

Black African Cinema

Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley / Los Angeles / London

formulation firmly rooted in the spirit of pan-Africanism, calling for the rearticulation of Africa's history distorted by colonial ideologies.

One such protest of significant historical and ethical value was registered by Inoussa Ousseini in his first film, *La sangsue* (The leech; Niger, 1970). This little film (which deals with an African's interpretation of Western sexual relations) explains why Nigerois filmmakers, even though they learned filmmaking by working with French filmmakers, did not hide their contempt for films made about Africa by Europeans, such as the ethnographic films of Jean Rouch in particular. Ousseini made it clear that for him *The Leech*

is a sociological essay on the sexuality of the French as seen by an African. . . . I was trying to shock people in order to draw a reaction. . . . Jean Rouch was to play a role: I wanted to show him naked in the same way as he shows naked Africans in *Jaguar*, for example. My idea was to create a psychological shock. But he didn't turn up for the shoot.⁵⁹

Mandabi, as Sembene has stated, also does not present a beautiful, glowing picture of neocolonial Africa,⁶⁰ as with so many other films of this period. Out of the ideologically, sometimes diverse political and cultural national contexts a tradition is being established linking this overall determination to what one would call an African cinematic tradition that recognizes the need to embellish conventional narrative structures with African oral narrative modes. With this, black African cinema established a structure that links traditional culture with western technology (typified by the technologically dominant mode of production). This structure is exemplified in the innovative work of two men whose theories and film practices have greatly influenced the younger generation of black African filmmakers, Ousmane Sembene and Med Hondo.

Med Hondo and Ousmane Sembene: The Schism between Theory and Practice

Typifying the mood of the 1960s, when national consciousness and revolutionary awareness were sweeping through all the world, some artistic expressions, political manifestations, and the fully formed strategies of the structures and concrete practices of some committed individuals were directed toward anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles. During this decade there emerged the black consciousness movement in America, armed guerrilla struggles in Latin America, student revolts, and the intensification of national liberation struggles that led

to the freedom of most African states, with the exception of the Portuguese-held territories and white minority-ruled states of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), apartheid South Africa, and South West Africa (Namibia).

From the first decade of African cinema, nowhere else did the philosophies expounded by these movements become more apparent than in the writings, speeches, and film practices of Senegal's Ousmane Sembene and Mauritania's Med Hondo. As this study has demonstrated, there were many films produced during these years that developed out of various traditions and an assortment of themes and styles. Characterized by social and domestic concerns, films simply reflected the tensions and contradictions of African experience which the filmmakers tackled with individual approaches. Some filmmakers were explicitly apolitical, but others found being so inadequate to address Africa's problematic emancipation and politically diverse contemporary events.

The coalition of all African filmmakers, *Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes* (FEPACI), accorded full political observer status at the Organization of African Unity (OAU), has devoted its doctrinal efforts to the advocacy of pan-African aspirations. For example, during the FEPACI conference in Algiers in 1975, filmmakers, concerning themselves with the future of Africa and African cinema, debated the role of cinema in political, economic, and cultural developments. Arguing to make consciousness-raising a priority, they suggested a bold design that would eventually free the continent from imperialism's economic and ideological domination by politically reeducating the masses. The aim of these measures was to encourage an African film style, which in its process of decolonizing, would also "question the images of Africa" and challenge the received narrative structure of the dominant cinema. As a model for Africa's "new" informative cinema, the films of Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo, and Mahama Johnson Traoré met the standards envisioned for African film by emphasizing instructional values while opposing the "sensational" and "commercial" aspects of dominant cinemas.⁶¹

Hondo's and Sembene's work is set apart from that of other filmmakers of this period. The ideological orientations of these two men gave direction to the creativity embodying the exposition, revivification, and solidification of Africa's national cultural systems, which should be attributed to the revolutionary pan-African awareness of this period. Although these filmmakers differ in both their approach to and style of filmmaking, their goals were the same—to facilitate the freedom of the oppressed with social justice and equality in every area of life.

Hondo and Sembene, as major artists of this period, introduced many of the thematic concerns and stylistic characteristics that permeate much of black African cinema. Their endeavors include the ex-

ploration of cultural imperatives and the infusion of African oral narrative patterns into Western, technologically inspired cinematic narrative forms, thus establishing an African cinematographic language with which to analyze traditional and modern cultures. This unique combination, both filmmakers maintain, stresses African cultural forms and ancient African representational patterns, but it also dilutes the potency of the dominant representational forms that have not and cannot be completely eliminated from their films. However, the major aesthetic significance of this undertaking should not be underrated. In the aftermath of continuing foreign cultural influences, especially Western, Africans are looking more and more at indigenous African traditions, and contemporary African film practice is shifting its focus to the potentials of African oral traditions as the quintessence of its creative autonomy.

This portion of our discussion examines the theoretical and artistic motivations, politics, and ideology manifested in the work of these great innovators in the first one-and-a-half decades of the evolution of black African cinema. As already indicated, it was the ideology and the philosophy of pan-Africanism that illuminated the structure of African political thought and the artistic development of certain individuals such as Hondo and Sembene. It is necessary at this juncture to pause briefly and examine the nature of the intellectual stimulation that structured this pan-African movement.

Since the pan-African movement was initiated, the patterns of African political thought⁶² have extended far beyond national boundaries and assumed international ramifications. The pioneers are intellectuals of various nationalities representing several generations emerging at specific historical periods. They were motivated by the same course of action—principally to advance the need to seek out the structures and coordinates of African history. Among the intellectuals who developed the theoretical concepts that strengthened this position as we know it today are Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Eduardo Mondlane, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Leopold Sédar Senghor. The various schools of thought they expounded were negritude, Marxism, African socialism, African nationalism, and pan-Africanism, the last being the most influential in the development of various African intellectual systems, politically and artistically.

This important political philosophy was born, paradoxically, outside Africa, a creation of African descendants living in America and the West Indies, committed intellectuals who, although living many thousands of miles from their African motherland, never lost faith in their identification with the culture slavery had forced them to abandon. As an intellectual process aimed at demystifying the ideological distortions of the colonial historiography of Africa and African cultures, the expli-

cation of the nature and structure of the history of the African continent and its people in the diaspora could assist in bringing to fruition the liberation of Africa.⁶³ The exponents of this philosophy included Edward Wilmot Blyden, W. E. B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, and C. L. R. James, among others.

Between the late nineteenth century and approximately the middle of the twentieth, this movement was at the peak of its influence. However, its importance began to wane with the attainment of independence by many African countries; other political-intellectual systems developed and expanded the original pan-African agenda to deal with contemporary realities. But in terms of the revolutionary orientation given to the anti-imperialist and antineocolonial struggles in Africa, the political philosophies of Fanon, Cabral, Nkrumah, and Nyerere undoubtedly illuminated African national liberation struggles.

As a mobilizing effort destined to give direction to a growing cultural consciousness, liberation movements sometimes stagnated, owing to the fact that the culture and nationalism that it set out to revive had disintegrated in the face of colonialism. In black Africa, centuries of European occupation had, through force or ideological distortions, eclipsed African ethnic cultural and national histories. It is vital to point out that this debilitating condition also retarded the intellectual and artistic maturity that would have inspired its opposition. The colonial process infiltrated the psyches of some of Africa's intellectuals and artists, denying the continent, in its early stages of formation, the intellectual vigor necessary for orderly growth. The result was that this deficiency engendered complacency for what Chinua Achebe has befittingly termed "a tendency to pious materialistic wooliness and self-centered pedestrianism,"⁶⁴ with no deeply ingrained sense of nationalism. This was indeed disastrous since a well-planned agenda of social and economic reorganization or at least a well-conceived and consistent program of reform (which Africa was and still is in desperate need of) is critical in effecting productive change. Since it is within the dawn of the neocolonial era that the production of cinema started, and since the pioneers of black African cinema are among the neocolonial elite (people who came to prominence by virtue of their education in Eastern and Western European colleges and film schools), it is also vital that we briefly explore the position of the African intellectual in relation to African development. This will also clarify the status of black African filmmakers and their ideological, political, and aesthetic pursuits.

Fanon, in an intensely critical evaluation of Africa's rather complex social, political, and economic process, viewed the evolution of Africa's intellectuals as traversing three phases of development: assimila-

tion; questioning or rediscovery; and revolutionary identification with national liberation struggles—national identification.⁶⁵

In the assimilation phase, intellectuals maintain complete loyalty to colonial doctrines and care less about Africa's cultural heritage and its history. In fact, they make European culture their own, preferring to be thought of as European rather than African. (It is in this vein that Senegal's Blaise Diagne,⁶⁶ before the Second World War, and Niger's Hamani Diori, between 1946 and 1958, served as deputies in the French Parliament—becoming classic examples of assimilated intellectuals.) Many scholars have argued that in this period, there was no real intellectually significant work of monumental value.

The second phase marks the period of rediscovery when the intellectual, identifying with his roots, begins to question colonialist assumptions about African societies, or in broader terms, the black culture. Césaire (of the West Indies) and Senghor (of black Africa) are the leading exponents of this tradition. Their well-known but often controversial negritude philosophies⁶⁷ did inspire noteworthy intellectual thought and responses of lasting value. Césaire's work, situated within the framework of culture and politics, stimulated innovative practices, and in fact, his brand of negritude influenced Fanon, the dominant figure of African political thought, whose work and influence is more encompassing.

In the third phase of national liberation, the intellectual, attaining maturity, teams up with the masses to form a combative liberation force and develops "a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and national literature."⁶⁸ The political philosophies of Fanon, Cabral, and Nkrumah make this direction concrete, and it is here that the maturity and impact of African political thought is most formidable. It is also here that we can find the level of inspiration that these political thoughts have imparted to Hondo and Sembene. But before we do that, and to provide further ground for understanding these filmmakers, it is vital that we relate Fanon's phases to Antonio Gramsci's categorizations of intellectuals and Teshome H. Gabriel's connection of these phases with the general patterns of Third World filmmaking.

Writing on European cultures, Antonio Gramsci, the Italian political theorist, identified in his *Prison Notebooks* "two conceptual categories of intellectuals": the traditional and the organic.⁶⁹ Whereas the traditional intellectual identifies himself with the main organ of the ruling class (as in the assimilationist phase, for example), the organic intellectual sees himself as an integral element in the strings that hold together the aspirations and the nationalistic ideals of an emerging "new" society as well as those of oppressed social ethnic groups. This phenomenon, which Gramsci defined as a "universal process," is relevant to

the African context. Here, in the fight against colonialism and imperialism, most intellectuals could be grouped in the category of organic intellectuals.⁷⁰ But in the postindependence era this tradition has split into two important traditions that we shall call the bourgeois tradition of narcissism and the service tradition. Here the importance of the new frontiers of human development, intellectual-cum-spiritual maturity, and how it is to function for the well-being of the society, is tested. In any society, there are people who cultivate intellectual and moral richness, making them more socially dependable and less prone to deviance; and even if they do deviate from cultural norms, they are still useful to society because they are inclined to work for the betterment of that society. It is in these terms that the principal tendencies of African cinema begin to manifest themselves.

Ferid Boughedir, in his examination of the thematic and formal concerns of African cinema, identified categories of African filmmakers. One of these categories is "those who make films in order (before anything else) to be of service to their people."⁷¹ There is no question that this reason dominates Hondo's and Sembene's desire to make films. They both defied the postindependence, neocolonial lure. They relentlessly spoke for the common people; they committed their art to the people in a pan-Africanist spirit. It is this writer's contention that during this period both filmmakers belonged to the service tradition as opposed to the bourgeois tradition of narcissism and materialism.⁷²

Film theorist Teshome H. Gabriel states that "the three stages Fanon traces alternatively mark and compose the genealogy of Third World film style,"⁷³ of which black African cinema must be located within the same social space. Gabriel identifies the first phase with the tendency to imitate Hollywood film style, "submitting both to the concepts and propositions of commercial cinema"; the second with the championing of the establishment of national cinemas, with filmmakers still retaining aspects of conventional film languages; and the third with intentional radicalization of modes of representation. Applied to black African cinema, the second and third categories are most appropriate.

Hondo and Sembene believe that cinema contributes to the struggle for national liberation through demystification of the distortions of colonial ideology. In other words, film must be explicitly ideological. How then has this assumption propelled the search for the authentic, or as Clyde Taylor puts it, "undominated African film language," which both filmmakers have relentlessly pursued?

Even before Sembene started making films, he had already vividly portrayed the relationship between Africa and Western cinema in his novel *God's Bits of Wood* in the character of N'Deye, a teacher training college student:

She lived in a kind of separate world; the reading she did, the films she saw, made her part of the universe in which her people had no place, and by the same token she no longer had a place in theirs. . . . When N'Deye came out of a theater where she had seen visions of mountain chalets deep in snow, of beaches where the great of the world lay in the sun, of cities where the nights flashed with many colored lights, and walked from this world back into her own, she would be seized with a kind of nausea, a mixture of hate and shame. . . . N'Deye herself knew far more about Europe than she did about Africa; she had won the prize in geography several times in the years when she was going to school. But she had never read a book by an African author—she was quite sure that they could teach her nothing.⁷⁴

The ability of film to build and change people's consciousness was also greatly elaborated in Hondo's article "What Is Cinema for Us?" Referring to what he calls "Euro-American Cinema," Hondo wrote:

Film plays a major role in building people's consciousness. Cinema is the mechanism *par excellence* for penetrating the minds of our peoples, influencing their everyday social behavior, directing them, and diverting them from their historic national responsibilities. It imposes alien and insidious models and references and without apparent constraint encourages our people to adopt modes of behavior and communication based on the dominant ideology. This damages our own cultural development.⁷⁵

In a tone reminiscent of other Third World theorists of ideology, both Sembene and Hondo called for the establishment of a national cultural and political force capable of inspiring the development of national liberation and therefore social transformation, echoing Fanon's ideological position that "an authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation."⁷⁶ Fanon's theory of ideology puts great emphasis on the importance of restructuring African society in order to create an emancipatory force formidable enough to take Africa back to its true national culture. In Hondo's and Sembene's films, we see a conscious recapitulation of the multilayeredness of African cultural-historical formations. And reminiscent of Fanon's views, this position is situated and posited within the threatening currents that inform the complex interconnections between traditional African culture and imposing international forces. At the beginning of black African cinema, Fanon's philosophy of culture and ideology seems to have had the most commanding influence, more so than in later films where sociohistorical aesthetic meanings exhibit formulations similar in construction to Cabral's philosophy of history.⁷⁷

Med Hondo and Ousmane Sembene both discovered their creative vocation in Europe (in Hondo's case France, in Sembene's both France and the U.S.S.R.). While Sembene returned to his native Senegal to pursue his career, Hondo is still exiled in France where he has become a formidable expatriate filmmaker. The film practices of both directors exemplify a meticulous examination of concrete problems within the society. Aware of the intimate relations between the cultural and the social, they convey the sense of the situation which they address. Above all, their work emphasizes the right to speak in one's own cultural idioms. As in the tradition of the African storyteller, their cinematographic language reveals their distinctive view of African reality mingling narrative, reflection, didacticism, and information in a haunting audiovisual flow of imagery. Hondo's experience in France of the confinement of Arab and black African immigrant workers in subhuman conditions has been the driving force behind his filmic approach. He, like Sembene, is an activist, and both filmmakers apply Marxist dialectical organization (and pan-African structures) to address various African issues.

For Hondo and Sembene, there is a bond that connects the artist to his audience. The audience, which both filmmakers aspire to educate and entertain, are the peasants. Like Fanon and other Third World national liberation theorists, the peasants are the force behind successful revolutions. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, for instance, Fanon calls for absolute political education, stating that "to educate the masses politically is to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends on them; that if we stagnate it is their responsibility and that if we go forward, it is due to them too."⁷⁸ Correspondingly, in the films, writings, and speeches of Hondo and Sembene, similar emphasis is placed on the educational role of the cinema among the "proletariat" (Hondo), or as a "night school of my people" (Sembene), for the benefit of the peasantry. As Fanon's position concerning Africa and the Third World is similar to the views of other liberation theorists such as Cabral, Guevara, and Mao, to mention a few, so do Hondo's and Sembene's cinematic practices bear close affinity to those of other practitioners of Third World/Third Cinema. The connotations of the term "Third World" have already been briefly stated. For the purpose of this study, the term used in relation to film simply means those made by filmmakers who come from peripheralized countries (generally referred to as the Third World) as well as by filmmakers of Third World origin living in the so-called First World (developed countries) and whose films meet the Third Cinema criteria.⁷⁹

The notion of Third Cinema began in Latin America in the 1960s, partially inspired by the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and by Brazil's Cin-

ema Novo. Glauber Rocha's article "The Aesthetics of Hunger" (also known as "The Aesthetic of Violence")⁸⁰ became the driving force that accelerated its polemical significance. The term "Third Cinema" and its relevance to film history was actually launched and given prominence by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, two veteran filmmakers and theorists from Argentina who made *La hora de los hornos* (The hour of the furnaces, 1968) and wrote a manifesto entitled "Toward a Third Cinema,"⁸¹ followed by Cuba's Julio García Espinosa who published an avant-gardist manifesto in 1969 entitled "For an Imperfect Cinema."⁸²

Getino and Solanas's manifesto addresses two major concerns, calling for the rejection of the cinematic model imposed by the Hollywood tradition and the need to create a new cinema that would fulfill ideological and revolutionary purposes. The new form of cinema they advocated was to be used for "the development of a worldwide liberation movement whose moving force is to be found in the Third World countries."⁸³ Its purpose was to assist the decolonization process by transforming the unchanged individual to the "new man" exemplified by revolutionary objectives and revolutionary culture.⁸⁴ In tones that correspond with Fanon's third phase, where militant literature is likened to a weapon, Solanas and Getino liken the film image to guerrilla tactics: the camera is "a rifle"; the film, "a detonator"; and the projector, "a gun that can shoot twenty-four frames per second"; while the filmmaker is the guerrilla fighter who "travels along paths that he himself opens up with machete blows."⁸⁵

Getino and Solanas's manifesto attacks two existing forms of cinema, namely, "First Cinema" and "Second Cinema." While the former, Hollywood cinema, is seen as expressing imperialistic, capitalistic, bourgeois ideas, the latter is dubbed "author's cinema" and ranges from the French Nouvelle Vague to the Brazilian Cinema Novo. Although, in many respects the Second Cinema does not actually belong to the dominant cinema, since it attempts cultural decolonization, under the terms by which the Third Cinema was to function, it still "expresses the aspirations of the middle strata, the petit bourgeoisie."⁸⁶ Clarifying the demarcation line between Third Cinema and First and Second Cinema some years later, Solanas put it this way:

For us, Third Cinema is the expression of a new culture and of social change. . . . Third Cinema gives an account of reality and history. It is linked with national culture. . . . It is the way Third World is conceptualized and not the genre nor the explicit political character of a film which makes it belong to Third Cinema.⁸⁷

Also, Solanas reminds us that there are many categories of filmmakers in the Third World as well as good and bad authors in any of the categories.

Julio García Espinosa's argument in his manifesto emphasizes the relationship between "art" and "life." According to him, the purpose was not to create a minority of intellectual full-time artistic filmmakers but to question the division existing between filmmakers or critics and the masses. His main concern was how the cinema was to maintain an effective permanent function in cementing the relationship between culture and society. The technical or aesthetic perfection of the mainstream ("perfect") cinema which he said "is almost always reactionary" came under attack. For him, aesthetic quality or the valorization of technique was of less importance to his notion of imperfect cinema, which "finds its audience in those who struggle" and "its themes in their problems."⁸⁸ But their aspiration must be shown in a different way. Distinct from Western cinema, which celebrates in results and outcome, imperfect cinema concerns itself with the processes that cause the problem. And because much emphasis is placed on process rather than on technique or quality, imperfect cinema could be created "equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a guerrilla camp in the middle of the jungle."⁸⁹ Ideally, the filmic results are stylistically varied, and for the interpretation of Third World sociohistorical circumstances in cinematic language the approach has been anti-Hollywood.

Primarily, Third Cinema and the black African cinema exemplified by the political films of Hondo and Sembene attempt to divorce themselves from the cinematic traditions created by Hollywood. The extent to which this occurs in relation to the actual filmic practice is debatable. The audience's perceptions are transformed by making them aware of the underlying causes of their societal reality, and the relationship between their own lives and the "reality" encoded in film becomes a matter of paramount importance. This cinema is antitraditional in the sense that it goes against the universally accepted classical Hollywood narrative film style regnant since the twenties. But as film historians Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery note, "The stylistic transparency of the Hollywood style prevented films from raising the issue of their own status as cultural or aesthetic objects, for to do so would have been to undermine the primacy of the narrative."⁹⁰ Such exponents of the cinema of the Third World as Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino, Miguel Littin, Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo, and others have criticized Hollywood films for not encouraging their audiences "to think of them as films or to question their relationship to the events on the screen."⁹¹ Third World film practice seeks to develop an aesthetic

deemed relevant or appropriate to its own cultural environment. Meaningful theorizing of ideological and artistic significance is the goal toward which African cinema should strive.

In theme, theory, or practice, what these theorists and filmmakers are in effect saying is that the masses should mobilize or be mobilized for action toward the total liberation of oppressed peoples and transformation of society, through political activity, violent revolt, or by any other means. In fact, most of Fanon's theory of ideology emphasized violence as the only language that the colonizer understands. The villages he depicts are riddled with suffering masses, implying that suffering causes violence, and violence, in turn, can cause more suffering. But "for the native," according to Fanon, "violence represents the absolute line of action."⁹² This aspect of Fanon's position on revolution and violence is the least understood, his critics charging that it is too simplistic and deterministic.⁹³ Although Fanon's strong emphasis on the liberating role of violence does provide room for aberrant interpretations, Paul Nursey-Bray has observed that Fanon also "anticipated a number of contemporary positions in his recognition that a liberated consciousness is not an automatic response to social change. Indeed, [Fanon] also asserts that being directly engaged in the struggle to achieve that change may, in itself, be insufficient."⁹⁴

Similarly, Sembene's position echoes this observation. Agreeing that all work marks "a point of reference in history," this filmmaker is specific about the relationship between film and revolution. According to him, "the role of the artist is to denounce what he sees wrong in society," but, he argues, "to give solutions escapes the artist."⁹⁵ Like Sembene, a number of black African filmmakers also acknowledge that a single film cannot create a revolution. In his discussion of Third World revolutionary films, Gabriel points out that it is in the film's role as a denouncer that Sembene attaches its revolutionary potential, thus, for Sembene, "a film can be revolutionary without creating an actual revolution."⁹⁶ Here one can easily sense some irony or discrepancy in Sembene's understanding of the distinction between art and revolution and the interpretation of that distinction if one should contrast it with his powerful screen images. Toward the end of *Mandabi*, for instance, the postman (Bah) unleashes the powerful warning "Nous changerons tout cela" (We shall change all this). Considering this statement within the situation in which it is delivered (the protagonist having gone through societal injustice and dehumanization), there is no doubt that a call for change has just been made. That the audience did not react en masse by trooping out into the streets to fight for their rights does not necessarily indicate that passivity or the need for revolutionary change was not implied.

Like most other African or Third World filmmakers or theorists, most of Sembene's films are open-ended in much the same way that Fanon's ideological construction leaves his views susceptible to various interpretations. Sembene once remarked, "I had no belief that after people saw it [*Mandabi*] they would go out and make revolution,"⁹⁷ yet the director remained committed to the "collective optimism" that he stressed all along in this film and particularly in the film's closing prophetic statement, "We shall change all this." The strength of collective endeavor in *Mandabi* is comparable to the individual experience Hondo turns into a collective one in *Soleil O*. Toward the end of the film, the hero is seen fleeing into the bush apparently shocked and disgusted (considering his own depravity) after seeing a French family waste food. He falls upon the roots of a tree, his mind swirling with haunting images of martyred revolutionaries—Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Ben Barka, and Malcolm X—and with machine-gun fire resounding in his ears. Here image and sound coalesce into a revolutionary whole, and on the symbolic level, the hero can only find salvation in his own roots. All of this emphasizes the restructuring of consciousness as a necessary precondition for a genuinely "new" society. Thus, as in Fanon's writings, in the films of Hondo and Sembene it is the structure itself that dramatizes the ideological dimension of the whole project. How then does identification with one's heritage guide and shape the social practices of Hondo's and Sembene's aesthetic and artistic maturity?

It is the contention of this writer that black African cinema, like any other filmmaking practice or national cinema, does not have to reinvent the conventions of cinema in order to remove it from the dominant film practice. Rather, the filmmakers of a particular region, depending on cultural tastes and historical circumstances, might opt to create aesthetic strategies that build upon the already existing traditions of the dominant cinemas. Much black African and Latin American cinema has adopted this counterhegemonic strategy.

The artistic and aesthetic development of Hondo and Sembene is attributable to a number of cumulative influences ranging from all aspects of their culture and education (traditional, colonial, and neocolonial) to their Marxist or pan-Africanist ideological orientations. In their films, no one specific influence can be said to override the others. Among the aesthetic influences we find elements of Italian neorealism, Brechtian epic theater, avant-garde as well as Russian-Marxist aesthetics and cultural practices, all now refurbished to conform to the social tendencies of the African people and forming the basis on which political practice of cinema can be sustained. In reaching this goal, however, Hondo's and Sembene's styles are diametrically opposed to each other.

While Sembene's style is more relaxed, Hondo's is very personal and combative, yet they are both revolutionary in content and treatment. Both approaches have been linked with the kind of mass mobilization or "call for action" sentiments found in Fanon's work and subsequently in Third World theories and Third Cinema practices. Their films provoke thought and instigate action.

In regard to Hondo's film style, Pfaff notes a "syncopated eruptive tone that reminds one of the stylistically disruptive tone of some French speaking black literary writers such as Frantz Fanon, Léon Damas and Aimé Césaire."⁹⁸ Indeed, Hondo eschews the type of linear narrative structure that composes most African films. This is why European film critics have likened his style of filmmaking to the militant anticlassicism of Godard and European avant-garde theater. Since it was Sembene's films that opened up African cinema to the outside world, his film style substantiated the notion that African films "tend to engage in building a new style from the ground up."⁹⁹ While *Borom Sarret*, *Black Girl*, and *Mandabi* might be considered annoyingly slow paced, African and European viewers were stunned by the way Hondo's film style confronted and demystified dominant film practices. While Hondo's images gyrate in a camera movement that provides a powerful climactic shock, Sembene's depend on linear structuring and explication of minute details—letting things happen in a natural time continuum.

Sembene frequently argues that the "deliberate" slow pacing of his films works to the advantage of his target audience, that is, the illiterates who may not understand the meaning of the messages conveyed if a rapid succession of images bombards the screen.¹⁰⁰ But Hondo does not see fast camera movement or the rapid succession of images as inhibiting understanding. According to him, "It has often happened that those who understood it [*Soleil O*] best are illiterate," arguing that it has always been the proletariat who must explain his films to the intellectuals because the former can identify with it.¹⁰¹ Both filmmakers invoke African oral storytelling technique as their primary influence. Directorial style and individual application of oral tradition to film narrative structures compose the major differences in these filmmakers' work. Hondo has stated that "there is no dichotomy between style and content . . . [since] it is the content which imposes a style."¹⁰² He goes on to state that in his country, and throughout Africa, "when people talk about a specific thing, they may digress and come back to their initial topic. . . . We shall not tell a linear story as it happens in Hollywood but we should narrate it as an African and the African way."¹⁰³

The basic differences in the approach of both filmmakers is particularly discernible within the context of African oral narrative patterns.

As already stated in chapter 1, in this context stories, even familiar ones, can be told in different ways. It is the idiosyncrasies of stylization that enhance the power of these artists' audio and visual imagery. This is an important phenomenon and a reason why Hondo's and Sembene's aesthetic differences must be viewed in terms of oral tradition rather than judged exclusively according to avant-garde, Godardian, Brechtian, Hollywood, or European aesthetic norms. As both filmmakers have demonstrated, the modifications they introduce on the level of structure via oral tradition tend to highlight the situations they portray and the kind of struggle their images evoke, as well as demand that their audience identify with the images and participate in the struggles ahead.

Sembene may not argue with Hondo that there is no dichotomy between style and content, but the question is, does their content actually impose a style? Hondo believes firmly that it does, and a look at *Soleil O* and the films following it ratifies this claim. Whereas Hondo's strategy is to montage unrelated sequences (reminiscent of Dziga Vertov of the former Soviet Union),¹⁰⁴ Sembene uses static camerawork and the effects of the long take (reminiscent of André Bazin's notion of psychological identification in the audience-image relationship)¹⁰⁵ to reach the same goal.

Sembene's *Borom Sarret*, *Black Girl*, and *Mandabi*, as well as Hondo's *Soleil O*, are all revelatory attempts from this period to express African and pan-African imagery. *Borom Sarret* deals with the contradictions of a taxi driver's life in newly independent Senegal, while *Black Girl* and *Mandabi* treat, respectively, the disparity between affluent French colonialists and their oppressed French maid and an allegorical exploration of corruption and exploitation, and *Soleil O* is preoccupied with French racism and mistreatment of African expatriates living in France. These films embody rich themes and cogent inquiry into aspects of African life as well as change film structure by exploring new forms of representation, new perspectives. William Van Wert's observation that Third World artists have proven that "Marxist theory could go beyond static dialectical oppositions, could coexist very well with surrealist metaphors, with African music, with Indian folklore"¹⁰⁶ best applies to Hondo's and Sembene's film practice. In their films, as well as in many other African films, elements of neorealist Marxist, avant-garde, and Brechtian strategies parallel the African oral narrative tradition, becoming incorporated into their films as part of an authentic black African film language. Similarly, the digression that takes place in African oral narrative structure works on two levels in Hondo's and Sembene's films. In conventional cinema, subplots and transitions replace this element of digression found in the African oral narrative pattern. Whereas in *Borom Sarret*, *Black Girl*, and *Mandabi*, Sembene

prefers flashbacks (a derivative of oral tradition) to well-developed subplot, Hondo, in *Soleil O*, uses nonsequential episodic patterns as the primary component of this digression. This opposing strategy confirms the point that in most black African film initiative, and authenticity, and not acceptability, is the test. Interestingly, the kind of dichotomy just mentioned actually becomes an aspect of the representation of Africa and its realities by Africans from an African perspective.

As we have shown, methodological differences underlie how this reality should be portrayed. But neither Hondo nor Sembene vilifies the other for this, and in fact, in the next chapters we shall explore further the strategies informing contemporary African aesthetics. These elements frequently combine to form the integral force shaping the construction of the “real” picture of social and domestic life that was lacking in the escapist entertainment cinema of the COMACICO-SECMA years.