

African Cinema's Renaissance

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Abstract:

In *African Cinema in a Global Age*, Kenneth W. Harrow moves beyond traditional postcolonial and national frameworks to examine how African cinemas have been reshaped by transnational capital, festival circuits, streaming platforms, and Nollywood-style video economies. The book is a theoretically dense intervention that repositions African cinema as 'worldmaking' practices operating within uneven global temporalities. While theoretically ambitious, the work occasionally sacrifices empirical depth and gives limited attention to gender and South African perspectives.

Die Renaissance des afrikanischen Kinos

German Abstract:

In *African Cinema in a Global Age* geht Kenneth W. Harrow über traditionelle postkoloniale und nationale Konzepte hinaus und untersucht, wie das afrikanische Kino durch transnationales Kapital, Festivals, Streaming-Plattformen und Videoökonomien im Stil von Nollywood neu geprägt wurde. Das Buch ist ein theoretisch anspruchsvoller Beitrag, der das afrikanische Kino als ‚weltgestaltende‘ Praktik neu positioniert, die innerhalb ungleicher globaler Zeitlichkeiten operiert. Obwohl theoretisch ambitioniert, opfert das Werk gelegentlich empirische Tiefe und widmet Gender- und südafrikanischen Perspektiven nur begrenzte Aufmerksamkeit.

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African Cinema's Renaissance

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Harrow, Kenneth W.: *African Cinema in a Global Age*. London: Routledge, 2024. 292 Pages, 48,60 EUR. ISBN: 9781032502526.

Kenneth W. Harrow's *African Cinema in a Global Age* represents an evolution of his long-term project to theorize African cinematic cultures beyond the postcolonial-national paradigm that has defined earlier scholarship. Building on his earlier publications *Postcolonial African Cinema* (Bloomington 2007) and *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (Bloomington 2013), the author shifts his analytical frame to the 'global age,' examining how African films from the video boom and amateur video output of the 1990s have been reshaped by transnational capital, film festival circuits, streaming platforms, and the informal economies of Nollywood-style video production. The book is not a typically conventional survey, but a series of theoretical interventions that reposition African cinema as a site of 'worldmaking' practices operating within uneven global temporalities and power differentials.

The author argues that the period of 1980s–1990s constituted a decisive break of structural adjustment, cheap video technologies, and investigates how globalization pulled African cinemas into new circuits of production and distribution. Rejecting both romanticized hybridity and simplistic resistance narratives, he insists on making visible the material 'cargo' of ideological freight that accompanied these cross-cultural exchanges. Drawing on Johannes Fabian's critique of coevalness and Jacques Derrida's *différance*, the author analyzes how films navigate literal and metaphorical borders, from migrant routes in *Frontières* (dir. Mostefa Djadjam, Algiers 2002) or festival versus local circuits in revealing persistent asymmetries that older Third Cinema models often overlooked. The result is a cinema that is neither purely militant and resistant nor fully representational, but one that negotiates new forms of visibility and erasure in the digital distribution platform era.

The book's greatest strength lies in its rigorous theoretical repositioning of African cinema within 'World Cinema' and 'Global Cinema' discourses. The author refuses to celebrate the birth and emergence of Nollywood uncritically or lament the decline of militancy and politicization of Third Cinema; instead, he offers a nuanced account of how filmmakers navigate modernity and neoliberal constraints while generating new forms of reflexivity, militancy, and memory. Chapters on migrant cinema and border-crossing are particularly incisive and illuminating, demonstrating how films such as Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (Mali/France 2006) or Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's cinema expose the complexity and unequal temporalities of globalization in the TGV versus desert footpaths without resorting to easy representations. His attention to the 'global age' as a condition of uneven coevalness provides fresh tools for analyzing how African films both preserve and commodify trauma, making the book supplemental if not essential reading for scholars of memory, representation, and neoliberal screen cultures as well as the vocal proponents of Afropolitanism.

The book is not without limitations. Its theoretical density occasionally comes at the expense of sustained empirical depth; some chapters lean heavily on European philosophical references (Heidegger, Derrida, Fabian) while engaging less closely with African film theorists and scholars, as well as African filmmakers' own voices or local audience reception contexts.

A noticeable and recurring tension is the author's occasional reliance on a Western theoretical gaze, even as he critiques it. This is illustrated in his analysis of Claire Denis's *Chocolat* (France/West Germany 1988) as an "African film" (pp. 62–84), which raises important questions about nationality and classification in African cinema scholarship. While the author uses the film to interrogate transformations in African politics and cinematic representation through Fanon and Derrida, the choice of a French-directed, foreign-funded work as a central example risks reinforcing the very Eurocentric frameworks he seeks to untangle. This returns us to longstanding debates about what constitutes an 'African' film and how such classifications can shape national identity and cinematic development (Jacqueline Maingard: *South African National Cinema*, London 2007).

A pattern emerges in the chapter "Auteurism and African Cinema," where the author deploys Derrida's notion of invagination to describe emergent Nigerian cinema narratives that "cave

within themselves” (p. 115). While the concept is intellectually provocative, suggesting a merging of Third Cinema principles with Nollywood sensibilities, it remains somewhat obtuse. The juxtaposition of *Chocolat* with Nigerian amateur films such as Kenneth Knebeue’s *Living in Bondage* (Nigeria 1992) feels conceptually ambitious, undertheorized but bloated; the precise connection Harrow seeks to draw between these vastly different cinematic traditions is not always clear. A more linear and straightforward analysis would provide clarity and brevity in untangling these complex concepts.

In Part Two, the author links societal changes to cinematic developments, revisiting the 1884–85 Berlin Conference – that meeting at which European powers formalized the ‘Scramble for Africa,’ and laid the foundation for colonial partition and the subsequent economic legacies of colonialism, structural adjustment, and IMF/World Bank policies. He argues that these forces have tied African cinematic output to systemic underdevelopment, making it difficult for the continent to match European or North-American standards. The section charts the collapse of ‘old Africa’ and the rise of a neoliberal, cosmopolitan modernity, with particular attention to transformed representations of African women (often as maternal superegos, witches, or temptresses). While these arguments are well-positioned, they occasionally risk simplifying complex historical processes into a linear narrative of decline and replacement.

As it moves along post 2010s towards present times, Part Three offers the book’s most compelling and enjoyable moments, particularly through its engagement with Lesotho filmmaker Jeremiah Mosese’s *This Is Not a Burial, It’s a Resurrection* (Lesotho/South Africa 2019). The author uses the film to explore themes of mourning, resistance to displacement, and the persistence of ancestral memory in the face of neoliberal ‘development’ projects. The film’s slow, ritualistic aesthetic and its centering of an elderly woman’s refusal to be moved from her ancestral land serve as a powerful counterpoint to the cosmopolitan mobility celebrated in most of Afropolitan cinema. Here, the author’s concise analysis excels in showing how certain contemporary African films continue to function as guardians of popular memory, resisting the commodification of trauma and the erasure of local realities. However, the section still feels somewhat brief relative to the theoretical weight it carries, and one wishes for a more sustained comparison with other recent works that similarly foreground refusal and collective memory.

Gender and queer perspectives receive a relatively light touch and limited attention compared to the author's earlier feminist focused work, such as his seminal book *With Open Eyes: Women and African Cinema* (Amsterdam 1997). The author's look at the South African case, which is crucial for understanding post-apartheid nonlinearization and Afropolitan aesthetics in a developed cinematic landscape appears more negligible and peripheral than one might expect. The analysis of streaming and digital platforms, while prescient, sometimes feels anticipatory rather than fully grounded in post-2020 data. These gaps reflect the book's ambitious scope but may leave readers seeking more focused and granular national-industry case studies being a perfect gap for further development.

Within broader film scholarship, *African Cinema in a Global Age* positions itself as a bridge between older Third Cinema paradigms (Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino: "Towards a Third Cinema," *Tricontinental* 1969) and newer global/world cinema frameworks (Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen Newman: *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*. New York 2010). It critiques the universalizing tendencies of both while insisting on the specificity of African 'worldmaking' practices. In African cinema studies specifically, the book consolidates the author's status as a bridging figure, extending Frank Ukadike's (*Black African Cinema*. Berkeley 1994) diagnosis of continental depoliticization and moving beyond the political-engagement focus of the 1980s–1990s (Manthia Diawara: *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*. Bloomington 1992) and the postmodern/'trash' aesthetics of the 2010s. For scholars working on memory, decolonization, and neoliberalism in African cinematic cultures, including the South African post-apartheid context, this book provides a vital theoretical lens for understanding how global platforms accelerate the erosion of collective, decolonizing narratives.

In sum, *African Cinema in a Global Age* is a major contribution that will shape the field for the next decade or so. Its conceptual frameworks and theoretical rigor, with its refusal of easy binaries makes it a required read, even where its empirical scope invites further case-specific elaborations and extensions. Emerging scholars will find in it a model for thinking and repositioning African cinema both locally and globally without sacrificing critical edge. It is

highly recommended for researchers in African film studies, global cinema, and postcolonial cultural production as well as memory work.