African cinema as either world cinema or art house cinema is related to a different type of stereotyping – it points out that these films are ‘different’, are ‘other’. And of course they are different, just as any film (or rather most films) are different from any other film – but they are not ‘other’. They deal with human emotions, societal changes
and global issues. They may be thrillers, rom-coms or hard-hitting documentaries. They may even feature white actors.

The main aims of the Galway African Film Festival have been, since its inception, to introduce audiences in Ireland to the brilliance and variety of African cinema and to overcome the under-representation and marginalisation of African film in Irish film-going culture. As organisers, we believe that one of the best ways to learn about Africa is to listen to African voices and to view representations created by Africans themselves, as these often counter the stereotypical representations seen in the Western mainstream media. This has an effect on how people from Africa are treated within Irish society and can contribute to a more diverse outlook through the festival. At the same time, the festival is aware of its own power regarding the films it chooses to screen; censorship, however well meaning it may be, does support a more simplistic view of very complex realities. Since 2008, the festival has included all genres of films (comedy, sci-fi, horror, etc.), and while stereotyping is something the festival aims to challenge, the quality and ‘buzz’ of films are equally important. For example, in 2012 the festival screened *Viva Ríva*, a violent thriller set in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) which centres on one character’s attempts to become rich through criminal means. It all goes horribly wrong of course. The film received good reviews within Africa but was accused of focusing too much on the criminal and violent behaviour of the black characters. Countering this, the director of *Viva Ríva*, Djo Tunda Wa Munga, said:

“The film dives into its depiction of tough situations so forthrightly that we hope it will help sweep away some of the old school perceptions of Africa and African art. Our aim was simply to work without fear or shame of who we are and the issues we face today” (2011).

Equally, people having seen this movie told us that they loved it as it connected them with home through language and seeing Kinshasa again.

The festival very much focuses on contemporary African Cinema, highlighting new and emerging talents as well as depicting different stories. Be it
a transvestite in a Kenyan railway station, a husband-to-be’s roadtrip, or a woman’s search for water to plant a tree – African cinema has it all.

The festival vindicates the view that feature films from the global South can add to the development debate by providing a broader as well as alternative perspectives on Africa and its peoples. By discussing development issues using films from Africa, the subliminal messages of diversity and capabilities of African countries will go somewhat towards righting our skewed picture of the African continent.

Note
It is difficult to draw up a list of ‘suitable’ African films for use in development education, especially in a once-off context (it is much easier to include a horror movie from Nigeria in a festival with other films than to show it on its own and exclusively to debate development). So below are personal recommendations that could usefully inform development education practice.

- **Pumzi**, by Wanuri Kahiu – a film on environmental sustainability, especially around water and forests.
- **Bamako**, by Abderrahame Sissako – on the issue of debt.
- **Microphone**, by Ahmed Abdullah – on displacement, youth disempowerment, and Egypt before the Arab Spring.
- **Kinyarwanda**, by Alrick Brown – on genocide, resilience, religion.
- **This is my Africa**, by Zina Saro-Wiwa – different perspectives on Africa.
- **Yellow Fever**, by Ng’endo Mukii – globalisation of beauty and its impact on black women.
- **The Lion’s Point of View**, by Didier Awadi – different perspectives on Africa.

References


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**Films referenced in the article**


*City of God*, 2002, Fernando Mereilles.

*Fluorescent Sin*, 2011, Amirah Tajdin.


*The Killing*, 2007-12, influential Danish television drama.

*Tsotsi*, 2005, Gavin Hood.

*Viva Riva!*, 2011, Djo Tunda Wa Munga.


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