

Postcolonial African cinema

Ten directors

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Manchester University Press

Manchester

Chapter 3

Med Hondo

Introduction

Although the Mauritanian director Med Hondo is acknowledged as one of the great postcolonial chroniclers of the lives of the unrecognised and unrepresented masses in the various waves of the African diaspora, his own life and its relevance for his filmmaking is less acknowledged. While an overemphasis on, or overinterpretation of, biographical aspects in relation to a filmmaker's output is not necessarily either desirable or useful, elements of Med Hondo's life resonate so strongly with very many of the issues raised in his films that it is worth examining them in a little detail. Abid Mohamed Medoun Hondo was born in 1936, in Ain Oul Beri Mathar, in the Atar region of Mauritania. Part of the French Empire at that time, Mauritania has nevertheless had a remarkably tenuous, almost nebulous, existence. Despite being colonised, it was only formally created as a territory in 1904, but then not fully accepted into the French West African Empire until 1933. As an unprofitable colony it was given independence in 1960, but many countries refused to recognise it as a sovereign nation, rendering its status uncertain; in particular, Morocco withheld recognition for a decade. Mauritania has borders with five other countries, but only the one formed by the Senegal river has any substance, the others being part of the geographical imagination of empire. A sense of the porousness of borders, or their irrelevance, was part of Hondo's formative experiences, as he commented, 'My grandmother always reminded me that we had family in Mali, in Morocco, in the Sahara, in Algeria, in Senegal . . . I had the strange feeling, thanks to my grandmother's stories, of being born in five or six different countries at the same time' (Signaté 1994: 10). In addition, Hondo said of his family, 'We were nomads in our souls' (Signaté 1994: 10) and the migrant, diasporic spirit – as well as the frequently painful realities of life in the diaspora – is repeatedly reflected in Hondo's films.

The uncertainty of territorial boundaries is also reflected ethnically within the country. The major ethnic groups are the indigenous black Africans (Peul, Wolof, Toucouleur) comprising approximately 25 per cent of the population, and the Moors, Arab-Berber people who make up the rest. While this division might appear reasonably solid, the Moorish majority are internally divided into 'white' or Bidan, and 'black' or Harattin, where the

significant epidermal distinction implied by the nomenclature does not in fact exist. This seeming substantial corporeal division is in reality purely one of social class and hierarchy: unsurprisingly, the 'white' Moors constitute the superior group, while the 'black' Harattin, as freed slaves or the descendants of slaves, are regarded as their social inferiors.

Hondo was born into a Harattin family where slavery, rather than some relic of the past, continued to be a daily reality, as, indeed, it did in much of the country, Mauritania being peculiarly resistant to abolishing the practice, even at the end of the twentieth century. Hondo's maternal grandfather was a slave – calling into question the idea that the Harattin were freed slaves or their descendants, rather than actual ones – and he recalls how much it shocked and pained him to see his grandfather forced to prostrate himself before his (black) masters. At the same time, his father worked as a 'boy' for the French, but of these two conditions of subservience it was the situation of his grandfather that profoundly affected Hondo, and he swore to himself as a child that he would not allow himself to be reduced to a comparable state. Nevertheless, structural subservience did not always involve complete submission, and part of Hondo's upbringing consisted of family stories telling of rebellious slaves who killed their masters and escaped to Senegal. Similar rebelliousness against those who would claim superiority was clearly part of Hondo's character from an early age, as he recalls pelting the 'noble' Bidan children with stones despite being severely punished for an action which his grandfather considered sacrilegious.

Above all, the significant, revelatory discovery in Hondo's childhood experiences was of the existence of social inequality, injustice and oppression, as well as the possibility, even the necessity, of opposing them, something which every one of his films does so powerfully. In addition, there was the fact that social boundaries might be grounded in ideological distinctions of hierarchy rather than the more substantial 'black' and 'white' ones of race (which is, nevertheless, profoundly ideological). Interestingly, despite his being born into colonialism and moving to France at a relatively early age – having taken 'my first step as a migrant' by going to hotel school in Morocco – racism, as an expression of social inequality injustice and oppression, seems not to have been an immediate problem for Hondo. His comment on the situation at the end of the 1950s was, 'Racism grew as the numbers of Africans arriving in France grew' (Signaté 1994: 15) – which ironically risks echoing the racist argument that prejudice is caused by the African presence, even though that is clearly not what Hondo believes. This kind of perception may, however, be attributable to the fact that, as Hondo recognises, his political consciousness was not highly developed – or even developed at all – at this point in his life. Certainly, it was an analysis whose oversimplifications would not satisfy him for long.

Hondo's first foray into cultural production was in the theatre, rather than cinema, once he had reached his self-declared goal as migrant and moved from Marseilles to Paris. His involvement was the result of a particular

combination of positive and negative motivations. The positive was simply his love of the theatre and his desire to use it as a means of exploring important ideas and communicating them to a sizeable audience. The negative was his growing awareness of a troubling absence – that of black people, whether as performers, as directors, as authors of works to be performed; or simply as people whose lives were worth representing on stage. As would-be performer, Hondo soon found that his ambitions to play roles other than those stereotypically allotted to black people simply made no sense to white casting directors. This encounter with the structural racism of the theatrical establishment was profoundly disillusioning. Nevertheless, he founded his own theatre company, the symbolically named Griot-Shango, and his first production as director was a play by the Congolese writer Guy Menga. In the end, however, the combination of the frustrations represented by work in the theatre, the lack of interest in plays by or about black people demonstrated by mainstream audiences, the effort required versus the lack of financial rewards, and what Hondo referred to as theatre's 'ephemeral . . . fugitive' nature pushed him towards 'an art form which does leave a mark' (Signaté 1994: 19–20) – the cinema.

Much more than in the theatre, however, where at least he could take drama classes, Hondo is self-taught as a director; indeed, he is one of the great autodidacts of world cinema. Having learnt his craft through observation and analysis while working on other people's films as an actor and director's assistant, rather than through formal study, has meant that Hondo's approach is more than usually distanced from prevailing norms of filmmaking, whether formal or ideological, than is the case even for other postcolonial directors. Despite the necessary differences involved in working in the two areas, however, Hondo retained aspects of theatrical practice in his filmmaking. These range from the relatively slight but nevertheless significant in *Soleil O* to the full-scale in *West Indies*. In the former, there are, for instance, the stacy discussions between the central black character and a white interlocutor, as well as the scenes with the dysfunctional white couple which could easily have come from a contemporary play by Ionesco. In the latter film, the stage, and the staging of history, is everything, as the multi-level narrative unrolls in the shape of, in Hondo's words, 'a musical tragi-comedy', with verisimilitude taking a back seat.

A crucial element in the switch to making films was the fact that, by his own estimation, Hondo's political consciousness had now matured. For some time, he had been reading important black writers – Cheikh Anta Diop from Senegal, Kateb Yacine from Algeria, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire from Martinique – but at first these had given him only 'political ideas', rather than a fully developed political consciousness. Later came the effect of the 'pell-mell' reading of Marx and Lenin, Mao, Nasser and Nkrumah. Whether or not the long process of maturation is responsible, or factors such as his disillusionment with the claims of Western culture and his increasing exposure to that culture's racism, Hondo's first full-length film, *Soleil O* (discussed in

detail later in this chapter) burst on to the scene in 1969, both politically and formally radical, lucid and angry, disturbing and challenging. To a greater extent than most other African directors, Hondo has been both outspokenly and consistently radical in his political views: the Hondo of the early years of the 21st century may be battered and bruised from his experiences of four decades as a filmmaker, and disillusioned with so-called left-wing regimes both inside and outside Africa, but he remains committed to a socialist vision of a better future for his continent and, like Fanon, for the wider world.

Building at least in part on the experiences of his formative years, Hondo's approach to the cinema combines a politics of liberation and a politics of representation. The former is grounded in his earlier rejection of oppressive social hierarchies, relationships which strip human beings of their dignity (as Hondo says, 'There is nothing worse for a man than humiliation', Signaté 1994: 72), and extends it to a historically nuanced understanding of the ways in which these systems operated at continental and global levels in the past, and continue to do so in the contemporary world in different forms. A politics of representation in its broadest sense was already, as we have seen, a fundamental aspect of Hondo's cultural practice. If the absence of black people, as well as images of their lived experience, was already a problem in the context of the theatre, it became an even more acute one in the world of filmmaking, precisely because of the nature of the globally dominant form, categorised by Hondo as 'Euro-American cinema'.

Although Africans are not present in any meaningful way in mainstream cinema, as in the rest of the media, they are of course present in the shape of negative stereotypes, sometimes centuries old. As Hondo comments:

This is the most basic reason why I make films. Seeing the image, tainted with racism, that the media offer of Africa, I couldn't help reacting, in my own way and with the means at my disposal, to try to show something else that was closer to the truth.

Open the papers today: as far as Africa is concerned it is nothing but permanent contempt. (Signaté 1994: 75)

The ability of this media-produced 'mépris permanent' to influence the way in which African people see themselves is one of the reasons why the cinema is so politically and culturally important for Hondo, why the forms and the contents, the modes and the machineries of representation matter so acutely:

Cinema is the mechanism *par excellence* for penetrating the minds of our peoples, influencing their everyday social behaviour, directing them, diverting them from their historic national responsibilities . . . This alienation disseminated through the image is all the more dangerous for being insidious, uncontroversial, 'accepted', seemingly inoffensive and neutral. (Hondo 1977: 20)

Alienation is one of the many areas where the thinking and analysis of Hondo and Fanon, which form the later part of this chapter, echo one another. *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example, was famously conceived as an intervention towards 'the effective disalienation of the black man', while

in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* Fanon talks of the alienation which for centuries made the colonised ‘the great absentee of history’ (Fanon 1989): the same combination of alienation and historical absence which Hondo rails against.

The films

In terms of his approach to filmmaking, whether stylistic, generic, technical or thematic, Hondo is nothing if not a migrant, a man of the diaspora. Fanon’s comment in *Black Skin, White Masks*, ‘In this world through which I travel, I am endlessly recreating myself’ (Fanon 1986: 229) could certainly apply at least as well to Hondo as to himself; and, if he is not re-creating himself, then he is unquestionably re-creating his cinematic product. Hondo’s restless search for the appropriate filmic form for his chosen subject matter has meant that none of his films has been the same as the previous one: black-and-white short documentary (*Balade aux sources*, 1969), followed by black-and-white short fiction (*Roi de corde*, 1969), experimental non-narrative black-and-white feature film (*Soleil O*, 1969) followed by colour film with more continuist narrative (*Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins*, 1973); radical political documentary (*Nous aurons toute la mort pour dormir*, 1977), followed by historical musical (*West Indies, ou les nègres marrons de la liberté*, 1979); African historical epic (*Sarraounia*, 1987), followed by thriller set in Europe (*Lumière noire*, 1994); racist politics of the far right in contemporary France (*Watani: un monde sans mal*, 1998), followed by unearthing the memories of the war of liberation in Algeria (*Fatima, l’Algérienne de Dakar*, 2004).

One of Hondo’s guiding principles is the need to avoid ‘mimétisme’ or mimicry of the West. Completely lacking any of those subversive qualities which Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial reading famously attributes to it (Bhabha 1994), mimicry theoretically, politically and artistically bedevils Africans in the contemporary world. This holds good for almost any area of life, but, given his comments about the powerful effects of cinema, is especially relevant to the world of film in general, and to his own practice of filmmaking in particular. Both the form and the content of mainstream films – Hollywood above all – may have nothing to offer, but more is required than simple dismissal:

It would be dangerous (and impossible) to reject this cinema as simply alien – the damage is done. We must get to know it, the better to analyse it and to understand that this cinema has never really considered the African and Arab peoples. (Hondo 1977: 20)

Although in Hondo’s eyes the avoidance of mimicry is a general concern for postcolonial filmmakers, it does have a particular personal significance, since many critics – understandably, predictably no doubt – wanted to read *Soleil O* as a straightforward example of work deeply indebted to European

avant-garde and auteurist approaches, whereas for Hondo it was the African tradition of digressive and multi-layered narrative which was the formative influence.

If escaping from the stranglehold of formal, thematic or ideological mimicry of the West at the level of film production is difficult enough, the practical problems in all areas of production, distribution and exhibition constitute potentially insurmountable difficulties for directors such as Hondo. The fact that these difficulties are also frequently produced by the West is the mark of another kind of stranglehold.¹ This has been true throughout his career, with *Sarraounia* offering perhaps the clearest instance – though at the level of distribution and exhibition it is an example not from the notoriously impenetrable circuits within Africa but from the notionally more accessible ones of Europe. Based on the novel of the same name by Abdoulaye Mamani, the film recounts the struggle of Sarraounia, the warrior queen of the Aznar people of modern-day Niger, against the French military incursions, in this case the Voulet-Chanoine expedition, as part of the ‘Scramble for Africa’ in the closing years of the nineteenth century. It was due to be co-produced with money from the government of Niger, and when, with no warning, they withdrew their funding shortly before the start of filming, the stress this caused Hondo resulted in a heart attack. The project was rescued by Thomas Sankara, subsequently President of Burkina Faso, whose country then provided both funding and locations for the filming, which was eventually successfully concluded. Although Hondo had incurred considerable debts in making the film, he had nevertheless found a distributor apparently willing and able to have the film screened far more widely than he had expected. In the event, however, and with no explanation, the film opened in only a third of the promised cinemas and with virtually no publicity, and therefore with little in the way of audiences. Such response as there was from critics was largely hostile: the film was deemed too political, even propagandist. (Given that the film severely – but justly – criticises the brutality of the invading French, these attacks should probably have come as no surprise: Sembene had already suffered in the same way several times in the past, and would do so again soon with *Camp de Thiaroye*, another exposé of the all-too-easily forgotten murderous side of colonialism.) The resultant lack of income generated by the screenings meant that Hondo was left with his outstanding debts, went bankrupt, had to close down his production company Films Soleil O, and was forced into further debt to enable him to buy back his own films in order to prevent them being sold off at auction. Hondo’s verdict on all of this was simply, ‘The film was assassinated’ (Signaté 1994: 46).

Although this was perhaps a more extreme example, Hondo had already experienced something similar with *Soleil O*, where he was robbed both financially (by the owner of the cinema screening the film who refused to pass on the takings) and in terms of prestige (opposition from various post-colonial African heads of government, unhappy at the way in which they

were collectively portrayed in the film, prevented it from winning the main prize at the Carthage Film Festival). Other instances of the kind of obstacles encountered by Hondo include not being allowed to film *Lumière noire* in the Paris airports and their associated hotels because of the politically sensitive nature of the subject matter – declared ‘une sale histoire’ by one of the bureaucrats responsible for the ban on the filming. ‘Dirty’ it may be, but it is based on real events – the secret deportation of Africans – and once again, this time despite a more favourable critical reception, the film encountered enormous difficulties at the level of distribution. Hondo’s more recent, and also politically sensitive, film *Watani* was forced to carry a warning about its (alleged) level of violence, which in conjunction with its adult rating meant that it would inevitably be seen by a much more restricted audience.

Another possible reason for the resistance to Hondo’s films is that he so frequently insists on doing what other filmmakers do not, or will not – for whatever reason – do. Constantly working against the grain of dominant cultural practice – even if it is dominant only within the relatively restricted field of African or postcolonial filmmaking – is almost bound to make him a controversial figure. Thus, for example, making a historical epic in the shape of *Sarraounia* might not appear to be unusual or challenging, but, surprisingly, as Josef Gugler points out, ‘The imposition of colonial rule and the colonial experience have elicited little response from African directors’ (Gugler 2003: 7). Similarly, one might imagine that discussions of metropolitan racism, such as occur in *Lumière noire*, *Watani* and *Soleil O*, would be almost obligatory for diasporic and postcolonial filmmakers, yet, as Melissa Thackway notes:

the majority of second wave films are striking for their relative lack of preoccupation with questions of racism and discrimination, even though these remain very real issues in France. Both Carrie Tarr and Christian Bosséno highlight parallel trends in the films made by North African and second-generation *beur* filmmakers in France in the same period, which also tend to explore multiculturalism and integration, rather than racism and exclusion. (Thackway 2003: 130)

The tendency for directors to gravitate towards ‘softer’ subjects is something which Hondo has also noted: in a recent interview he comments on ‘so-called African cinema’ which is currently ‘drowning in the anecdotal’ (Hondo 2002) in contrast to the challenging, and still vitally relevant, subjects tackled by someone like Sembene. There is also a self-perpetuating mechanism at work here: given that the ‘softer’ films are the ones which are better received in the West, they are also the kind which African directors would then be tempted to make. For Hondo, both the cause and the effects are entirely negative: ‘You have to say that a certain European paternalism, ready to go into raptures over the work of black or Arab filmmakers whose films don’t create any problems, has, with its rubbishy exoticism, encouraged stagnation and mediocrity’ (Signaté 1994: 39).

Although a comment such as ‘so-called African cinema’ might appear arrogant or dismissive (and there are ways in which Hondo is indeed rejecting a certain contemporary filmic practice), the phrase is also – sadly – simply descriptive. In so far as film production by Africans remains a sporadic, unpredictable process, there still does not exist in Hondo’s eyes a sufficiently substantial body of work to merit the title of African cinema: ‘There are African filmmakers, but no African cinema. To be able to talk about cinema, you need structures, infrastructures, laboratories, producers, scriptwriters, cinemas, an organised marketplace . . . For the moment, we are at the artisan stage’ (Signaté 1994: 27).

One of the challenging and still relevant subjects which have occupied Hondo throughout his filmmaking career is dispossession, in its manifold forms and various histories. The losses he chronicles include that of one’s country (under the impact of colonialism); of one’s liberty (especially during the period of slavery); of one’s history (written out, ignored or denied by the West); of one’s culture (ditto); and, in all of these as well as in the context of metropolitan racism, of one’s basic dignity as a human being. Although Olivier Barlet has argued that the latest African films display a concern with the human rather than any particular forms of political militancy, for Hondo this latest trend is something to which he has been committed from the very beginning. Comparing *Watani*, then his most recent film, with *Soleil O*, he said, ‘My preoccupation remains that of the human being – immigrant or not’ (Hondo 2002). At the same time, for him it is emphatically not a question of either/or: concern for, and defence of, the human being requires a sustained and rigorous political commitment on the part of the filmmaker.

This commitment comes at a cost, however, particularly that, as we have seen, of incurring the displeasure of those in authority. Thus while Hondo displays a strong attachment to Mauritania, appropriate for a man of the diaspora, the feeling is not reciprocated – at least at the official level – as the government opposed his being honoured by Tunisian President Ben Ali in 1994, and described him as ‘an anti-national element fomenting disunity’ (Haroun 2004: 2). Such an attitude comes as no surprise to Hondo, however, for whom, like Fanon, the postcolonial black elite in power in Africa constitutes one of the continent’s major, and continuing, problems.

Hondo and Fanon: the dialectics of liberation

Since his death over forty years ago, Frantz Fanon has been widely recognised as a perceptive theorist of culture. More recently, he has become for some, especially in postcolonial studies, an indispensable aid in the analysis of culture. It is much rarer, however, to see him as exercising any constitutive or determining function in the actual processes of cultural production. In that respect, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s comment that much of postcolonial African fiction could be regarded as a series of imaginative footnotes to

Fanon (Ngugi 1993: 66) is remarkable for the (hierarchical) relationship which it establishes between theorist and cultural producer. No one has yet offered a similar evaluation of African filmmaking, but the remainder of this chapter will examine Hondo's early classic *Soleil O*, where the relationship is both more substantial and more reciprocal than anything implied in Ngugi's image of footnotes.

Soleil O, Hondo's first feature-length film, was released at the end of the 'Fanonian' decade of the 1960s. Both the film and its maker are marked by the events of the times and by Fanon's penetrating analyses of them, their histories and their contexts. As Hondo has commented, his (textual) encounter with Fanon was 'a great revelation' (Hondo in Signaté 1994: 18) in a period when he was also reading Aimé Césaire, Cheikh Anta Diop and others, and *Soleil O* is arguably the most Fanonian of African films. This is fitting, given the similarities between these important diasporic intellectuals. Both in their particular ways are representers (in the strong Saidian sense) as well as representatives of the greater African diaspora. Fanon's trajectory was more complex than Hondo's: from the Caribbean to Europe and back; to Europe again; to North Africa; and, as a dying man, to the US. Hondo's was much more straightforward – and in some ways straightforwardly post-colonial – from Africa to France where he went in 1957, typical of so many of those whom he portrays in his films. Both were part of the dream of self betterment or communal betterment which fuels so much of the 'free' migration which characterises the imperially segregated and hierarchised spaces of the capitalist world system. Despite – or perhaps precisely because of – the fact that they spent all of their adult lives in diasporic or exilic circumstances, both Fanon and Hondo were acutely aware of the profoundly negative dimensions of that sort of life, though the aspects they highlight vary. For Hondo, it is the determining historical conditions themselves which are the most pressing problem: 'For, if exile remains as the worst thing, what is essential, in the heart of that worst, is to be conscious of what has to be struggled against. And what is vital for us, here and now, is surely to struggle against capitalism under its different aspects and its multiple powers' (Hondo 1987: 70).

For Fanon, it is, unsurprisingly, the psychological damage resulting from particular historical conditions which is paramount. As he says in *Toward the African Revolution*, 'Psychoanalytical science considers expatriation to be a morbid phenomenon. In which it is perfectly right' (Fanon 1970: 25). Even at his most apparently straightforwardly psychoanalytic in *Black Skin, White Masks*, however, he is aware that the constructed inferiority of black people is, in the first place, an economically driven process before it becomes an internalised or epidermalised one. Although Fanon's analysis was formulated in relation to the circumstances of colonial domination, it is no less applicable to the postcolonial period. Indeed, it could be seen as even more relevant: as the 'Black invasion' which Hondo chronicles progressively advances into the European heartland, it becomes ever more necessary to

white culture that black people accept and acknowledge their inferiority; otherwise, the degree of threat which they (supposedly) constitute risks becoming overwhelming. For Hondo, metropolitan racism was a direct response to the arrival of postcolonial migrant workers in ever greater numbers. This is true up to a point, though it does rather suggest that the racism was not already there – not an assessment which Fanon would agree with.

As well as their anti-capitalism, Fanon and Hondo share a belief in a Marxism which needs to adapt to colonial or postcolonial conditions. As Fanon famously said, ‘Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem’ (Fanon 1967: 31). For Hondo, deploring what he sees as a certain African tendency to swallow theories whole, and unreflectingly, it is the fact that Marxism is not a set of rules or formulae to be mechanically applied, that it changes – and needs to change – with different historical conditions, which makes it important. The fact that ‘It appeals to people’s intelligence’ (Signaté 1994: 89), that it asks you to think for yourself, and, critically, means that you cannot be a ‘fetishist’ of Marxism, taking it as a once and for all dogma. While Marxism gives, among other things, a recognition of the importance of historical conditions, it in no way involves any loss of interest in the present. As Fanon says in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and future . . . In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later. I belong irreducibly to my time. (Fanon 1986: 226, 15)

The present is similarly the focus for Hondo: ‘In making these films, at the cost of enormous difficulties, I had an unshakeable desire to be a witness to my time’ (Signaté 1994: 24). For both, however, it is not simply a case of being passive witnesses of the unfolding present; on the contrary, the witnessing is part of the process of engagement in observation, analysis and action, in a very obvious Marxist-style combination of theory and praxis.

In Hondo’s case, theory and practice are focused on the politics of cinema, in an obviously specialised way which takes him far beyond Fanon, but the two are still connected via more general concerns regarding the politics of cultural production and representation. For Hondo, although there are important battles to be fought around the question of cinematic distribution and exhibition, Hollywood’s dominance in the non-Western world is not only expressed economically; the power of Western ideologies and modes of representation is another site of struggle for him:

Audiences around the world have come to accept this [Hollywood vision of the world] consciously or unconsciously because they have had no alternative. Africans have been made to accept values and tactics of their oppressors. In learning to re-codify (as film-makers) we are breaking down the emotive identification with particular codes (as audience). (Hondo 1978: 29)

In Hondo's view, Hollywood films often propagate their ideologies in an 'underground' way which makes them even more dangerous. Even when African filmmakers are able to produce images of Africa (no small achievement in itself, as Hondo is at pains to point out), the nature of those images is still a sensitive issue:

We therefore have to be very careful when we use images of Africa, on account of the ideology of the systems which are still, today, destroying and disturbing the dynamics of our culture. We have not yet escaped from colonialism and imperialism. We are still oppressed. (Hondo 1988b: 8)

Although, as mentioned earlier, Fanon indicates the primacy of the economic in the creation of black inferiority, it is significant that his analysis remains at the level of the cultural-ideological-psychological nexus as a recognition of its fundamental importance, and *Black Skin, White Masks* is premised upon his attempt to free black people from its effects. The power of this nexus, particularly as articulated through film, is also the driving force behind Hondo's oppositional cinematic stance. Anticolonial and post-colonial theorists from Fanon to Edward Said and Stuart Hall have commented on the ideological power of film to make one identify with the 'wrong' side – in their case, Tarzan (versus the Africans); the British army (versus various swarthy enemies); the cowboys (versus the Indians) – and the ability of the Western media – especially in this instance Hollywood – to recycle negative representations of Africans is one of the prime motivations for Hondo to make the films he does.

Hondo's relation to ordinary people in the production of his films stands both as a way of tackling the issue of negative representations and also as a practical example of the combination of theory and praxis involved in 'trusting the people' or 'being inside the people' indicated above. Hondo's filmic practice instantiates a range of ideas which left-wing theorists have long advocated but rarely seen carried out. Walter Benjamin, for example, in his famous essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin 1982: 232–4), points to the radical potential of filmmaking which, like some post-revolutionary Russian work, uses ordinary people to portray themselves, since on the one hand it brings the film closer to actuality, and on the other it diminishes the hierarchical distance between expert and lay person. Hondo, for his part, in films such as *Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins* and *Soleil O*, has used African migrant workers to portray themselves, though more as collective representatives than as highly delineated individuals. Also, the Brechtian principle of the dialectical and dialogical process of production of the theatrical performance via discussion with the cast and audience – so often praised, and so little practised – has been deemed inappropriate for the cinema, given the process of filmmaking and the apparently unalterable nature of the text once produced. Ousmane Sembene, however, has attempted a partial enactment of Brecht's approach by making the screening of his films in Africa the starting point for discussions of them both as

texts and in terms of the issues they raise, aiming to incorporate insights gathered in future films. For his part, Hondo has occasionally tried something more thoroughgoing, and his involvement of migrant workers in his films has extended to discussing the rushes with them and introducing modifications on the basis of those discussions.

As mentioned earlier, *Soleil O* may well be the most Fanonian of African films, but it is also, according to one critic, ‘perhaps the least understood of African films, and has been grossly misinterpreted by Western critics’ (Ukadike 1994: 81). One aim of this section will therefore be, while avoiding further ‘gross misinterpretations’, to examine the Fanonian elements in the film, and thereby to offer one ‘meaning’ or way of understanding this supposedly impenetrable text. The apparent incomprehensibility of *Soleil O* perhaps says more about Western assumptions or unexamined expectations regarding forms of non-Western cultural production than it does about the film itself. Certainly, the film makes a number of demands on the viewer as it moves from cartoon to tableau, to historical re-enactment, to satirical pantomime – and all that in the opening fifteen-minute sequence. Nevertheless, at the level of formal experimentation, it is hardly very different from the work of a number of European directors of the same period – so much so that Hondo is often assumed to be working in the same kind of avant-garde mode as someone like Godard, though this, according to Hondo, is emphatically not the case.

Soleil O is grounded in the contemporary situation of diaspora blacks in Europe, but the multi-layered opening sequence just referred to provides brief contextualisation for the precolonial and colonial periods. After the opening cartoon sequence which shows an African chief being embraced by two European colonial officers, and emerging from the embrace laughing and wearing one of their solar topees, a solemn tableau sequence has a voiceover listing the qualities and accomplishments of pre-colonial African cultures: ‘We had our own civilisations; we had our songs and dances; we minted gold and silver coins; we had our own literature and legal terminology; we had our own system of education and science . . .’ This iconic moment is followed by the process of the ‘fall’ from the precolonial state, as Africans are first of all converted to Christianity – losing their language as well as their religion in the process – and then turned into cannon fodder for the colonial armies. In the darkest of ironies, Africans are not only co-opted to serve the Europeans but also used to fight and kill other Africans – all for the benefit of their white masters. After this sweeping panorama, the narrative (as far as there is one) follows a paradigmatic diasporic African on a journey which corresponds very closely to Fanon’s famous three-stage development of the colonised intellectual. The first of these stages is that of ‘unqualified assimilation’, and in the words of the voiceover which begins the ‘narrative’ section, ‘One day, I started to study your culture . . . to spout Rousseau and Molière; to analyse your graphs . . . Sweet France, I’ve been whitened by your culture . . .’ As Fanon had commented earlier: ‘The native

intellectual . . . will not be content to get to know Rabelais and Diderot, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe: he will bind them to his intelligence as closely as possible' (Fanon 1967: 176). In an ideologically powerful example of what Edward Said called 'the Voyage In', the unnamed central character declares: 'Dear France, your first city is also my capital. I'm coming to you. I'm coming home . . .' Much of what then follows is a pitiless dissection of what 'home' has to offer its returning son.

The central character arrives in France as a visibly representative figure: his suitcase adorned with the flags of many African nations signals his status as representative of postcolonial Africa, or already part of its internal, intra-continental diasporic movements, or both. His thoughts in the voiceover articulate the beliefs and aspirations of so many colonised or post colonial intellectuals: 'Here or elsewhere, I'm at home . . . Aren't we equals, you and I? We had the same ancestors – all Gauls! I know there is no discrimination here . . . Aren't I in the land of liberty?' The fact that these are all part of the same ideological package means that the patent absurdity of asserted common ancestry – though 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois' was standard in school books even in Francophone Africa – announces the slightly less blatant absurdity or hypocrisy of the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, whose (practical) emptiness in everyday metropolitan life the film progressively demonstrates. The other side to this claim of racial primacy is the fact – unspeakable in this context – that the real common ancestor is of course African, since Africa is where humankind originated.

In relation to the heightened expectations of the *évolué* intellectuals in particular, Fanon comments: 'Quite literally, I can say without any risk of error that the Antillean who goes to France in order to convince himself that he is White will find his real face there' (Fanon 1986: 153). In one sense, Fanon is perfectly correct – the black man is forced to recognise that for Europeans his 'real face' is simply, immutably, *black*. In other ways – and this is something which *Soleil O* demonstrates – the 'reality' of the black face is anything but simple or straightforward, since it is the result of centuries of representations, stereotyping and ideological constructions in Western culture. Conversely, it could be argued that, if there is a 'real face' being uncovered here, it is the repulsive physiognomy of the West, the truth of its racism, its contempt for others, its vulgar hypocrisy beneath the mask of liberal, civilised or progressive culture. The contempt for non-white, non-Western Others constitutes for Hondo an unchanging reality, 'le mépris permanent' facing postcolonial black people.

If the revealed truth of the West is of a society which is inhospitable, discriminatory, and oppressive, that could scarcely be further from the self-representation of that society. In Fanon's view,

The Western bourgeoisie, though fundamentally racist, most often manages to mask its racism by a multiplicity of nuances which allow it to preserve intact its proclamation of mankind's outstanding dignity. (Fanon 1967: 131)

Here, the recurrent obsessive trope of the racist imagination over the last four hundred years at least – that of the embattled domestic culture under threat from a ‘black invasion’ – is repeatedly invoked as the ideological mystification for the (normally) unspeakable truth: that the West cannot do without black people to exploit, that it has to be continuously ‘invaded’ in order to survive. In a similar way, official discourse on the ‘open’ nature of Western society, its desire to welcome or include or gently assimilate, is demolished by the racism which marks everything from state practices to individual behaviour. Fanon’s comment that for black people the choice is ‘turn White or disappear’ (Fanon 1986: 100) seems almost to have become a form of Hobson’s choice now: the first option, the ‘strong’ version of assimilation, being unavailable (since no matter how educated or cultured – i.e. ‘white’ – Africans become, they will never be accepted as white), ‘disappearing’ is all that black people are permitted. Once again, however, the double standard is in operation, because what they are required to do is to make themselves invisible, and therefore not offend white sensibilities, rather than actually going away, which, as already mentioned, would be economically unacceptable.

The film operates with a dialectic of acceptance and rejection, and the fact that their occurrences are so often unpredictable (and irrational, especially at the level of rejection) makes the experiences all the more moving or anguishing. The offer of something to eat from a small blonde girl is, on the face of it, the antithesis of the famous Fanonian (primal) scene of ‘Look Mama – a Negro!’ in *Black Skin, White Masks*, but, like most or all of the other more encouraging events, it slides into a kind of superficiality, emptiness or meaninglessness, as the offer of food becomes a repetitive infantile chant, which raises the question of whether it was real or genuine in the first place. Whether they are grounded in class solidarity (the young garage mechanic), intellectual standing (the political or philosophical discussions), sexual attraction (the relationship with the white woman), basic hospitality (the white nuclear family) or a kind of willed race-blindness (the man in the bar), these ‘positive’ moments either end badly – especially with the nuclear family – or, like the discussions which establish the intellectual parity of black and white, are completely undermined and contradicted by the everyday events of the film. To that extent, it is significant that the discussions take place in an atmosphere even more unreal and dreamlike than the rest of the film. Although the relationship of acceptance and rejection was described above as dialectic, it might be more accurate to see it as a version of the tortures inflicted in Greek myths, with the desperately desired object or outcome always just out of reach, or snatched away at the moment of its achievement.

One hard-won prize which Fanon worried might indeed be snatched away at the moment of its achievement was the fruits of the national liberation struggle, and one of his clearest premonitions concerns the emergence of the wrong kind of leadership, both in that struggle and, even more so, as the

ruling class of the postcolonial state. In class terms, the ‘wrong’ group is the newly emergent black bourgeoisie, and some of the fiercest criticism in *The Wretched of the Earth* is directed against that class: ‘because, literally, it is good for nothing’ (Fanon 1967: 141). In addition, it typically perverts leaders of the liberation struggle into becoming its figurehead.

Soleil O has relatively little to say about the indigenous postcolonial black bourgeoisie, but the figure of the ‘president’ appears on various occasions, grotesquely and inappropriately wielding the trappings of power in a foreign country, and squandering his nation’s wealth in displays of excess and corruption. We also hear about the new nation of ‘Tomorania’ – the president’s, or someone else’s, it hardly matters – whose inhabitants live in poverty, but which has managed to acquire a great many embassies. In addition, the president’s comment that ‘We have done away with politicians’ marks the final step in the process which Fanon particularly feared: the move to the one-party state as ‘the modern form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, unmasked, unpainted, unscrupulous and cynical’ (Fanon 1967: 132).

Although the central character, as an educated individual, potentially belongs to the bourgeoisie, his experiences in France are resolutely proletarianising. The film shows him sliding down the socio-economic ladder, being refused all jobs, including those for which he is apparently over-qualified, until he swaps his suitcase for a street sweeper’s broom – the iconic fate of Africans in the metropolis. (It is noteworthy that one of the central characters in Hondo’s last-but-one major film, *Watani: un monde sans mal*, is a street sweeper.) The role may be iconic, but not all Africans are in the same condition as the central character. At the same time, and perhaps as a result of his proletarianising experiences, he is one of those intellectuals for whom there is some hope in Fanon’s eyes, one who is capable of following the stages towards politicised or revolutionary consciousness. We have already seen aspects of the assimilated stage, and it is no doubt a mark of power of the ideological formations involved that for so much of the film, and despite all that happens to him in terms of his brutal education in the truth of white society, the central character seemingly cannot get very far into, still less beyond, the second or ‘worried’ stage. One of the important elements of that education, one which contributes to the growth of his ‘worried’ consciousness, and one which is also central to Fanon’s concerns in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is the question of black–white sexual relations, especially black men and white women. The central character in *Soleil O* apparently misses out on something which for other new arrivals in France was essential, as Fanon notes: ‘Talking recently with several Antilleans, I found the dominant concern was to go to bed with a white woman . . . Once their rite of initiation into “authentic” manhood had been filled, they took the train for Paris’ (Fanon 1986: 72). However, the fact that for Fanon the myth of the ‘quest for white flesh’ is ‘perpetuated by alienated psyches’ may be a hopeful sign as far as the central character is concerned. Nevertheless, being black he is fixed at the

level of the sexual or the genital in the white imagination, and as such, constitutes a particular kind of threat:

One thing must be mentioned in this connection: a white woman who has had a Negro lover finds it difficult to return to white men. Or so at least it is believed, particularly by white men: 'Who knows what "they" can give a woman?' Who indeed does know? Certainly 'they' do not. (Fanon 1986: 171)

As an example of the contradictions of bourgeois ideology mentioned earlier, we note *en passant* a character commenting that he is a great believer in the brotherhood of man, but absolutely cannot stand the thought of black men with white women – that perennial phobic obsession of the white imagination.

'Who knows what "they" can give a woman?' Some women, as Fanon comments, and as the film illustrates, are desperate to find out. We see two white women scandalised, even revolted, at the discovery that one of their friends has had a black baby. They nevertheless speculate about what it would be like to have sex with a black man, and one of them proceeds to do just that, picking up the central character and taking him to bed. There, in the manner outlined by Fanon, she experiences the gap between the man's ordinary human reality and the erotic racist fantasy, and is profoundly dissatisfied.

The women among the Whites, by a genuine process of induction, invariably view the Negro as the keeper of the impalpable gate that opens into the realms of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations . . . We have shown that reality destroys all these beliefs. But they all rest on the level of the imagined, in any case, that of a paralogism. (Fanon 1986: 177)

Fleetingly, this looks like the most optimistic of the 'positive' moments, as the couple stroll around, seemingly happy and oblivious to the stares of the white population (not to mention the animal noises on the soundtrack). The latent possibilities here – healing the hurt of racist insults suffered, overcoming the alienation of diaspora – founder in the face of the white woman's fantasy-driven desire. Fanon recounts the case of a white woman who had intensely arousing fantasies of what black men would do to her in bed, but found the actual experience little different from sleeping with a white man. The problem for black men is that, in demonstrating their simple, ordinary maleness, they cannot even manage to be the thing they are supposed to be, or required to be by the world of white erotic fantasy – the sexual beast, the Negro-as-penis.

The central character's transition to the third and final 'fighting' stage comes via a series of rejections or departures: he smashes up his room and leaves; he leaves the city; he is welcomed and then revolted by the 'liberal' French family; he flees from them into the forest amid frantic drumming, apocalyptic images and savage screams with which he eventually joins in. Calmed or exhausted by this cathartic version of what Césaire called 'le

grand cri Noir', he ends up in a clearing surrounded by images of black or Third World leaders, heroes and martyrs – Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X – and the noise of fire and destruction. The final shot shows him smiling quietly, grimly, while the closing caption, rather than the usual 'La fin', is 'A suivre' (to be continued).

'A suivre', with its echoes of the revolutionary 'A luta continua', could hardly be more apposite in Fanonian terms. Although reaching stage three represents the conclusion of a long and arduous personal journey, in other ways it is only the beginning, since for Fanon it marks the possibility of a fuller or more relevant integration into the collective struggle for national liberation, which is the one that really matters. However, as the closing pages of the chapter 'On National Culture' make clear, even this is not enough, and another step – qualitatively larger, more difficult and more important – has to be taken, as the fight for the nation necessarily leads beyond the nation:

Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture. (Fanon 1967: 199)

There is something of this in the trajectory of the central character: he has gone from a position of diaspora as individual economic migrancy, of assimilation in his personal homecoming to 'La douce France', and of alienation disavowed, to one of diaspora as generalised alienation recognised, of the inter- or trans-nationalism of revolution, and of the realisation that there is more to be done. In the words of the warrior queen Sarraounia in Hondo's 1987 film, 'To stay free, we must fight a relentless battle.'

What happens next? What does the intellectual do? In Fanon's final, luminous pages, the dying hope of a fervent revolutionary, 'next' is the fight for human dignity, a 'new humanism', a better way of being: 'For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man' (Fanon 1967: 255). For Hondo, speaking thirty years later, 'next' was sadly not quite like that, and it is Fanon's pragmatic fears, rather than his visionary hopes, which have been realised. African intellectuals (i.e. African intellectuals in Africa), for example, have been unable to carry on the fight, and have been reduced to silence and inactivity by repressive or dictatorial regimes – the 'triumph' of the black bourgeoisie which Fanon foresaw destroying all that which the popular struggles had created.

The current situation is one in which African intellectuals seem unable to act or to analyse appropriately; as Hondo comments, 'I don't know of a single problem facing Africa which has called forth a properly African response from Africans. They are all listening to Paris, New York, London or Berlin' (Signaté 1994: 64–5). The idea that Africans, and other postcolonial peoples, need to develop their own analyses, and solutions, brings Fanon and Hondo together yet again: the Conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*

is marked by the urgent need not to copy European ways of thinking, and, especially, of behaving, since these have visited so much suffering on non-Western peoples in the shape of slavery, colonialism, racism, imperialism and the like. However, this is a question not of simply rejecting European models but of improving on them. For Hondo, as we saw earlier, the problem represented by 'mimétisme' or mimicry of the West is a particularly acute one for Africans in the contemporary world. As far as Fanon is concerned, any attempt to copy Europe is an obstacle to the proper progress of Africa – and humankind – given that 'the European game has finally ended':

When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders . . .

Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth . . .

Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature. (Fanon 1967: 252–4)

As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, Hondo is often regarded as inspired by European avant-garde filmmaking styles, or even mimicking them, in *Soleil O*, mainly because of the narrative and stylistic discontinuities. As far as he is concerned, however, the film is derived from African modes of storytelling: digressive, cumulative, multi-mode, using recitation, song and dance as required. The correlative of this is that ordinary Africans can understand complex or 'difficult' narrative forms, such as *Soleil O* is deemed to be:

There are different perceptions of an image. *Soleil O* is crystal clear and is neither intellectual nor sophisticated. It has often happened that those who understand it best are illiterate. This film was shown in Algeria. There, the proletarians explained the film to the intellectuals because the proletariat thoroughly identified with it. (Hondo in Pfaff 1986: 45)

Hondo's attitude is part of a long tradition of left-wing thinkers and cultural producers who have faith in the people's ability to analyse or understand. Among African filmmakers, Ousmane Sembene is the most famous example, while Fanon, unsurprisingly, is one of the thinkers who have faith:

We must above all rid ourselves of the very Western, very bourgeois, and therefore contemptuous attitude that the masses are incapable of governing themselves. In fact, experience proves that the masses understand perfectly the most complicated problems . . . Everything can be explained to the people, on the single condition that you really want them to understand. (Fanon 1967: 151–2)

Trusting the people, as we saw earlier, is central to Hondo's approach to filmmaking. People 'really understanding' is, for Fanon and Hondo, the whole point: the politicised 'prise de conscience' is something they both experienced personally, and forms an essential desired outcome of their writing, filmmaking and activism. For Fanon, for example, the liberation

struggle is possible precisely because of the cumulative growth of people's critical awareness of the situation they face, their own capabilities and how the latter can change the former. For Hondo, 'the [filmic] image is the weapon of choice for making people aware, for the long-term transformation of their understanding' (Hondo in Signaté 1994: 31), and in his view it is one of Africa's particular problems that, as a continent, it has yet fully to grasp this fact.

A keen sense of the dialectical processes of cultural production and political development aiming at profound social transformation unites Fanon and Hondo. We have already seen Fanon's view of the linked twofold emergence of national and international consciousness as 'the source of all culture'. For Hondo, this includes the limits and possibilities of film:

What is more, a political film is not necessarily a 'revolutionary' film. What is a revolutionary film? A film unlike those already seen? A film calling for insurrection? Which incites revolution? I have never heard of people running to look for rifles at the cinema exit, to overthrow the government or to chase out the village mayor. Revolutionary cinema without revolution: I do not understand what that means. (Hondo 1987: 71–2)

The absence of rifles at the cinema exit does not mean that Hondo is denying the possibility of either revolution or revolutionary film, simply that there is a necessary relationship between them, that the latter requires the appropriate conditions which the arrival of the former will create, and that the arrival of the former is not produced by the emotional uprush generated by even the best of political films. It also makes very clear the limits of formal radicalism, and even of would-be incendiary content. At the same time, it is important to remember that these 'conditions' do not simply happen, that they are the creation of conscious human agency:

Africa will not be free through the mechanical development of material forces, but it is the hand of the African and his brain that will set into motion and implement the dialectics of the liberation of the continent. (Fanon 1970: 183)

That was Fanon in 1960. Despite all that has happened since, the 'dialectics' are, for someone like Hondo, still available – if less immediately accessible. 'A suivre', somehow, no doubt.

Note

- 1 The fact that many of Hondo's films simply cannot be currently accessed is a clear indicator of their non-distributed, non-exhibited status. Further, none is available for purchase in any format.

Filmography

Balade aux sources (1969)

Partout ou peut-être nulle part (1969)

Roi de corde (1969)

Soleil O (1969)

Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins (1973)

Nous aurons toute la mort pour dormir (1977)

Polisario, un peuple en armes (1979)

West Indies, ou les nègres marrons de la liberté (1979)

Sarraounia (1987)

Lumière noire (1994)

Watani: un monde sans mal (1998)

Fatima, l'Algérienne de Dakar (2004)