

Med Hondo: *Soleil Ô*

Interview by Jean Delmas

MED HONDO Objectively, by chance (or the opposite), we found ourselves as artists “of colour”, to use the common term, gathered in Paris, finally for precisely the same reasons. Bachir Touré, Robert [Liensol] and I were there in the middle of a country, a city, where we needed to live our lives. To put it simply, to work as actors, musicians or singers. But subsequently, we realised something else: that the doors were closed.

ROBERT LIENSOL Because it's extremely difficult for us to gain recognition as actors. We really serve as the shading in the picture, you could say. And then we have to conform to a very precise, very stereotypical image of Negroes seen by Whites... Thinking that a black actor can play any role that isn't a black role, well, that is viewed as totally absurd. A black must be a black... Finally, there is a more or less conscious wish to lock us into our skin. In other words, into picturesque, savage or comic figures, or the role of good Negroes. We're not black humans, we are Blacks. And Blacks are like that, they're nice, they're good and they are also a little cannibalistic, or they were... Generally, the things that prevent us from working, from living as genuine actors, are exactly the same things that prevent a Black, whoever he is, from living as a human.

M. H. To overcome that, our dream is to form a theatre company together. Meanwhile, we have made *Soleil Ô* together.

It was materially impossible to make the film according to the rules of the industry because the film industry has its requirements: for fifty actors, so much money; the camera every day; three months of filming and no more; funding and scheduled dates. It's all methodical, precise, clear: decisions are made in advance, and there must be no overruns. I have no objection to that. But we didn't have enough resources; we don't have them today and in all likelihood we won't tomorrow. To make a film, we had to break with the very nature of formal, material film-making. In other words, we had to go and find a producer and say to them: "My project is the best because I believe in it. Give me—not 40 million—but 10, and I'll manage," etc.¹ We thought that if we could speak, express ourselves, we could make a film—without any help. You could say that the film was made without a centime. There wasn't a million in a bank account so that we could plan the payment of the first instalments. There wasn't 500,000 francs. There was only what each of us was earning from our professional acting together with our total commitment towards the people who trusted us: the promise that we'd pay them one day. I think that's the first thing you have to know. The second thing is that the film—in any case, that was our intention—was to more specifically address people who have been subjected to or followed a very specific path of culturalization, moving from one set of customs to another, starting off from their own language and adopting something else simply to survive.

¹ Translator's note: in 1960, one million "old" francs became ten thousand "new" francs, but large sums often continued to be referred to in "old" francs.

And then, because it is there, because you are told, "That's good," you think why not, since it's good? Until the moment when you finally realise that it's not good and that there's a basic lie there. Let me explain. We are delighted that you like the film and that you watched it. That's even almost a miracle. But someone like us, who has suffered the same distresses, the same lineage, can judge much more severely, much more directly, and say, "Yes, that's actually it." And you'll go further.

Because the evidence is flagrant: since France colonised and then "decolonised" those countries, there have been no African or French-African works. There hasn't been a shared culture produced by that interpenetration.

JEAN DELMAS Yet the poets—? Senghor?
Césaire?

M. H. The garrets have to be opened to the poets, otherwise where will they be read? We also have to take over the Negro expression that one reads, saying, "Look at that fine example of a Negro who thinks like us." Of course we need those poets.

On the other hand, what could be better than to say, "Look at me, I'm a fine example of a Negro, and I write verses like Racine or like Mallarmé. Not exactly the same, because I'm a Negro." And apart from that, lying down and being paid royalties.

I think that Negritude was originally a revolt, a redefinition of oneself. But because it didn't succeed and didn't metamorphose, it became an altar, a closing-in on oneself. Not a battle, but self-satisfaction.

And if it isn't reflected in a struggle, it's nothing.

When we talk about a poet, we are talking about a writer's talent. There's no doubt that Césaire has a fabulous writer's talent. But a writer's talent to benefit whom? To benefit what? An aesthetics of fantastic words, terms, phrases and paraphrasing that you read at home and think, "How beautiful that is!"

But let's look beyond that. His land, the French West Indies, is not in a position to say, "How beautiful that is!" It's repressed.

J. D. But let's suppose that your film is warmly welcomed by Whites in the same way that Césaire has been. What will you do then?

M. H. I'm not claiming to be the Third World's film-maker, as others say they are the poets of Negritude. But. Admitting that I want to take responsibility for certain things, I don't know how I'll be tomorrow. That's a question I must ask myself. If I fall into the trap, well, I hope there'll be people to give me a kicking. Oh yes. Because it's exploiting the naivety, hope and intelligence of others just to blow bubbles. That's monstrous. If I come to you tomorrow and show you the film, saying, "I'm conveying the distress of African workers," and people think, "We have a film-maker who expresses our thinking because he has a weapon, cinema. He'll defend us," and I go off and make aesthetic films to be shown in the salons of the 16th arrondissement or at festivals and I settle for simply making pictures, if I continually reveal the suffering of Negroes while repeating, "Look, they are unhappy, but they're beautiful; they're beautiful, but they're unhappy," I'll win palms. Oh yes! But I believe that others should point it out if I'm irresponsible. You have to take responsibility. By that, I mean that Césaire may be a great poet, but he hasn't assumed his responsibilities. Because he might have used his talent and success to go much further than ten thousand Negroes together could. I have no illusions, though. I already feel we're going to be "hijacked", as they say. It's true. We will, because we can't avoid it. Yet we made this film because it was that or die a little more. We are totally convinced that it's nothing compared to other things that should be done. Nothing.

In any case, we can't stop there. It's something ephemeral, something important at the time it's done, with sweat and determination. We had to say these things that might never have been said. But cinema in itself for us is not the entirety of our expression, it is not the accomplishment of what we want to do...

J. D. What if the success of *Soleil Ô* meant you could make another film?

M. H. I don't know. My stomach already churns just thinking about it. Oh dear. You suddenly have to live up to the clichés about you, whether they're accurate or not so much. And then you have to make films you don't have inside you. I can't imagine making film after film, making films like making sausages. You can't.

If I make another film tomorrow—unless I become the same as others, which isn't out of the question—it will be because I need to do it, because I need to say something in a film. I adore cinema. But for me, cinema in itself isn't total expression, the accomplishment of what I want to do.

J. D. Is that what you want to do with this film, help make African immigrants aware? Spur them to action?

M. H. You don't spur people into some kind of action, you know. But you can be revolted by what you hear every day, by the magma of giant falsehoods that reigns over Africa. And when you are directly concerned by Africa—and by other things, because ultimately everything's connected—you feel a little ill; it's like being slapped every day. And if you're a bit sensitive, you think, "But what does all that even mean? How can you say that?" No, you have to speak out against it, because it is a lie. You have to vent your spleen, you have to get it off your chest. First, you have to vomit it up to understand.

You can't forever listen to black prime ministers and presidents spout horrifying stupidities in the name of the thousands of people they are grinding under their heel. They bring television to Africa and then have presidents say the same things as the Westerners, and then all that continues, and it all just becomes a drone... So what then?

J. D. In one of its aspects, the film conveys an image of the life of black immigrants in Paris. What role does investigative cinema play in its conception? The role of experience?

R. L. All the scenes are based on real experiences, so to speak. Racism isn't a work of imagination, especially in the movies. It's not imaginary. There are very precise things you suffer and that enshroud you. It's like a kind of coat they put on you and you have to live with it. All the slightly anecdotal scenes, even the ones that are pushed to the extreme, are based on real experiences. Even the confession scene at the start, which is startling. At home, in the French West Indies, they actually taught children who were going to confession to admit the sin of speaking Creole. I can guarantee that's true because I lived there for years, until I was twenty-two, and that's genuinely how I began my confession: "Father, forgive me for I have sinned. Father, I admit I have spoken Creole." It's still engraved on my mind and obviously not just on mine, but on the minds of all the kids of my generation. In the same way, the words of the European sociologist—played by an actor, of course; it's not a real interview—are a speech broadly based on a real report from beginning to end. At the same time—because you've realised it's not simply an assault on Whites—the Black who says, "I have an advantage over you, I'm whiter than you are," is also something I experienced and which illustrates the climate.

But I think we have avoided what's known as cinema vérité. At one point, we wanted to film in genuine slums, in Ivry, in fact. But then we thought that it would be good if simply showing an appalling slum, where it's truly impossible to stay for more than an hour without suffocating, could solve the problem. In other words, perhaps by doing that we could make all the French think, "No, it's inconceivable that human beings should live like that in France. We cannot allow it to continue." But we didn't have much hope about that, of course. We were very aware that the film would be shown to audiences who would be like us—without a camera, but with their cigar or cigarette—who, after seeing it, would be capable of saying, "What are you doing now, my friend? Let's go and have a beer." So we would have been using that ghastly poverty to make a film, which would be terrible and a failure on our part. We thought that if we could talk about the problem, we should also be able to avoid repeating that cliché of poverty once again and do something else. The only thing we did in cinema vérité style was to film black faces mingling in the crowd showing that, for economic reasons, Blacks would increasingly be coming to France. The more the West tends towards growth and a strong economy, the more it will need black labour. And the more underdeveloped Africa will be—because the reverse isn't true. It shouldn't be claimed that the richer the West becomes, the more chance Africa will have of becoming rich too. That's wrong: there will always be the masters and the servants since each is kept in a different condition. That means the French are being lied to, and that makes them racist. And on their part, the Africans are lied to as well, told at school, "France is a wonderful country, it's the land of freedom," African governments need currency, and if Blacks go to work in France, they send money home. But nobody tells them it's a difficult country.

« Conversion »



Procession



Reconversion



Décoration



They were needed here, but at the same time, they were rejected.

So the idea was to film images of Blacks who were here. There were one, two, three and then ten, fifteen, twenty and then fifty. The original idea was to show all the places devoted to and sought after by tourists be occupied solely by Blacks.

So suddenly, we would see the Sacré-Cœur... with only Blacks. A good cinematographic impact. But we couldn't do it.

J. D. Apart from that, it's all played by actors?

R. L. It's all played by actors. Absolutely everything. There are forty-five, I believe.

J. D. With a very precise script? Or partly improvised?

R. L. I don't think anything was set in stone at the start. But there's a scene that's a little different, the one where the character I play acknowledges the amount of housing available to Africans. There, all the dialogue is improvised, except for mine, which is from a genuine official report. Everyone said they thought the news I was giving them was total improvisation. But that's the only part, I think.

J. D. Together with descriptive—or demonstrative—scenes on real life for Africans in Paris and the reactions of Europeans towards them, there are images in the film that take on a more general, rather symbolic value. For instance, the christening and then the procession at the start, and subsequently, the mutual extermination of the Blacks using inverted crosses turned into swords, under the derisive adjudication of the French NCO. Or, for example, at the end, the destruction of the family meal in a Norman country house that happens to belong to a trade unionist, done by children watched admiringly by their amused parents. Did that introduction of allegories respond to a choice?

M. H. It's very difficult to answer. I don't know. It's simply a view of things. In the course of the oppression we're subjected to, and which Whites are also subjected to, there are moments when you can no longer cope with your inconsistencies.

There remains just a horrible, nightmarish vision, and to convey that, perhaps all that's left is allegory. As for the meal in the country house—this is a personal notion, a doubt I hope will not last—I believe that for the moment, the ambition of the working classes isn't revolution, it's a better life in a rich, bloated system; the best consumption possible. In other words, they don't mind the boss having his chateau, but they want their chateau too. Or rather, the boss having a Mercedes and their having a Renault 4L, but a little bigger each year, so following the boss. That remains the target, the reference. In that sense, it's a trade unionist I show as not being, let's say, a revolutionary. And then there's something else, something completely personal, which is that I think of the West like that: in other words, a degree of growth making it a great feast. A great feast where a banana no longer means a banana, where a chicken is no longer a chicken, where children are no longer children, where parents are no longer parents, where things take on such proportions that we no longer know what is what. It becomes a confusion of food, bellies, something enormous, where people eat, drink... and then what they eat, what they drink, is not necessarily for enjoyment, not necessarily out of a need to live. I see the West as a huge meal. In fact, you can see it more easily than you can explain it: it's a huge spread; it's grub. When I read that they're throwing artichokes into bins or that there's too much sugar so it has to be kept in a warehouse until it reaches a certain price, those are things that personally, I don't understand, and I can't find the words to explain that situation... Western civilisation, when I see people driving, walking, talking to each other—when they speak—going out to the cinema, eating... for me, it's a dead civilisation. Because people don't count any more—if they ever counted. I don't know, I've only been in France for eleven years.

People don't count at all, they're devoured by cars and transistors; they're devoured, they're devoured, they're the ones **who are devoured**.

That's an African reaction, of course, because I come from Africa and I'm here, and I'm forced to compare. I'm told that Africa is underdeveloped. Underdeveloped compared to what? Compared to the West, which has technological forms, fundamental knowledge. But to achieve what? From what I see? It's a catastrophe.

J. D. After the nightmare, after the race through the forest, the final scenes give something of a sense of relief...

R. L. After the race, when the character collapses, there are pictures of Lumumba, Ben Barka, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, and finally, he glimpses a solution there. It's not really relief, but a moment of optimism.

M. H. There are people who say to me, "You show Guevara. So are you a follower of Guevara?" I say no. "So are you a follower of Lumumba? Of Malcolm X?" I say no. It is simply true that when an individual stands up for certain values basic to humanity, they are shot down, they are killed. I think that's a sufficiently revolutionary attitude. I am no more a follower of Guevara than of Malcolm X. But those who take things to the limit, those in power, those who oppress us all, they kill them. That's clear to everyone. So there is no happy medium. You have to be here or there. You have to choose and refuse. The West has lost its sense of refusal.

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