

CINEMA, COLONIALISM, POSTCOLONIALISM

*Perspectives from the French
and Francophone World*

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Decolonizing Images

NINE

Soleil O *and the Cinema of Med Hondo**

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AN ACCULTURATED SUBJECT IN SEARCH OF A PLACE

When Med Hondo is asked to talk about himself, he will insist that he is an *acculturated* African who, as such, shares the plight of millions of Third World migrants displaced and dispossessed by neocolonial economic necessities. He came to cinema, he says, in part to find his place in the world and to make a place for images of Africa that will inform the world about the painful reality of Africa past and present.

Born in Mauritania to a Mauritanian mother and a Senegalese father, Hondo traces his forebears to the migratory journey of Sudanese slave workers. At age eighteen he went to Rabat, Morocco, to become a chef. His native language had by then been replaced twice, by Arabic and by French. One of the many cruelly comic scenes in *Soleil O* (his first full-length feature film, made in 1970) shows recent African immigrants being taught the French language reduced to the few vocabulary items that they will need to function in their menial tasks, one of which is *le balai* (the broom). An “assimilated” Black man directs the class to mindlessly repeat the word, which as any Parisian viewer would know, is the main tool of their future trade as street and Metro sweepers, and therefore a sign of their oppression.

Hondo was fortunate in that he was spared this fate, but the jobs he found when he came to France in 1959 were not better in terms of either salary or treatment: dockworker, farm laborer, cook in the back kitchen of a Marseilles restaurant, delivery man at the Paris Halles, and later, waiter. These menial jobs gave him an insight, however, into the French scene, in particular the French bourgeoisie, which he came to understand, he says, “just by watching them eat.”¹ More important, this period of his life would provide him with his inspiration for *Soleil O*, a loose narrative about the trials

and tribulations of an African looking for a position as an accountant in Paris. The feeling of alienation, the experience of racism that he encountered during these years, the exploitation of cheap, imported manual labor, and the living conditions of immigrant communities all became the material for this film and the following one, *Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins* (1973). These experiences made him a very angry young man, and it is his anger that gives Hondo's films an exceptionally biting edge.

While working at these various odd jobs, Hondo, under the impression that drama would provide him with a way to express himself, began taking acting courses. He soon discovered that the French repertoire was far removed from his own experience. He therefore decided to assemble his own theatrical company in order to direct or act in plays that spoke to his own concerns, mostly plays about the Black experience, by the Haitian Depestre, the Congolese Guy Monga, and the Martiniquan Daniel Boukman, whose play *Les Nègriers* he freely adapted in his film *West Indies ou les Nègres marrons de la liberté* (1979). During that period, he also worked under the direction of avant-garde stage director Jean-Marie Serreau and held parts in Bertolt Brecht's plays.

Hondo's training in acting and stage direction led to his direct involvement in film. Like many film directors of his generation, he received very little formal cinematic training and taught himself by "doing," convinced that "if one is able to speak and express oneself, one is capable of making a motion picture."² But, like Truffaut and the other *Cahiers* critics, he sharpened his own critical sense by seeing as many films as possible, sometimes seeing the same one two or three times in succession.³

When Hondo finally decided to move behind the camera, his double exposure to the avant-garde theater of the sixties and New Wave cinema were to have a direct impact on his filmwork, inasmuch as both avant-garde play wrights and New Wave directors pursued objectives similar to his own: to challenge traditional modes of narration and representation. But for Hondo, taking up the challenge was a more clear, more pressing political act than for Western artists. His imperative goal was to create filmic images out of a number of traditions and traditional genres as long as they were meaningful to African audiences and relevant to their experience. "My work and that of other African film-makers, in our different ways, evolves and revolves around the question of colonial history," he said to Don Ranvaud in 1978.⁴ He was therefore determined to make films that had to be different because their content was different, films that would adapt a cinematic language developed by the West—there was no quarrel about that—to speak to and about Africa in a language Africa would recognize as new, yet rooted in its culture and traditions. Only a man as tenacious as Hondo, however, would have been able to overcome, no matter with what difficulty, the financial hurdles that have brought many a Third World filmmaker down.

HONDO AND THE ECONOMICS OF FILMMAKING

Hondo's script for *Soleil O* was ready as early as 1965. After gathering a crew of technicians and a team of African actors, he was able to get processing companies to donate some raw film. The film was made on a very small budget of \$30,000 and took one year for completion because his actors could play only during their spare time. His subsequent films, shot with the direct participation of African and Maghreb migrant workers living in Paris, and of people involved in the fight for freedom in Western Sahara, were also made on small budgets. But when in 1979 Hondo decided to film a version of Boukman's play, he was faced with hard choices about funding sources. The story is that he "refused a \$2.5 million offer from an American film producer because the latter wanted him to use Black American actors instead of a lesser known West Indian cast."⁵ Then, too, he "wanted African producers, not because they would be more aware or more motivated . . . but so that they would produce images [for their own people]."⁶ Eventually, with help from African backers in Mauritania, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast, as well as the French Centre National du Cinéma, he was able, after seven years, to put together \$800,000. One-fourth of the budget went to the building of the slave boat replica, a symbolic icon of slavery both past and present, in which the musical epic is staged. That he could spend \$2.5 million for his latest film, *Sarraounia* (1986), is a tribute to his enterprising spirit, his persistence, and also the efforts of the government of Burkina Faso, which, at the time, was committed to helping to develop an African film culture. Hondo himself went into debt for half a million dollars and, once again, took seven years to make the film.

Hondo's difficulties in finding backing for his films are in no way unique, but they illustrate a state of affairs that the Mauritanian filmmaker has been denouncing repeatedly—the colonization of Black Africa by Western cinema.⁷ In many ways, Hondo is less bitter about the lack of interest shown in the West for African films than he is about Western distributors' inundating African nations with images—and often bad images at that—made in Hollywood, Paris, or London. But the imperialistic dominance of big distribution companies, which makes it very difficult for independent filmmakers and producers to show their films on regular circuits, is not the only reason that Hondo's films have been kept out of Africa.⁸ His refusal to toe a party line has also made him persona non grata in some circles. One scene in *Soleil O* takes union officials to task for not supporting the cause of immigrant labor more actively. In this and other films, especially in *West Indies, ou les Nègres marrons de la liberté*, Hondo denounces the corruption of African "kinglets" with their lust for power, the squandering of money on lavish embassies abroad, and more generally the lack of concern of African nations for their exploited citizens. These are images that African rulers would rather not have shown on African screens.⁹ To make matters worse, Hondo's position on the Negritude movement is reserved, if not outright critical. Only *Sarraounia*, Hondo's latest full-length feature, steers clear of controversy by celebrating the African past rather than a grim postcolonial present. In this film the lines are drawn very clearly—some critics

would say a little too clearly—between the good Black “guys” and the bad White “guys.” So, not surprisingly, it was his first film to be shown in Congo, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, the Ivory Coast, and Benin. (Even so, Hondo had to go and present his film himself.)

SOLEIL O: IMAGES OF POSTCOLONIAL DISPLACEMENT AND SELVES

Hondo’s films are remarkably different from each other, and while drawing upon many genres, each shows another facet of Hondo’s creative ways with images. Rather than touch briefly on each of them, though, I will concentrate on his first experiment with long features, *Soleil O*, which many critics pronounced the best African film at the time.

The film explores, as *Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins* and parts of *West Indies* will do later, the condition of African immigrants in France. But whereas *Bicots* is more extensively documentary, and *West Indies* wholly theatrical, *Soleil O* is essentially an autobiographical and fictional film, in which a central character, played by the West Indian actor Robert Liensol, is invested with both individual and collective significance. The narrative is sparse, and the film can be seen as a collage of scenes whose sudden shifts in tone and style create a sense of constant ruptures, a fitting mode for a film concerned with exile and alienation. So one way of approaching it is to look at how clusters of images and the camera work together to frame the central theme of displacement and its concomitants—marginalization, emptiness, loss of identity, forced ingestion of “alien,” unwanted nourishment, and rejection (or *vomissement*)—motifs that all are paradigmatic inscriptions of the postcolonial migrant condition.

The poetic title, *Soleil O*, masks the theme of displacement, yet encodes it. It was borrowed from a song that the Haitian slaves would sing on their way to the West Indies and America: “Soleil O moi je ne suis pas né ici / Moi je suis nègre d’Afrique” [O sun, I was not born here / I am a Negro from Africa].

After a prologue, to which I will return, a sequence establishes the theme. A Black man gets off a train in a Parisian train station. The angle is low, so the man looks tall and somewhat assured. We will later learn that he has every reason to be confident: not only is he a qualified accountant in his country but he has also been indoctrinated and believes that France will welcome him with open arms. A close shot of stickers on his suitcase suggests that he has traveled to several African countries before coming here. The shot nicely illustrates the complexities involved in reading an image depending on one’s racial and class identification as well as ideological positioning. A sympathetic viewer might interpret the various stickers, bearing the names of Ghana, Benin, Senegal, Mali, among others, as signifying brotherhood and solidarity. A less sympathetic viewer might, on the other hand, construe them as signs that he is from nowhere in particular; that he is “just” a wandering, rootless African, one in a “homogeneous swarm of grasshoppers,” as Hondo puts it with bitter irony.¹⁰

The image, however, invites yet another reading as one remembers that all these names inscribe the legacy of a colonial past when lands were carved into national entities irrespective of African historical, geographical, and tribal realities. The single close shot of the suitcase therefore becomes a metonymy of imperialistic control. As the different layers of meaning are unpacked, the train station sequence engages the viewer in a sort of dialectical seesaw in which he/she is constantly having to shift positions and gazes, alternately reading from a White and a Black point of view, a Western and an African position, which is very much at the microlevel what Hondo's film is about at the macrolevel: not just about shifting individuals from continent to continent but about shifting and unsettling gazes, and challenging ready-made interpretations. About learning to view the Other and one's Self as engaged in a historical process in which responsibility for the Other must be accepted.

THE WANDERING BLACK

After the sequence at the train station, we follow the immigrant in search of a job and a home. Even though the search will end up in his finding temporary occupations and lodgings, Hondo's montage deliberately underscores the message of his film: that there is no successful insertion of postcolonial subjects into the dominant social structure. That externality, marginalization, and rejection define their experience. Hondo's nonlinear narrative is therefore particularly suited. He has assembled sequences suspended in medias res, without origins and ends. And if they tell a story, it is a very elliptical one, made up of fragments that do not construct a fully developed whole. The inability of the African immigrant to account for his own existence in toto in the White world finds its visual equivalence in the truncated, fragmentary narrative in which he is thus caught.

Hondo's use of an essentially static camera further stresses his message. What was an economic liability—he could not afford expensive filmic equipment—was turned into an aesthetic asset. The absence of long tracking shots, varied angles, panning shots, except in a couple of instances, including the long final sequence, means that the view we have of the protagonist's life—and that of all the other characters as well—is incomplete and distant. Therefore the individual is made to appear transient, passing but never touching our lives profoundly. So, paradoxically, the lack of mobility of the camera is pressed into serving a thematics of non-rootedness, disconnectedness, and not, as in the old, classical cinema, a thematics of stolid stability.

In a similar fashion, the positioning of the camera outdoors and at some distance from the events it narrates results, too, in highlighting the immigrant's social *exteriority*. Thus when the man tries unsuccessfully to get a job or a room, the camera is not “allowed” inside but merely records from the outside his being expelled. The first time, we see from a courtyard a concierge chasing away the man, who has come to apply for

an advertised position. The second time, we witness his being rudely kicked out of an apartment building by another concierge. The same scene being repeated farther down the street, this time accompanied with sound effects, transforms the whole sequence into a visual and sound gag. Such Chaplin-esque use of comedy to clothe tragedy is particularly effective in this context because it catches the White viewer in his/her own contradictions: between laughing at the Black character and feeling sympathy for his plight. But as the film progresses, and the Black man experiences more rejection, rejection takes on surreal and anxiety-laden connotations. At one point, he comes to a garage that has advertised a position for an accountant. Again from the streetside, he asks a mechanic at work under a car whether the job is available. In place of the expected verbal exchange all he and we hear are silences and monosyllabic negatives uttered by a voice—that of the boss—somewhere in the darkened garage. The sense of distance, of non-engagement, is made eerily visual and aural.¹¹

From that point on, the theme of rejection spills out, so to speak, to encompass other destinies, embrace other transitory characters. On the streets of Paris, we see Blacks in suits, while a voice-over reads statistics on the “Black invasion” in France since 1944. We see African women in traditional dress, we see chance encounters of Black people who come from nowhere and vanish from the screen forever. None of these characters enter our lives, nor do we connect with theirs, the filmic replica of life in which Blacks remain transient ciphers.

Underscoring his message that these are people who have no place in the White society, Hondo has chosen to film them in public rather than private spaces: in cafés, restaurants, a classroom, and, of course, the streets. When he does film them in private spaces, the camera captures the fact that they are exiguous and filled with signs of impermanence. Furthermore, such spaces are always, in one way or another, the setting in which White ignorance and prejudices are tested and exposed. In one such case, a blonde wakes up in bed with the protagonist, whom she had propositioned the night before. Unfortunately, her partner was unable to confirm the legendary sexual overendowment of Black men. In another scene, the same woman and a companion visit their creole colleague’s newborn baby. But they discover that genetics work in wondrous ways, since the white-skinned Antillean has fathered a black child!

To return to what we said earlier, then, both thematically and formally, transience and marginality are established. Short segments, rarely lasting more than two minutes, showing lives cut off from their beginnings and their destinations, translate visually the fact that these migrant workers, while necessary to the economic well-being of France, have no existence as unique subjects. Hondo’s very sparing use of close-up shots underscores this feeling of nonrecognition. At times, faces move across the screen but are never held steady long enough for the viewer to identify with one. Even the main character is seen mostly in long shots, and generally on the side of the frame rather than dead center, which, of course, keeps his emotions at a distance from the viewer. Hondo is not trying to make us feel sorry and manipulate our sympathies. Rather his camera

reproduces the harsh, distant gaze with which the Whites view the immigrant community. The one scene in which the main protagonist is seen looking at us and is framed in the center is at the train station. A low-angle shot at that point gives him a status he will never regain until the very end: that of a man in the process of freeing himself. The next full close shot will turn up in the very last sequence. But before we come to it, let us return to the prologue, which is about history and the process by which African subjects have become ciphers in it.

THE NEW SLAVE: EMPTYING AND FORCED INGESTION

The colonized subject is one that has been divested of his/her identity and invested with a new, borrowed one. This, the long prologue—more than fifteen minutes long—establishes in a form that is totally dissonant with the rest of the film. In five sequences using, in turn, animation, theatrical techniques that draw upon Brecht, guerrilla theater, and symbolic realism, Hondo paints a schematic picture of African history, from precolonial times to the postcolonial era. We see how proud peoples, with a rich and varied culture, technical skills, and facility with multiple languages, were turned into puppets, thanks to the joint efforts of the Catholic Church and the colonial army. The longest and possibly the most emotion-packed scene of the whole film, the third scene, takes place in a church. Africans from all nations are confessing to a priest for speaking their tribal languages. Then they are baptized and given a new Christian name. Changing names—which is tantamount to changing one's identity, particularly in an African culture where naming is giving life to—is the apex of a process of acculturation through which the Black man must pass in order to be “whitened” and “proud of it.” We do note that as each newly baptized individual pronounces his name he spits out toward offscreen in a symbolic yet futile gesture of rebellion. Futile, since in the next prologue scene we see the Africans leave the church dressed in white surplices, lined up in military fashion and carrying crosses, which, when turned upside down, become swords. The camera then cuts to a deadly fight between two Senegalese soldiers supervised by a sarcastic-looking and cynical French corporal. The soldiers drop to the ground but are momentarily revived by being given French franc bills until they die for good. The whole prologue tells it all in uncomplicated but powerful skits: the African has been robbed of his culture and his self; he has become an object, a pawn in a new slave trade.

RESISTANCE AND REBELLION

So, with the protagonist pursuing his dream of becoming a full-fledged citizen on French shores, the film follows his gradual descent into despair. In many ways, the binding

cement of the filmic patchwork is an interview that he conducts with a sociologist for an organization that employs him temporarily. The use of interview sequences interspersed at various points in the film may point to an unacknowledged Godardian influence over Hondo, for, as we know, in the sixties Godard frequently used interviews in his own films.¹² The interview provides the theoretical, Marxist foundation for the narrative: It makes clear Hondo's belief that the responsibility for the new slavery rests not, certainly not solely, with individual racism and bigotry but with powerful and inescapable economic forces that create a demand for cheap labor. So, armed with the conviction that there is no hope for him as an individual nor for his "brothers," the protagonist chooses the last resort—to flee.

Thus begins one of the longest sequences in the film. Abandoning all pretense of realism, Hondo plunges headlong into an eerily symbolic meal scene, almost in anticipation of Peter Greenaway, in which he settles accounts with his own past experience. As the protagonist runs through a forest, he meets a White union official—whom we have already encountered in another scene—and his family. They invite him to share a meal at their country home. But the meal turns into a nightmare. The children refuse to eat the food they are given and begin using it as projectiles, later climbing onto the table and wildly trampling on it, while their parents watch with mild reproach. The African stares with dismay. What can this rather unnerving scene possibly mean? How does it cap the various messages previously encoded? According to Hondo, "The meal is the image of the West. I imagine it as a big meal in which nothing has any meaning any more."¹³ Certainly this scene gives support to that assertion. It makes abundantly clear that the refusal of food is scandalous in a world in which so many are starving. It also suggests that in Hondo's view the Western family as an institution symbolized in the ritual of togetherness around the table, its values, and its traditions has crumbled. Third, and perhaps more important, it throws into question the meaning of refusal and rebellion, particularly when we connect this scene to an earlier one in the film.

In it, we saw a little girl (ingenuously?) offer the newly arrived immigrant a sandwich. The man refused it. The film left the viewer clueless as to why he did so. One can therefore only surmise that for the Black man the offer is construed as a demeaning act of charity. Refusal, in this instance, shocking as it might be to good souls, becomes an assertion of dignity and an exercise of freedom.¹⁴ By contrast, in the later scene, the children's rebellion is presented as an example of misguided freedom, precisely because it is not framed in the context of oppression. The children's refusal of food makes a mockery of freedom and of resistance as an empowering act. Furthermore, it is the sign of a society that has lost its sense of the sacred, vital relationships between human beings, and between them and the economic processes—including the production of food—that make their lives possible. To the extent that Third World laborers are involved in this production, trampling on food becomes symbolically trampling on them.

This farcical sequence ultimately makes a powerful statement by exposing the humanistic values—respect, decency, control, education—that are supposed to define the Western culture. What hope is left? None at this point, and the protagonist resumes his flight. This time, however, he is no longer the one that is being rejected: *he rejects*, and he does so in a long scream, akin to a *vomissement*—he throws up everything he has endured.¹⁵ Thus the cycle of ingestion/rejection is completed. Significantly, language, the medium of his acculturation, is what is being thrown out. The man returns to a state of infancy—literally of not speaking. In the last shot, he is filmed in the fetal position at the base of a very large tree, a baobab look-alike, while nearby three portraits are aflame: those of Malcolm X, Ben Barka (the Algerian leader), and Che Guevara. Is it a dream or the foretelling of a revolution, of a general conflagration, death or resurrection? The film ends with the title “To be continued.” But the wandering Black man has come home. He has literally and figuratively returned to his roots, to the base, to the center of the frame.

DECOLONIZING CINEMA AND THE RECEPTION OF AFRICAN CINEMA

It is ironic that at the beginning of this decade, representatives of European filmmakers at the GATT meetings should again be fighting the same battle as the one Med Hondo—and other Third World filmmakers—have been fighting in the last twenty years. It is a battle against the hegemony of Hollywood cinema, based upon the premise that whoever controls the images controls the ideology. Of course, for Med Hondo, the battle must be fought against other White national cinemas as well.¹⁶

But perhaps as important as the “decolonizing” of images is the decolonizing of film criticism. Again, I shall return to *Soleil O*. The film reviewers were exceptionally laudatory. “*Soleil O* seems to me to be the film that, to this day, best expresses Africa,” wrote Bernard Trémege in *Jeune Cinéma* (39). It is “an extremely modern work on the aesthetic level and strikingly powerful on the political level,” according to the critic for *Jeune Afrique*. It is a fascinating film that will deal a masterly blow to the Europeans, his former “masters,” according to Jean-Louis Bory, the film critic for *Le Nouvel Observateur*.¹⁷ Bernard Cohen, in *Positif*, is struck by its creative wealth and turbulence, while the critic for *Les Lettres Françaises* states that this “scream of protest, filmed with remarkable mastery, makes *Soleil O* one of the very best African films today.”¹⁸

Even though Hondo’s subsequent films would not always draw such unanimous praise, the critics would seldom fail to comment positively on his originality, his creativity and vision, the beauty of his images—which, in fact increases with time—and the power of his convictions.

Interestingly, one of the sources of disagreement has been how well Hondo’s militant camera has avoided the pitfalls of ideological didacticism. In view of the

French taste for political readings of artistic works, it is surprising that didacticism should have acquired such a negative connotation among French reviewers, and, I must add, irrespective of their political affiliation. How militancy articulates with didacticism, and how didacticism impacts on aesthetics, are questions too broad to be taken up here but that Hondo's films beg.¹⁹ With regard to this point, the films that most invited such criticism were *Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins* and the two on the Polisario freedom fighters (who have been trying to secure independence from Morocco in the Western Sahara for more than two decades). In his 1973 film, Hondo, fearing that his political message in *Soleil O* had been overshadowed by the existential dimension of his protagonist's fight and flight, decided to sharpen it with the theme of Black and North African laborers in Paris. Inevitably, the risk of didacticism increased with the need for clarification. The risk was there, too, in the following works on the Polisario, because of the need to inform a generally uninformed viewer of the historical background, and the difficulty of avoiding "preaching" on an issue that so directly involved Hondo the Mauritanian.²⁰

But Gilles Colpart's praise of *Nous aurons toute la nuit pour dormir* (1977) as "A just and honest film," in which an "attentive" and "unobtrusive" camera was all the more effective as it avoided sentimentality, would suffice to illustrate how subjective judgments can be when it comes to measuring didacticism in a film, or any work of art, for that matter!²¹

Another theoretical issue that Med Hondo's work brings to the fore is that of the relationship between "modernity" and "Africanism."²² At first glance, there is something unexpected in associating the two terms, as we tend to link African aesthetics with traditional forms, in contrast to modern aesthetics. Among the traditional features commonly stressed in African literary and filmic texts figure orality (or oralitude), the presence of nonlinear narratives, and, of course, any inscription of an African culture, history, symbology, and mythology.

Certainly, to the extent that Hondo's films are solely concerned with chapters of African colonial and postcolonial history, no one can dispute their "Africanism." His inventive use of the sound track can easily be related to an oral tradition. The use of songs, of tribal languages, the intensity of verbal exchanges and of the sound level on the track—particularly noticeable in *West Indies*, even his stream-of-consciousness voice in *Soleil O*, can all be related to an oral culture. They certainly make the White reality represented in his films sound strangely lifeless. Nonlinearity, too, is a common trait of Hondo's films, with the single exception of *Sarraounia*, to this day his most conventional film and conventionally African for its content.

Yet, even *Sarraounia* is touched by modernity. With its strong linear narrative, beautiful and controlled images, a unifying African theme, alternation of grandiose battle scenes and intimate ones (as of the queen being groomed for battle), its subversive intent may not be as evident as in previous works. Its patterning after the

Hollywood epic genre is contradicted, however, by a reversal of viewpoint: the film speaks from the position of the colonized or the aggressed, not that of the aggressor. The film's modernity, therefore, lies in its thematic rather than its formal treatment.

Where modernity and Africanism may be seen in a somewhat less easy relationship is in a film like *Soleil O*. The sense that the two orientations are dichotomous runs through Albert Cervoni's review of the film, which he criticizes for being "too excessively Rive-gauche/Left Bank."²³ True, Hondo's use of animation, theatrics, symbolic theater, masks, songs, and dance—which he also used extensively in *West Indies*—is reminiscent of Western avant-garde theater. But here is a case in which criticism is marred by Eurocentrism. To claim these features as Western property is to forget to what extent twentieth-century avant-garde theater was influenced by non-Western theater, developed in the East as well as in Africa. The theater that Antonin Artaud envisaged, with its expressionistic forms, its display of raw emotions through dance and sound, this "visceral" and ritualistic form of drama, was indeed a Western reinvention of Eastern and African realities. So instead of arguing that Hondo is too acculturated to Western forms, I would like to argue that his work is situated at the confluence of two traditions: his own native tradition and the one he acquired in the West, one that itself had borrowed heavily from artistic forms more familiar to an African artist. In a sense, *Soleil O* and *West Indies* reclaim, in their very modernity, the African heritage buried beneath the veneer of the Western avant-garde.

Cervoni's criticism points to the dangers of critical misappropriation and monocultural interpretations.²⁴ Decolonizing images means taking them back from their exclusive appropriation by a culturally dominant group; but images must also be freed from the viewers' monocentric and monocultural appropriation. How much each of us remains imprisoned in his or her own epistemology is illustrated in Michel Ciment's otherwise sympathetic and intelligent interview of the film director after the release of *Soleil O*. In it, Ciment asked Hondo to define his style, a notion that directly reflects a Western concern—and certainly a very French one—with formal unity and artistic integration. Significantly, Hondo rejected the concept of style and concentrated instead on the role of "visions" as inspiration for his film.

Hondo's dream is to educate people about the "richness of the African heritage," to "explain Africa and the crucial burning issues faced by Black people in Africa and abroad."²⁵ Hondo likes to end his films on a note of hope. I wish I could do likewise here. Yet none of Med Hondo's films are distributed in the United States at the moment. The one most likely to appeal to a wide audience, *Sarraounia*, saw its career on Parisian commercial screens curtailed, and no American distributor stepped forward despite "strong, positive reactions from blacks and whites" when it was shown in Alberta, Chicago, Washington, and Philadelphia.²⁶ The decolonization of images may begin with a talented individual's fight. It will perhaps have a chance of succeeding with the decolonization of the film industry. But as long as audiences continue to

demand films that show “colonial adventurism” and leave no space for reflection about the implications of living in a postcolonial world, it is difficult to be very sanguine about the future of Hondo and filmmakers like him. Yet, Hondo is busy making another film!²⁷

*I am indebted to Robert P. Kolker for his critical comments.

NOTES

1. Quoted from an interview of the filmmaker in Françoise Pfaff, *Twenty-five Black African Filmmakers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988), 157.

2. Quoted in *ibid.*, 159.

3. He worked briefly as an apprentice assistant on several sets and had minor parts in television series.

4. In Don Ranvaud, “Interview with Med Hondo,” *Framework* 7–8 (Spring 1978): 28–30.

5. Cf. Maryse Condé, quoted in Pfaff, *Twenty-five Black African Filmmakers*, 160.

6. In Marcel Martin, “Brève rencontre avec . . . Med Hondo,” *Ecran* 79 81 (15 June 1979): 25–26.

7. Cf. in particular Med Hondo, “Cinémas africains, écrans colonisés,” *Le Monde*, 21 January 1982, 12.

8. Hondo founded his own distribution company, Soleil O, in 1970.

9. Hondo’s criticism of African rulers ended up keeping his films out of the Carthage Festival.

10. Cf. Pfaff, *Twenty-five Black African Filmmakers*, 161.

11. Hondo’s interesting work with the sound track would merit a long discussion.

12. To my knowledge, Hondo never mentions Jean-Luc Godard as a possible influence on his cinema. As a matter of fact, he goes to great lengths to disclaim any influence by a French filmmaker, acknowledging only Glauber Rocha, the Brazilian master of Nuovo Cinema, and Luis Buñuel.

13. In Michel Ciment, “Entretien avec Med Hondo,” *Positif* 119 (September 1970): 22–26. My translation.

14. The notions of gift, refusal, dignity, and independence take on a particular meaning in the context of a postcolonial economy and Western “assistance” to the Third World.

15. Hondo uses the term in a number of interviews that he gave journalists and critics about the film.

16. Hondo has raised questions, for instance, about the appropriateness of using neorealist aesthetics, as the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene has done, to represent an African reality.

17. Quoted in the press release. Jean-Louis Bory, “Les pièges du catéchisme,” *Le Nouvel Observateur* 421 (4 December 1972): 81.

18. In *Positif* 119 (September 1970): 18, and *Lettres Françaises* (5–6 May 1970).

19. On this issue, cf. Thérèse Giraud’s discussion of *Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins*, in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 245–255 (December 1974–January 1975): 41 ff.

20. The two films were *Nous aurons toute la nuit pour dormir* (1977) and *Polisario, un peuple en armes* (1979).

21. Gilles Colpart, *Cinéma* 77 223 (July 1977): 103.

22. The modernity/tradition opposition was a key structuring element in colonial ideology, where the West’s supposed modernity served as a rationale for colonization. By borrowing from both traditional and modern formal codes, Hondo is consciously subverting this opposition and therefore the whole discourse that was founded upon it.

23. In Albert Cervoni, “Un film rive gauche,” *CinémAction* 8 (Summer 1979): 81–82.

24. There are notable exceptions to this critical monoculturalism. One is Guy Hennebelle, who wrote in *CinémAction*: “Mise en scène délibérément moderne, sans être pour autant d’inspiration occidentale” [purposely modern mise-en-scène without, however, being inspired by the West] (“Med Hondo: Mon Film est un vomissement,” *CinémAction* 8 (Summer 1979): 80–81). My emphasis. See also Guy Hennebelle, “Dans *Soleil O* je dénonce les “nègres-blancs . . .,” *Les Lettres Françaises* 1333 (6 May 1970): 17–18.

25. In Pfaff, *Twenty-five Black African Filmmakers*, 161.
26. Cf. Tony Rayns, "African Queen," *Time Out* 906 (30 December–6 January 1988): 36.
27. In 1994 Med Hondo made a new film entitled *Lumière noire*.