

CHAPTER 13



Soleil O (Med Hondo, 1969): 'They cannot represent themselves . . .'

Patrick Williams

Med Hondo is arguably the most 'lost' of the major African directors. For years, not one of his films was available in any format, either to buy or to rent. That astonishing situation has changed very slightly, with the appearance of *Soleil O*, the film to be analysed here, on YouTube, but the general 'lost'-ness continues. There are, no doubt, many reasons for this absence, some of which will be discussed here, but perhaps one of the most important has to do with Hondo's approach to filmmaking. Principled, uncompromising, intransigent — opinions differ; what is clear, however, is that Hondo has increasingly turned his back on the commercialized film world, and it has repaid him in kind.

Born in Mauritania, Hondo moved to France in the late 1950s, and worked, mostly in Marseilles, as a docker, a waiter, and (most successfully) a cook. When he eventually moved to Paris in the early 1960s, it was, in his own words, 'the realization of a dream' (Signaté 1994: 22),¹ a sense of deep longing finally satisfied which is echoed in the first words spoken by the protagonist of his film. Even more than the unnamed protagonist, however, in this early period Hondo was, in his own estimation, 'naive and unaware' (13). He read a lot, but although that included writers such as Fanon, Césaire, and Kateb Yacine, it still did not lead, he felt, to an appropriate political awareness on his part. Hondo's first foray into culture was in the theatre. He began as an actor, and eventually had his own theatre group, Griot-Shango. He was, however, increasingly drawn to the cinema, and began a process of self-education in filmmaking. By 1968 he had finished the screenplay for *Soleil O*, and set about making the film. There was, nevertheless, the feeling that the film might be 'lost' from the very start: Hondo said he had 'the foreboding that the film would have no future, and would be left in a drawer' (22).

Before starting on *Soleil O*, however, Hondo wanted to make some short films to prove to himself that he was proficient as a filmmaker. Since for him cinema is 'simultaneously fiction and documentary' (21), he decided to make one of each, a documentary on Africa entitled *Ballade aux Sources*, and a short fiction film, *Roi de corde*. Having successfully passed his own test, work began on the full-length *Soleil O*, whose stylistic mix of fiction and documentary can still unsettle viewers, though it makes perfect sense in terms of Hondo's own understanding of the nature

of film. Is an unsettling film a stronger candidate for inclusion among the 'lost'? There is no straightforward answer to that, but this film, like the ones Hondo made subsequently, continues to challenge viewers.

The actual making of the film has something of the stuff of legend: an untrained, unfinanced, would-be director, working with untrained, unpaid individuals, filming whenever people could be got together (usually at weekends), using a mix of film stock (some purchased, some donated, some out of date). How could the product of such a process hope to avoid being consigned to the oblivion Hondo foresaw? Ironically, in view of the subsequent 'lost' history of Hondo and his films, *Soleil O* began by being very well received, and it was entered in the critics' week at Cannes. Arguably, however, what it represents is a fundamentally different kind of film (radical postcolonial) being received by the critics as if it were the kind of film we know and love — *nouvelle vague* (done African style) — and that could safely be entered at Cannes.

In some ways, the decade of Hondo's entry into cinema is a decade that sought to bring about the reinvention of cinema — or at least the attempt by radical filmmakers to do so. 'Third cinema', 'poor cinema', 'imperfect cinema', 'hungry cinema' — these are all Third World interventions from the 1960s aimed at changing the theory and practice of filmmaking. We might now want to group them all as part of postcolonial filmmaking (though that would no doubt be resisted in certain quarters), but at the time the category did not exist. Hondo's filmmaking practice shows strong affinities with several of these radical projects. It is significant that in the interviews with Ibrahima Signaté which make up his volume, *Un cinéaste rebelle*, the only filmmaker by whom Hondo will admit to having been influenced is the Brazilian Glauber Rocha, director of films such as *Black God, White Devil*, and theorist of 'hungry cinema' in his 1965 article 'The Aesthetics of Hunger'. Both Hondo and Glauber Rocha are readers of Fanon, though they use him in very different ways. Glauber Rocha is particularly interested in the 'violent' Fanon of the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, whereas Hondo draws on a range of Fanon's insights from that book as well as from *Black Skin, White Masks*.²

One of the things that Hondo particularly admires in the work of Glauber Rocha and others like the Argentinian director Fernando Solanas, theorist of Third Cinema, is

what I would be tempted to call a founding act of cinema: the irruption of the masses onto the screen, their taking the floor in order to denounce lies and hypocrisy, reveal the contradictions of society, and explore new paths. (Signaté 1994: 25)

Whether or not this quite constitutes 'a founding act of cinema', it is unquestionably an intervention of major importance, and the politics of self-representation it introduces represents one of 'the new paths' that Hondo would follow assiduously.

For Hondo, one of the possibilities of cinema is its power to influence how we see and understand the world, and the ways in which Africa and its people have been, and continue to be, seen and understood (if that is quite the word) must be challenged, opposed, overturned through the representational power of the moving image. Film then becomes a cultural struggle on behalf of Africa, a counterpart to

the struggles at the level of politics and ideas begun by figures such as Cabral and Lumumba. In that context, as one of the very earliest examples of African cinematic self-representation, the role of *Soleil O* as cultural intervention is potentially far-reaching. Edward Said's *Orientalism* famously uses an epigraph taken from Marx's 18 *Brumaire*: 'They cannot represent themselves: they must be represented'. In Marx, this is the voice of class power and privilege. Said transposes it to the colonial context. Appropriately for an act of postcolonial self-representation, *Soleil O* stands the phrase on its head, turning it from a condescending dismissal of the powerless to an urgent ethical and political need to act on behalf of those who are oppressed. Getting better representations (not least because they are self-representations) of Africans, and in this particular case African immigrants, on to the cinema screen is the task Hondo sets himself.

As befits its aspirations, *Soleil O* offers a new kind of story — that of large-scale postcolonial immigration (here, specifically African) to the imperial centre:

For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. (Bhabha 1994: 5)

Talking about Britain, the Caribbean poet Louise Bennett famously, and hopefully, described this as 'colonization in reverse'; in the film, however, the process is seen, from a French perspective, as 'the Black invasion'. The former colonial masters, especially in the early days of postcolonialism, struggle to come to terms with the changes that are happening. Nevertheless, argues Homi Bhabha: 'The Western metropolis must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity' (Bhabha 1994: 6). That, in fragmentary and digressive form, is what *Soleil O* sets out to tell.

The form of the film's narrative is no doubt one of the things that allowed European critics to see it as a variation on a European model, something that Hondo categorically rejects. As far as he is concerned, digression — with the consequent breakup of simple narrative continuity that it inevitably involves — is at the heart of traditional African storytelling. Another way of understanding the formal fragmentation (though one which is not without its problems) would be by means of trauma theory. The story that *Soleil O* tells is undeniably a traumatic one, both individually and collectively. The daily lived experience of the African immigrants, the total contradiction between the ideology and the reality of life in France, the slow and painful coming-to-consciousness of the central character — all of these can be rightly categorized as traumatic. For the kind of trauma theory elaborated by Cathy Caruth and others, the effect of trauma is such that it can only be narrated in fragments, in which case *Soleil O* would be a classic of the genre. In recent years, however, trauma theory has been criticized — not least from a postcolonial perspective — as being over-individualistic, over-psychologistic, as well as overly Eurocentric, all of which would tend to reduce its effectiveness as an analytical tool for discussing *Soleil O*.³

Although the representations of Africans that Hondo is concerned to challenge are above all contemporary ones, they obviously do not exist in a vacuum, and the film therefore begins with more historical examples, spanning the pre-colonial through to the late colonial period. In one of the more 'documentary' moments in the film (bearing in mind Hondo's view of the simultaneous presence of fictional and documentary modes in filmmaking), the opening scene is a static tableau of African men, with a voice-over calmly stating facts about traditional African societies which fundamentally contradict typical Western views, not least the infamous Hegelian one of Africa as 'the continent without history': 'We had our own literature. We had our legal terminology, our religion, our science, and our teaching methods'. All or most of this is news to Western viewers. It is followed by a realist scene in which new African converts to Christianity are baptized, and ask forgiveness for speaking their own languages, the multiple acts of contrition marking the shocking number of indigenous languages being lost. The new converts then march forth, to the accompaniment of an Africanized version of the *Kyrie* from the Catholic mass, and, in an increasingly surreal sequence, are transformed into soldiers who then slaughter one another for the benefit of the colonial master, as they did particularly in the French empire.

The postcolonial period, and the narrative proper (such as it is) begin with the arrival of the unnamed protagonist in France: 'Sweet France! I am coming to you. I am coming home!' The grotesque inappropriateness of this sentiment will become painfully apparent as the film progresses and the examples, and forms, of rejection and humiliation accumulate. As Hondo comments: 'There is nothing worse for a human being than humiliation. It has become the daily lot of immigrants in the countries of the North' (Signaté 1994: 72). In spite of that, it is understandably hard to let go of the belief in the ideals of the (supposed) mother country. Turned down on sight for yet another job simply because he is African, the central character silently ponders his position:

I know that discrimination is not common here. Am I not in the land of the free? I am as much at home here as anywhere. We are equal, you and me. Yesterday we had the same ancestors — they were all Gauls.

'Nos ancêtres, les Gaulois' may still be acceptable currency within the pages of *Astérix*, but while its absurdity here makes him smile, despite the pain of rejection, it also retrospectively highlights the absurdity of the ideology of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' which underpins his thoughts, as well as his expectations of life in France.

One of the ways in which the film unsettles viewers is through its use of the same actors to play several, even many, different roles. The white priest from the historical baptismal sequence now turns up as a businessman (or perhaps politician — it is not clear) in 'civilized' conversation with the actor playing the central character, who now appears to be some kind of researcher sent by the employment agency. Their discussion centres on the use of immigrant labour, in particular, the right sort of Africans (from a Western perspective); in other words, appropriately assimilated Africans (or, as one African pithily remarks, 'slaves, but civilized slaves'). For Hondo, there is a stark choice facing immigrants: 'give in [to Western culture]

or go home' (Signaté 1994: 72), and there is a strong echo here of Fanon's earlier formulation: 'turn white, or disappear' (Fanon 1952: 100). 'Give in' may be possible; 'turn white' is an impossibility, not merely at the epidermal level, but also at the ideological: however much Africans may bleach themselves, they will never attain a condition of acceptable whiteness.

Later in their conversation, the Frenchman comments that European workers are to be preferred to Africans because they are 'naturally' more adaptable, and their use would avoid the problems resulting from 'a large influx of Africans, who risk becoming a sub-proletariat'. Although this sub-proletarian status, the lowest imaginable, is supposed to mark the result of African inability to adapt, it in fact points to the level to which Western capitalism and racism reduce them. At another point in the film, a character says of his newly independent African nation, 'we are under-under-developed'. Again, the apparent African dysfunctional excess can be laid at the door of Western colonial and neo-colonial practices. In his analysis of colonialism, Sartre points out that while capitalism exploits the working class, colonialism practices 'super-exploitation' of the colonized (and there is no reason to suppose that neo-colonialism will aim for less). Sub-proletarianized; under-under-developed; super-exploited — this is the fate of Africans, whether in their own countries or in the West.

The location of Africans in the West is part of what Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, refers to as 'the Voyage In'. *Soleil O*, we can argue, offers a powerful representation — that is, both a portrayal and an instantiation — of that process. On one level, it is very much part of:

the work of intellectuals from the colonial or peripheral regions who wrote in an 'imperial' language, who felt themselves organically related to the mass resistance to empire, and if you set themselves the revisionist, critical task of dealing frontally with the metropolitan culture, using the techniques, discourses, and weapons of scholarship and criticism once reserved exclusively for the European. (Said 1993: 293)

In addition, the difficulty of pinning it down — is it European avant-garde? Is it typically African? — points to the hybridity which also marks it as part of the 'voyage in': 'The *voyage in*, then, constitutes an especially interesting variety of hybrid cultural work. And that it exists at all is a sign of adversarial internationalization in an age of continued imperial structures' (Said 1993: 295). In a somewhat more literal sense, *Soleil O*'s 'voyage in' is the journey of the central character to the heart of his supposed motherland, and into the belly of the beast which is contemporary racist metropolitan culture. A voyage in, and also a voyage down: to compare it to Dante's descent through the levels of Hell would be to over-dramatize, but the comparison is not entirely without merit. The descent here is both material and psychological. Materially, he descends from potential white-collar status to being offered the street sweeper's broom, which is the iconic symbol of exploited Africans in France. Similarly, he descends through levels of accommodation before ending up in the squalid room, which he wrecks in his cathartic moment of self-liberatory violence towards the end of the film. In terms of his psychological descent, we witness the failure of one after another of the ideological claims of the 'civilized' West, as well

as the hopes of the newly liberated postcolonial world. We have already mentioned the emptiness of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' as far as Africans in the metropolis are concerned; simpler, less heroic values such as community and neighbourliness similarly fail under the pressures of a contemporary capitalist way of life. Perhaps the greatest failure or betrayal at a human level is that of physical intimacy and the possibility of love across the racial barrier. The central character is picked up by a white woman who, after scenes indicating a growing intimacy in the face of general racist rejection of their relationship, takes him to bed and then summarily rejects him when he fails to live up to her fantasies of sex with a black man.

In the end, though, this is a voyage both in and out again. Hondo summarized *Soleil O* as 'the story of the developing political awareness of an African immigrant' (Signaté 1994: 20) — a narrative made possible by the development of his own political consciousness. The traumatic realization of the facts of life in the West brings the central character to the point where, as mentioned, he wrecks his room, and then runs out of the city, and into the countryside, while the voice-over (the voice of his developing political awareness?) delivers a stinging critique of the society from which he is in flight. A final failure (the middle-class liberal family, and, to a lesser extent the rural idyll) sends him running again through the forest, tentatively, then semi-ecstatically adding his cry to the all-enveloping roar that echoes through the woodland. In the final scene, he is in a clearing, surrounded by portraits of revolutionary figures — Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Ahmed Ben Bella — which are in turn surrounded by flames. He has plumbed the depths of the dehumanizing West, but has emerged transformed.

The awareness of revolutionary possibilities for the sub-proletarianized, under-under-developed, and super-exploited of the world, to which this final scene alludes, indicates one way in which, although the narrative of *Soleil O* focuses on a single individual, the story is equally a collective one: 'It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question' (Fanon 1952: 13). As Fredric Jameson famously commented:

Third world texts — even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic — necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society.* (Jameson, 1986: 87; my emphasis)

Soleil O, we might argue, takes us one stage further, into something like a trans-national postcolonial allegory. At that level, Hondo's film — lost or not — and his quest to represent those who, for whatever reason, are unable to represent themselves, take on their greatest significance.

Notes to Chapter 13

1. Translations from Ibrahima Signaté are, for better or worse, mine.
2. For an extended discussion of *Soleil O* through the lens of Fanonian theory, see the chapter on Hondo in Murphy and Williams 2007.
3. For a representative example of these criticisms of trauma theory, see Craps and Beulens 2008.