

Interview with Med Hondo Michel Ciment and Paul-Louis Thirard

MICHEL CIMENT AND PAUL-LOUIS THIRARD

You have principally worked in the theatre before you started making short films.

MED HONDO I have been in France for twelve years, and I travelled through the country like some African aculturalist seeking out knowledge. It's somewhat like a kind of sickness of knowledge: of wanting to be strong and yet equal to others. I was involved in several trades before enrolling in theatre classes; I learned Molière. I have a pretty decent diction, as you can hear. It is always the sickness of knowledge that makes us act like robots: we learn how to recall, to have correct diction, to make ourselves heard, to reject our accents. Things started going wrong whenever I went to the theatre or the cinema, for I didn't see what are commonly called actors of colour. Why even bother to learn *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* if there was no role for me? It was similar in cinema: the same people invariably doing the same films with the same mindset. It was a world from which I was excluded.

And then I had the chance to start in theatre, for the trends were always shifting: Black Americans such as LeRoi Jones foisted a type of play on the theatre. I was thus able to find stage work.

But, that didn't really satisfy me. I haven't actually done that much: *Un homme de trop* by Costa-Gavras, *Tante Zita* by Robert Enrico. I threw myself into directing theatrical productions: Chekhov, African tales and the first piece by an African: *L'Oracle* by Guy Menga. The god of cooperation maintained that we couldn't stage this piece in Africa, for we see Negro generals taking a good tumble. I made two short films, one, *Partout peut être et nulle part*, drawn from a novella. It's the story of a white bourgeois couple observed by me, an African; a play in the comic vein and about responsibility that culminates in the suicide of the man who could not react concretely and was content with intellectual palaver. And another short film, *Ballade aux sources*, about an African (myself), who reflects over ethnic mixing and ethnic relations. I forced myself to do things without any funding. I've always worked in a similar vein ever since I assembled four Black actors to form the company Shango. And these two short films were made from bits, not of wood, but of matches. In other words, with nothing. We would shoot one sequence per day, and whenever the actors were available, we would shoot a second sequence. The films were not screened, for I was worn out even before I could distribute them. I couldn't bear the thought of hauling my film reels around from one distributor to the next.

I think we can do things without what we call money. You have to assume your responsibility, knowing what producers and distributors are like; we can't just throw it together. Everyone laughs if I want to make a film about a personal story, a story about Blacks. Liberal-minded friends tell me, "It's a terrific idea, but what about the money?" We could at least ask the question. That's what I set to prove.

M. C. and P.-L. T. If you were to shoot a film in Mauritania, which language would you use for the dialogues?

M. H. It's still the same problem throughout Africa. Each country is inhabited by several ethnic groups. In fact, there is no state as such. To reach a majority of people the film's dialogue should be spoken in Arabic or in Fulani. In the same way that all the Senegalese don't get the Wolof spoken in *Le mandat* [by Ousmane Sembene]. I once had a project to stage this piece written in French for many African ethnic groups and have it translated simultaneously into several languages. That would be straightforward enough—but that's not the real problem. The real problem is to be able to **say** and distribute that which is said and to have it screened. It is a problem of information, but given this information is retained by political means of which everyone is aware, everything remains to be done.

M. C. and P.-L. T. What is the meaning of the title?

M. H. *Soleil Ô* is a song by Haitian slaves sung when Africans were being transported to America on ships:

*Sun O me I wasn't born here
Me a Negro from Africa
Sun O, Sun O,
My friends on sunny side! Sun O*

It is a kind of recurring hymn. I wrote the story following my impulses. I had come up with a meticulous, heavily written scenario. I even wrote five of them before attempting some cinematic transpositions. I broadened the subject; I let myself be deliberately overwhelmed by events.

M. C. and P.-L. T. What is striking are the ruptures in tone, in rhythm and even of style.

M. H. When I wanted to work in theatre, I started from the idea that an individual who spoke on stage was an orator of sorts who, if sufficiently confident and had enough technique, had to get across what he needed to say and to stand up for it. It still holds true in Africa where we remain open, where we listen to what is being said and where we comment on it right away. Still, I quickly realised that the theatre in the West was all about spectacle, something to be beheld year after year and that always ended up with a familiar routine: "Shall we go for a drink?" "What are you doing tomorrow?" before everybody gets the hell out of there.

As for style itself, I don't really know what it is. I do things a little by vision. I see things in front of or in me, and I don't try to find cellophane to sell it better, to wrap it up more nicely. I'm waiting for events to impose themselves on me. You need to decide not to make a spectacle, to remove the attractive images that can leave viewers lethargic under a false charm due to the costumes, the framing and the camera movements. It's a conscious break with the spectacle. Of course I have had problems because I didn't have the means to do a *recce*. There were sequences that I had visualised but was unable to shoot. You have to be able to change events as you go along, to adapt to them without betraying yourself, to remain honest to yourself. In the script it was written that Blacks would occupy all the sites in France blessed by the gods, such as the Basilica of Sacré-Cœur, the Eiffel Tower, the Pantheon, the Concorde, all these beautified sacred sites. It was meant as a sort of anti-racist provocation that I couldn't do. I would have needed three hundred walk-ons and filming conditions that were not at my disposal.

M. C. and P.-L. T. Ousmane Sembene is so much like Zavattini-De Sica, whereby the mandate replaces the bicycle. Your film seeks to invent an original African style.

M. H. I think it's unintentional dishonesty. The creators, or those burdened with the sickness of knowledge, imagine that whenever you have to speak to a Mauritanian or Senegalese peasant that you have to adopt a neo-realistic vocabulary, simplified to the utmost and even simplistic. We must be able to say things and accept the responsibility for them. If certain insights overwhelm me, and if I'm unable to accept them, even with respect to this Senegalese peasant, then it would be dishonest on my part. My primary virtue is to film that which I have felt. If I am unable to convince, then I am wrong, and I put it all behind me. Otherwise, I would be hiding behind my words.

M. C. and P.-L. T. How do you envisage the future path of your film?

M. H. I have no illusions about the potential to salvage it. First of all, I would like to rent a hall and screen it for all the African ambassadors. I won't see them when the lights go up because they will all have exited before me! And then I would like to find an outlying circuit, for this African portrayed in the film is not from a specific country, and the problem unfolds over the course of the film: we see a Spanish worker, an Arab worker. Everything is interwoven; it is no longer a question of speaking only about Africa. It's lacking in realism; we're all up one gigantic and dreadful shit creek. Negroes, Whites, Yellow-skinned peoples, we are all in the same boat. We have to find candy merchants who would buy thirty-year-old Egyptian films and impose my film on them for their working-class customers. Ultimately, *Soleil Ô* was made through an investment scheme. I don't want a situation where it's the distributor who pays the employees. That's out of the question. The proceeds will be shared between the sixty people who made the film. But I knew before undertaking the film that it might well remain

hidden away in my closet, even if I worked for years to pay off debts by doing dubbing work, or commercials for Africa. To my great shame I admit that I've made advertisements with images, but rather in the form of tales. We avail ourselves of African tales that are very beautiful to sell Gillette blades or beer. In any case, this film helped me learn to speak out. I don't make cinema so as to impose my ideas on others, but rather to speak out about what disturbs me in the world, what makes me sick and prevents me from breathing.

M. C. and P.-L. T. You reject psychology.

M. H. It is important for me to know, as close as possible to unfolding events, where I am, whom I'm with and why. And the parable expresses this better than me. What I want to avoid is aestheticism. This is something that is only valid from that moment the master idea takes centre stage. Otherwise, it is the ruse of the beautiful image with its risks of escapism, distraction or intellectual satisfaction. The root, however, of what you want to express, the true state of affairs, the spitting, the vomiting, don't get expressed if they're wrapped up in a silk handkerchief. Perhaps I find myself at present in a ferocious state, where my flesh is scarred with cuts. Yet, it is also possible that tomorrow I will ask for fifteen-kilometre long travelling shots, but for now these things don't interest me. I only see in images what I've experienced, my acculturation both by Arabic and by French. If you truly want to understand, things become more straightforward. We tear off the beautified mask and grasp reality. And that reality is the opposite to that which we have been taught. That's what I wanted to reveal in the film. A meal conjures up the image of the Western world. I picture it to myself as a big meal where nothing makes sense any longer. Soon in France, in Italy, we will have everything, cars, appliances, chairs,

butter, whatever in the millions, which we will have to transform into grass for the cows. Ultimately, for whom, and why all this? Even bread no longer has its meaning. We throw it away, and then we reach out for a cigarette. It's the annihilation of all indispensable values for mankind: nothing means anything anymore. It is a huge holiday meal that we fling in our faces. One of my earliest memories on arriving in France is that for three months I used to cart Gruyère cheese to Les Halles: a friend invited me to a meal where I couldn't eat because I saw in it a situation identical to that I have portrayed in my film. It is not without good cause that the man portrayed in the film as the host was a CGT trade unionist who champions order, while at the same time protecting and representing the misfortune of others. There's that which he says and that which he really is.

M. C. and P.-L. T. What is your attitude to Negritude?

M. H. Negritude for me has become, schematically speaking, a kind of self-satisfaction. At the outset, we can see the actual outcome for Césaire and Senghor—which is clear and persuasive. Their actions are very precise—Negritude was a combat weapon. But, as with any combat weapon, it needs to change and not turn into the stuff of selfishness. We were fond of Mr Césaire's verses, which are indeed very beautiful; he's a master poet, and we read his poems in maid's rooms across Paris well-heeled 16th arrondissement. But with regard to what he must answer for, he contents himself with his satisfaction as a Black man. And, in terms of action? Nothing more. And suddenly, the reverse complex takes effect. Whites have been saying: "Pay heed, it's Mr Césaire, he's a great poet, we ought not to question him." Negritude has not changed. It has made us dream; it is true that it has afforded some people a sense of awareness;

it has reconnected them with their roots, while the champions of Negritude have become the merchants of Negritude. In its name, Mr Senghor runs a country with his dogmas and the liberalism that we know. Mr Césaire spends ten months a year living in his Paris apartment by selling beautiful poems, which, compared to reality in the West Indies, is an anomaly, an appalling treason.

M. C. and P.-L. T. What training do you have in film-making?

M. H. My training comes from my viewpoint as a spectator. I would go to the cinema and watch a film three or four times, jotting down notes in a notebook where I criticised the film. I did two internships as an assistant. In more recent cinema, what I find wonderful are the films by Glauber Rocha, both stylistically and in terms of their content. What I would reproach him is perhaps that he confuses the problems a little too much, as though I were to mix fetishism with my themes. His films are more geared toward intellectuals. The problem nowadays, however, is to be understood. Apart from Rocha, I admire Buñuel; but no French director at any rate.

M. C. and P.-L. T. What is interesting is that, thanks to you and some other directors, we White people see ourselves being scrutinised.

M. H. Whenever you experience a difficult situation and you feel that you are being spied upon, there are things that are striking, as with the couple in front of the TV in the film. There is nothing other than TV; mankind no longer exists. It's been three years since I returned home and I'm starting to have difficulties breathing, and I walk like a robot. I'm surrounded by too many inimical elements, too much aggression. We feel as though we're being

observed because we have been cultivating the difference since Europeans colonised Africa. We have defined what an African is, and now we state that he is different, and we distinguish him amidst Africans. Even if welcomed by cultured or intelligent people, they observe us because they have already built up an image of us that they have learned through books, daily culture, and from that point they come face to face with you, they confront you with the idea that they've already made of you. We have lied to Africans and to the French alike about the true nature of the other. I started off with a film about Africans in Paris, for it is a reality that I live intensely, one that hurts and tortures me.