

Popular Cinema: A Panacea for African Cinemas?

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Abstract

This article argues in favour of a serious scholarship and academic valorisation of African popular/ commercial cinemas. It has been observed that there is a dearth of studies of African popular or commercial cinemas, and this is largely due to a belief within academia that popular cinema is generally of low quality, with hardly any innovative aesthetics or teachable lessons for individual and societal transformation compared to arthouse films. This paper hinges on the premise that popular cinema is a solution for the survival of an emerging African cinema. In this regard, we used the works of Alphonse Béni, one of the most successful African commercial filmmakers in the early years of African cinema, as a case study. This study reveals that popular cinema is employed by the West to assuage their domination over the rest of the world, as well as to foster their imperialistic agendas. Furthermore, it is also noted that Béni used popular cinema to encourage change in the mentality of the masses and display the modernity of developing nations.

Keywords: Popular Cinema, commercial cinema, aesthetics, african cinema

Introduction

There is a longstanding tradition in African film studies and criticism that privileges auteur cinema while dismissing popular and commercial works as not sufficiently innovative or having any artistic merit. This view, which is still enforced today in African film criticism, as Alexi Tcheuyap argues in *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (2011), is believed to have had its origin from a resolution of early African cineastes, especially those gathered under the aegis of the Fédération Panafricaine des Cineastes (FEPACI).¹ These filmmakers felt that Western cinema was itself riddled

¹ More information can be found in Teshome H. Gabriel's *Third Cinema in the Third World* (1982) (pp.103–109).

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with inherent Western biases meant to indoctrinate the masses and, as such, they sought refuge in a cinema, which they believed would encourage the viewer to think about and question their reality. However, this noble ideal did not play out on the field as expected, but rather led to a situation of the African film being trapped in an endless cycle of trying to find, define, and redefine itself, despite having indigenous elements to define its structure from the start. In this paper, our argument revolves around three elements: the notion of high and low arts underpinning auteur cinema as seen from a traditional African perspective, thus bringing out the tenuous line separating popular from high arts in traditional African culture; the fallacy of a unique universal film language which undermines a proper appreciation of African popular cinemas and their various forms of expressions; and why African cinema does not need to mimic Western models given that African cinema is at core *hybrid* and forged by a confluence of cultural influences and indigenous art forms.

Definition of Key Terms

Art films or arthouse cinema is defined as “a ... type of European cinema that is experimental in technique and narrative. This cinema, which typically produces low to mid-budget films, attempts to address the aesthetics of cinema and cinematic practices and is primarily ... produced outside dominant cinema systems” (Hayward, *Cinema Studies* 27). The idea of a cinema outside mainstream Western commercial cinemas, and aimed at innovating aesthetics or techniques, appealed to early African filmmakers who adopted this notion of filmmaking and formalised it in a series of manifestos and resolutions throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as noted by Tcheuyap (2011, p.4). Amongst other things, these resolutions taken by early African filmmakers under FEPACI promoted a highly intellectual cinema meant not for the masses but for the elites and was formerly only available at some Western embassies or, as derogatorily put

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by film scholar Manthia Diawara, “reserved for sociology classrooms,” which he describes as “cultural ghettos” (*African Cinema*, 1992, p.33). Art house films are often seen or considered as the opposite of commercial or popular cinemas as they are believed to make viewers think, not just entertain (Tcheuyap, 2011, p.4).

Commercial or popular cinema, on the other hand, refers to a cinema that can be considered the antithesis of arthouse films in that its targeted audience is the general public and the primary goal is to entertain and make a profit. These films are often considered industrial products without a clear vision of an individual artist, as is often assumed to be the case with art films. In short, as David Bordwell puts it, in *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, “The main purpose of a popular movie is to offer us an experience, not to impart an idea. Still ... the experience ... engineered can suggest ideas, especially to critics attuned to looking for them” (2011, p.viii). However, contrary to the consensus within African film scholarship and criticism of its supposed intoxication of the masses with Western bourgeois consumerism culture, commercial or popular cinema has been argued by scholars like Olivier Barlet to equally be a vehicle to federate people around a common identity (2010, p.221). This helps instil a sense of national belonging and patriotism through the evocation of popular, cultural, and national tropes, as noted with American popular cinema which acted as a sort of school to teach migrants American culture as noted by the Ewens in *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (1982).

The term “auteur,” was originally coined by a group of young intellectuals and critics from France in the 1950s is used to describe “a film-maker with an original *temperament*; that is, a personality capable of conveying individual perspectives through thematic motifs and stylistic

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markers (Maule, *Beyond Auteurism*, 2008, p.13). These types of filmmakers are considered authors in their own right in that their perspectives come through in the final work in terms of aesthetic, thematic, or philosophical patterns, which they pursue throughout their body of work. Although the term was originally conceived to distinguish between Hollywood commercial/ popular and European stylistic and philosophical cinemas, it has evolved today to include the “film author [who] blurs the boundaries between art house and mainstream, national and international film production” (Ibid p.99), especially in “the era of global media, [where] the film author is no longer associated with notions of aesthetic originality and personal expression, but instead with reflexive tactics of re-appropriation and re-inscription of cinema’s formulaic and commercial characteristics” (Ibid p.100). This new definition accommodates both innovative Hollywood and non-Hollywood filmmaking styles.

African Cinema as Hybrid Cinema

Hybridity in cinema is the amalgamation of distinctive features of cultures, aesthetics, filmmaking traditions and techniques in a given cinematographic piece. The resulting product, therefore, is born with a syncretism whose manifestations can be perceived depending on the degree of the filmmakers’ borrowings. Following this observation, I note that most Cameroonian films are inherently hybrid with some borrowings appearing more salient in the final work, while for others it remains cleverly embedded and more immanent. For the former, which are films with an explicit adoption of Western genres, we have films by Alphonse Béni who openly copies B-movie elements, including sex as well as detective action thrillers, and later in his career made martial arts/ ninja films. This is equally seen in Arthur Si Bitá’s *Les coopérants* (1983) whose aesthetics, according to Frank Nwachukwu Ukadike, is “blemish[ed]” by “resorting to an international thriller tradition” (*Black African Cinema*,

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1994, p.196) Even though similar genre film elements that are present in Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005) did not prevent the film from winning second place at FESPACO in 2005. On the other hand, we have films that do well to camouflage their borrowed elements, such as *Muna Moto* (1975) by Jean-Pierre Dikongué-Pipa and described by Ukadike as "often lyrical, ... neither entirely Western, nor entirely African" (*Black African Cinema* 1994, p.186). The hybridity seen here is dissimulated and blends in within the film's diegesis, as also seen in Daniel Kamwa's *Pousse-Pousse* (1975), which effects a kind of hybridity inherent and indissoluble from the film's aesthetics. In the opening minutes of the film, we find the protagonist advancing payments for his pushcart, and then suddenly utters in Pidgin English, "Oh papa God helep me, Whiteman don chop my money." This is not anodyne as it linguistically acknowledges the unseen half of Cameroon's Anglophone population within the film's diegesis.

It suffices to say that irrespective of how one may look at it, I, however, agree with Alexie Tcheuyap's assertion that, "Western' aesthetics have consistently impacted African filmmaking in various ways" (2011, p.234), and nowhere is this more apparent than in popular cinema which runs the gamut of genres like erotic, thriller, horror, and action films. Each of these genres comes from complex cinematographic traditions and cultural backgrounds that contribute to shaping their forms, which become even more complicated when associated with specific nations. For example, a horror film produced in Japan is not only culturally different. Still, it has established cinematographic conventions different from those of Hollywood, and, therefore, raises questions about the validity of a standard or unique universal film language (Ajibade, 2013, pp.264–284, Sarkar, 2010, pp.34–58). Notwithstanding, I do observe the popularity and attachment people have of their countries' popular cinemas. However, in spite of this, in addition to the fact that some critics

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like Olivier Barlet have acknowledged that “Popular cinema makes it possible to federate a people around characters that represent its daily ambitions” (2010, p.221), these films remain snubbed by most African critics. A good example is Kamwa’s *Pousse-Pousse* (1976), which treats the topic of bride price unlike Pipa’s *Muna Moto* (1974) by granting victory to its protagonists. But it is criticised as technically shoddy and “iconoclastic towards African tradition” (Diawara, *African Cinema*, 1992, p.31), despite attracting 700.000 persons at the cinemas, an all-time box office record in Francophone Africa.

This critical perspective, as explained by Alexie Tcheuyap, stems from an archaic conception that cinema like literature and philosophy is not supposed to yield to popular mass appeal but rather be a didactic tool “set out primarily to convey ‘African’ values and to foster nation building” (2011, pp.101-2). In this sense, he continues, “[e]ngaging in ‘entertainment’ is perceived as a futile and ethically irresponsible affair, while encouraging reflection on ‘the real’ is the work of the ‘serious’ filmmaker—the overtly political and subversive filmmaker” (2011, p.42). Through this assessment, one begins to understand the inordinate focus accorded African auteur films by scholars, and more so when recalling the response of Chadian film director Mahamet Saleh-Haroun, who when asked if he would emulate the Nollywood model, had answered that, “he was an ‘artist’ and not an ‘entertainer’”. (Geiger, “Nollywood Style,” 2012, p.60). Jean-Pierre Bekolo believes academic focus on African auteurist films is misguided for, as he affirms, “nationalist and didactic narratives [have] left the African landscape vacant and thus vulnerable to foreign images [...] [and this has finally] resulted in African films alienating African spectators” (Tcheuyap, 2011, p.236).

The above may lead one to think African auteur cinemas, especially those adhering to FEPACI rules, are vanity projects pursued by selfish film

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artists at the expense of their immediate audience. This point is important as it is similar to what happened in South America, as Roy Armes explains in *Third World Filmmaking* (1987). He notes that between 1960s and 1970s attempts were made to develop national cinemas throughout the region but apart from the successful results in Brazil with *Cinema Novo*; and later Chile and Bolivia where Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's theory of *Third Cinema* first became operational, the effects on the remaining Latin American countries remained mitigated. "The problem," as local scholars pointed out, "lay largely in [...] tendency to imitate Western styles of filmmaking and to adopt European conceptions of film authorship" (Armes, 1987, p.180). David Bordwell corroborates this stance by pointing out that indeed, while festival or "Art cinema is not always profit-driven, [...] it [however] remains market-oriented, and this pressure has affected its traditions, genres, and conventions" (2011, p.4).

As a consequence, auteur cinema, which is much prioritised in African film practice and scholarship, has not succeeded in establishing contact with spectators suspicious of over-intellectual productions" (Armes, 1987, p.181). As proof of this, one can see that *Muna Moto*, which is art cinema par excellence, was not commercially successful in Cameroon despite its many critical accolades, and this may explain why Dikongué-Pipa decided to follow up his magnum opus with light-hearted comedies that have not received the same kind of critical attention as his debut feature. Yet, despite this critical snub, David Bordwell assures us that, "popular filmmakers [and popular films] innovate as well" (2011, p.9). Auteur filmmakers like Jean Pierre Bekolo acknowledged this element, especially seen in the way he analyses Coppola's *The Godfather* in his conversation with Nwachukwu Ukadike (*Black African Cinema*, 1994, p.225). As a result, Bekolo concludes that "both [African] artists and 'intellectuals' ... historically have failed to use cinema as a real 'tool for

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self-empowerment” (Tcheuyap, 2011, p.236). He advocates an approach described by a scholar as “aesthetic populism” (Adesokan, 2008, p.1). Bekolo has always strived for a popular cinema that African audiences can identify with, and which should have been the orientation of early African films given most of them are derived from African folk and narrative traditions that have always been popular, and not elitist as today’s African cinemas which uncritically embrace European notions of high art and in the process, therefore, alienating African audiences.

However, not all early filmmakers ignored their audiences, as an observation of Daniel Kamwa’s and Alphonse Béni’s filmographies indicates. These two, preceding Bekolo by three decades, differ from him in that they do not consider themselves auteurs and, unlike Bekolo, do not use popular cinema aesthetics as a facade to drive home more auteurist motivations. For example, while Bekolo’s *Quartier Mozart* (1992) depicts the Cameroonian audience’s daily routine, it refuses to indulge their fantasies by projecting them into dreamed images of self, unlike what Blaxploitation did for African Americans or Nollywood for African youths (Diawara, 2007, pp.80-81). This means that while *Quartier Mozart* puts on display, through inventive ways, the daily lives of Cameroonians, it does not indulge in flights of fantasy by radically changing reality as it truly is through poetic license. The result is that Bekolo sticks to the truth and does not embellish it for any reason whatsoever. In the above film, for example, the authority of the police officer, Chien Méchant, is strongly challenged by the end of the film, but his authority is not necessarily supplanted; Samedi, his daughter rebels against her parents, but continues to stay in her father’s house, meaning sooner or later she will be subjected to parental control; Atango and friends exhibit flashes of mental emancipation but are economically emasculated, and can hardly effect any change in a society under the baton of Chien Méchant.

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This is where Kamwa and Béni differ from Bekolo. If one takes, for instance, the former's *Pousse-Pousse* which deals with the abusive demands placed on the bride price, Kamwa grants victory to his protagonists who trick the bride's father, therefore rendering justice to the masses on an issue which constituted part of the *modernity* by which Cameroonians defined themselves in the 1970s.² This consisted of doing away with the rapacious effects of a bride price tradition that had become corrupted with time. The film's success stems from its popular narrative form, which young people were able to identify with, and is not necessarily representative or reflective of the reality prevailing then, and was treated realistically by Dikongué-Pipa's *Muna Moto*, which came out the same year. Béni equally produced action films where he plays modern, fashionable, globetrotting cosmopolitan characters that indulge the audience's fantasy of how they hope to see themselves in the future. Even Bekolo has admitted that cinema is a medium, which enables dreams to become reality: "je m'amuse toujours à dire que je décide de faire un film lorsque je ne peux rien faire dans la réalité ... ou je recrée un monde peut être dans l'espoir qu'il va avoir un impact dans le vrai monde" (Ateba, 2011, p.123). [I always say filmmaking enables me to recreate reality in hopes of effecting changes in the real world]. To illustrate further the power of the transformative ability of cinema to change a society, Bekolo explains the strategies he used in the film *Les Saignantes*:

[...] l'univers africain, notre univers est toujours filmé de manière très réaliste, du coup nous ne sommes pas sûr qu'il peut être transformé et il faut prendre cette idée là au premier degré parce que si nous ne sommes pas sûr de pouvoir transformer notre univers, comment pouvons-nous réinventer notre propre société en fait. Donc, j'exagère un peu l'assimilation fiction pour ne pas emprisonner nos imaginaires dans la réalité, parce que du coup

² Many scholars have argued that the concept of "modernity" is not new in Africa and existed under different terms on the continent. One of the most conspicuous defender of this thesis is the author Amouna Ngouonimba in his book *Duname: La Tradition Kamit avec ses 101.961 ans de Modernité avant Lumumba*.

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quand il s'agit de science-fiction on pense toujours à New York, c'est comme s'il y a des lieux qui peuvent changer et nous, on est dans l'intemporalité c'est-à-dire qu'on est toujours les mêmes et on est très réalistes et du coup on ne peut même pas imaginer qu'on peut transformer cette société. L'image non réaliste, l'image fiction, l'image ou on essaie de mettre ses artifices aussi bien la fumée et toutes les autres choses est une image qui nous permet de voir notre société de manière différente. C'est la même chose quand je filme le Palais des Congres, tous ces endroits là ou bien le Mfoundi la-derrière le marché du Mfoundi ou il y a le pont, tout le monde a cru que c'était à Venise et pourtant c'est quand même un endroit qui n'est pas très beau dans la journée mais toujours est-il qu'il faut qu'à l'image, on sente qu'effectivement cet endroit peut être différent. (Ateba, 2011, pp.120-1)

[...] the African universe, our universe, is always filmed in very realistic ways, and as a result we are not sure that it can be transformed and we must take this idea as a fact because if we are not sure that we can transform our universe, therefore how can we reinvent our own society. So, I tend to exaggerate the fictional elements a bit so as not to imprison our imagination in reality, because when it comes to science fiction we always think of New York, it's as if there are places that can change, while others like us are stuck in a timeless capsule, that is to say we are always the same and are very realistic and, therefore, cannot even imagine that we can transform our society. The non-realistic image, the fictional image, the image where we add some artifices as well as the smoke and all the other things is an image that enables us to see our society in a different way. It's the same thing I observed when I filmed the Convention Centre, all these places there at Mfoundi or 2 precisely behind the Mfoundi market, where there is the bridge, everyone thought it was Venice city, but it wasn't. Notwithstanding, it's not a very beautiful sight to behold during the day, but the fictional image enables us to feel that this place can indeed look different. (Translated by author)

The function one sees popular cinema play here in articulating a particular reality and, hence, suggesting changes for modernity has its origins in popular Western literature, where, as noted, Sheng-mei Ma, Western authors pit their societies against exploited colonies, with the latter often portrayed in Western minds as backwards and primitive. Sheng Mei Ma goes further to note that while “projecting their violence onto the other, colonialists have resorted to stereotypes of inhumanity as

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partial justification of imperialism, including cannibalism, head-hunting, and decapitation” (2008, p.249). All these are even though “*Western modernity defines itself against the ‘acephalic rush’ of the colonised, [Western] modernism is inspired by the alterity of African sculpture, Oriental ideogram, and various non-Western traditions*” (ibid). It must be pointed out that Western cinema art, both high and low, springs from the same virulent rhetoric as Western literatures as explained above and it is as a response to such popular works that Africans started producing their popular films, as a sort of counter discourse to the type of rhetoric coming from Western popular cinema. An example of a film with a discourteous rhetoric towards Africa was *Out of Africa* (1985), which was so displeasing to Africans that even the then President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, said this after watching it: “We are not amused” (Gugler, 2004, p.27).

A Case for Cameroonian and African Popular/ Commercial Cinema Scholarship

African filmmakers responded to this type of Western popular cinema as the one described above by creating their popular films not only as counterpoints to the discourse in such films as the one described above, but also as a means to galvanize the locals and help define for them through the “appropriation of Hollywood mode of production and its aesthetic model [...], one potential way of facilitating the encounter with modernity and identification with the modern” (Needham, 2008, p.54). Film scholar Meaghan Morris believes that, as far as popular films are concerned, the “action cinema works as a generic zone in which cross-cultural logics of contact and connection (audio-visual and socio-cultural as well as bodily and technological) are acted and tested out” (2005, p.13). Furthermore, following in this same line of thoughts, other scholars have argued that the martial arts component of Hong Kong popular cinema, which has served as template to action films from around the world including Africa, has now become an ingredient inhabiting action films

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from other parts of the world, with variations based on cultural specificities (Li, 2005, p.54).

One can add the action films starring Alphonse Béni such as *Cameroon Connection* (1985), *Three Men on Fire* (1985), *Black Ninja* (1987), and *Top Mission* (1987) which all incorporate aspects of Chinese martial arts like depiction of Kung fu fights even in Ninja films like *Black Ninja* (1987); and in which the filmmaker/actor incarnates a Cameroonian police inspector named Baiko, who is also a cosmopolite since he travels the globe fighting criminals while in small, but significant ways extols his Cameroonian culture. In some of his films, like *Cameroon Connection*, the martial arts is tinged with a distinct Cameroonian sensibility (an exaggeration to please Cameroonian spectators who are fans of Kung fu films). Similar to what is observed in action heroes of other popular action cinemas from around the world, Béni's heroic characters "depict a certain range for rebellion and pose possible alternative behaviours that appeal to the suppressed [...] as a true expression of *fantasy* and [as a] forerunner of *change* [...] that help[s] position the ordinary spectators [o]n the course of ... [a] unique [...] (post)colonial formation" (Chan, 2005, P.68). And by so doing, Béni inadvertently advances the agenda of pioneer filmmakers, reiterated by Bekolo in other terms whom I mentioned earlier, which is to empower audiences by using the cinema as a tool to provide alternative visions of self to encourage self-actualisation. But despite these positive elements attributed to the cinema of Alphonse Béni, which is similar to popular cinema stars like Clint Eastwood, Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li whose works and careers have been the object of numerous academic studies, local film scholars have not done similar studies for Béni's work.

Béni's films are often accused of being culturally lost and erasing local specificity, which, as I contest, ignores the fact, as notes Tcheuyap, that

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“in a context of transnational, hybrid, shifting and multiple identities, it is difficult to imagine that African productions have remained immune to outside influence.” (2011, p.14). Most film scholars frequently judge African films under criteria that are seldom applied to cinemas from elsewhere, especially in terms of authenticity, that is, taking inspiration solely from local/national cultural heritage and not from foreign cultural processes. One should not forget that American cinema is a concatenation of borrowings (Lim, “Generic Ghosts” 2007, p.124), since it cannibalises other trends that emerged in Europe from Italian Neorealism, Soviet Montage, French New Wave, Italian Peplum and Spaghetti Western, and German Expressionism whose filmmakers and stars were also imported to give new life to a waning American film industry. Therefore, there should not be any surprise or disapproval if African filmmakers start finding inspiration in popular Western and Chinese films, which are often considered the opium of the masses or poor quality. Similar trends of adopting popular foreign film styles were adopted by South Korean filmmakers, which led to revolutionising Korean cinema aesthetics with the culmination being the Grand Prix won by *Oldboy* (2003) 2003 at the Cannes Film Festival. Today, South Korea is one of only few nations in the world whose domestic film productions regularly draws in more profits than comparatively superior Hollywood blockbusters in its home markets (Hayward, 2018, p.7), which is a process that can easily be replicated in African cinemas provided that the inordinate focus on Arthouse cinema is phased out and more opportunities are given to other types of films to be produced, especially genre films.

For these reasons, African popular cinemas realise that the film images produced remain, for most nations, the only exposure of some on how they are perceived outside their borders. As such, many early auteur films produced from Africa, especially Francophone African countries, tended to emphasise the cultural and traditional aspects, thereby giving the

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impression that Africans were stuck in time and not in tune with the rest of the contemporary world. This is what some of Idrissa Ouedraogo's films were accused of and thereby inspiring the derogatory term "Cinema Calebasse." The films of Alphonse Béni played a significant role in fostering a positive image of Cameroon, especially as seen in their international popularity and reception due to the incorporation and embodiment of the modernist aspirations of both Cameroonians and citizens of the world. The next section is dedicated to an analysis of Alphonse Béni and his films to demonstrate how they subtly and intelligently challenge Western hegemony, debunk Western invincibility and empower those under domination on how to fight back. This, therefore, dispels a common claim that popular cinema genres do not carry serious intellectual ideas for self and societal introspection and change.

A Brief Analysis of Alphonse Béni and His Films

Robert Kolker avers that an "actor whose persona transcends a film can be considered the cocreator of another narrative: [which is] her or his mythic life [as] articulated in [the] films" in which they appear (2006, p.127). This description aptly applies to the career of Alphonse Béni both on and off the screen, as will be seen in our analysis of three of his films. Béni can be considered as one of the most important figures to ever emerge in the history of Cameroonian and African cinemas, not only for his diverse output which includes action films early on in his career and later on social and family dramas as seen with *La Déchirure* (2005), but equally for the notoriety of his erotic films seen as a cultural taboo by local scholars since they portray sexual intercourse in a brash overt manner as often associated with Western cinemas. Alphonse Béni had a career on screen that in different ways has served both nationalist and patriotic functions, such as portraying Cameroonians as modern people as seen in the characters he played, and therefore contributing to the

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nation's efforts in projecting a modernised image of Cameroon to the world. As such, Béni has inadvertently, through his films, become a symbol of Cameroonian patriotism, nationalism, and heroism. We see this aspect in three of his films: *Cameroon Connection* (1985), *Terror Force Commando* (1986), and *Black Ninja* (1986), where he plays the main hero and fights villains who are Europeans. These films were played in local cinemas in Africa and helped reinforce the idea of strong, resourceful, patriotic African characters who are efficient as well as globetrotters, as seen in their actions.

Equally, one of the resolutions of the filmmakers gathered under Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI) was to accompany the newly independent African states in their modernisation project as elaborated by Paulin S. Vieyra (Genova, 2013 pp.94-95), thereby leading us to also interpret Béni's oeuvres as a form of resistance since he appeared to adhere to Vieyra's call which is to depict a modern Africa against the French cinema politics of representation for its former colonies (see Genova, *Cinema*). In this sense, the militancy of Béni's cinema can be likened to how South Korean action cinema incarnates the role of a "de-colonising text" (Kim, 2005, pp. 103-4).

Furthermore, Hong Kong action cinema, although being overwhelmingly commercial, also has a strong political aspect, as David Bordwell recounts in *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*. He explains that "[p]artly because of censorship, partly because of the scale of investment at stake, Hong Kong filmmakers, [...] address politics in oblique ways. Again and again filmmakers have mocked the colony's rulers" (24). To illustrate, he points out that in most Hong Kong action films, it is difficult "to find a Britisher [...] who is not a brute, a bumbling timeserver, or a vain and dense boss" (Ibid). While this strategy is a form of direct address since it specifically ridicules images

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of British authority appearing in Hong Kong action films, Alphonse Béni, on the other hand, however, focuses his energy on making indirect political statements through the types of characters he plays on the screen and overall subtexts of his films. One of the things Béni actively denounces in his films is the idea of racial hierarchy, or European supremacy. We see this through the casting of Europeans as villains in Béni's films, who are often beaten up or ruffled up by Béni's African characters on film. It should be noted that efforts were made to discourage the depiction of Europeans in less savoury ways on African cinema screens,³ but Béni, under the guise of popular cinema, was able to get away with these less favourable depictions without being censored.

In this way, although his films do not directly indict neo-colonial forces, his characters nonetheless do so by indirectly and successfully undermining the Western narrative about the local native. Following this logic, Béni's characters, who are accused by local critics of being "mimic men" *par excellence*, can be seen on closer observation to operate an effective form of insidious dismantling of neo-colonialism from within its structures through "sly civility." Homi K. Bhabha first presented the concept of "sly civility" within his postcolonial discourse as an extension of his notion of "mimicry" developed as part of his analysis of "hybridity". Bhabha defines "mimicry" as "colonial discourse [that] encourages the colonized subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values" which "inevitably embodies the seeds of [the colonizer's] own destruction." This is because "the copying of the colonizing culture, behaviour, manners and values by the colonized contains both mockery and a certain 'menace', 'so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace'" (Ashcroft, 2013, p.155). As a result, this reveals limitations in the ability of the colonising power to have full "control [over] the behaviour of the colonised" (Ashcroft, 2013,

³ see Genova, *Cinema and Development*, 2013.

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p.155). “Sly civility” is an extension of the concept of “mimicry” and entails subtle forms of resistance by which “the native refuses to *satisfy* the demand of the coloniser’s narrative” (Parry, 1999, p.41). In this vein, “‘sly civility’ may be regarded as a sophisticated affective response that in its ambivalence—outward compliance and inner resistance—may be far more effective in its evasion than overt resistance” (Parry, 1999, p.7), because it escapes detection. One should not neglect the importance of this, given that although Béni was an independent producer, he still relied on foreign-owned local cinemas for exhibition (Coulon, 2011), hence the need for “sly civility.”

In the above analysis, we see two things accomplished by Béni’s films: firstly, they debunk the general critical assessment of popular films as mindless copies of Western genres; and, secondly, they employ “sly civility” to achieve the following: projection of a modern image of Cameroon and Cameroonians; secondly, destruction of the myth of white superiority and invincibility; and finally, they disturb the imperial narrative by “means of a mimicry that undoes the original” (Young, 2003, p.141) in that it imposes an African perspective and cultural view on Western-styled narratives. One sees something similar in Blaxploitation films that arose in the 1970s, which, although copying Hollywood film genres, nevertheless presented African Americans in a better light than Hollywood films. Closer to home is the image of modernity fuelled by Nollywood videos and films that successfully fulfilled the desires of young Africans of seeing their likeness in contemporary settings and adornments often denied to them in Francophone African cinemas (Diawara, “Self-Representation in African Cinema,” 2007).

Popular Cinema in Africa Today

Contemporary popular cinema from Africa in general has seen a wider appeal today than its arthouse forebears of yesteryears, and similar to

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early Hong Kong cinema in the 1960s, has successfully penetrated Western commercial film circuits, therefore having access to a wider global audience than most African arthouse films today. Today, with the advent of online distribution platforms like Netflix and Amazon, which are willing to buy high-quality products from around the world to boost their offers and film libraries, popular African cinema is now at the forefront of conquering new horizons, and even giving contemporary African art cinema a new boost.⁴ This new trend, as will be observed, emanates from both Anglophone and Francophone African film industries (McCall, 19), and all these are based on a contingent number of developments, both technological and economic, within global cinemas, which particularly favoured African filmmakers.

One of the first major changes to hit the global cinema landscape is the advent of affordable digital technologies and accessible and profitable distribution outlets, which helped eliminate self-censorship amongst African filmmakers who employed it to secure finances for their film projects. Early African filmmakers, especially those from Francophone countries, were restrained both in choice of style and genres by conditions imposed by Western sponsors who favoured arthouse over genre films (Şaul, 2010, p.137). You have Cameroonian filmmaker, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, on record accusing the French of writing scripts for African filmmakers to shoot (Ukadike, *Questioning African Cinema*, 2004, p.223) as well as systematically turning down scripts exploring any other popular film genres (Tcheuyap, 2011, p.104). In addition, Senegalese filmmaker, Mama Keïta, notes that prospective African films were expected to check certain boxes to qualify for funds from French funding agencies such as showing onscreen “a goat crossing a field, a woman grinding grain, a child dressed in tatters, and a man walking off to a field

⁴A good example is Nigerian filmmaker, Genevieve Nnaji’s, directorial debut *Lionheart* (2019), which was reportedly Nigeria’s official entry for the 92nd Academy Awards and with mostly positive reviews, sometimes from as far away as Mexico on imdb.com.

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with a hoe over his shoulder” (Diawara, *African Film*, 2010 pp.235-236). Therefore, digital tools democratised filmmaking due to their relatively low cost, which made it possible for individuals to embark on film projects with private savings. This is what led to the explosion of the Nigerian film industry, which also inspired their Francophone counterparts to follow suit. These developments encouraged the French funding bodies to relax some of their conditions for fear of losing total control over Francophone cinemas.

One should also note that, similarly to the penetration of Hong Kong popular films into North American and European commercial film markets in the 1970s, there is a similar pattern of some African films, starting with Nollywood popular films, being shown in well-known commercial theatres,⁵ and also performing well during their run,⁶ which is significant, especially when one considers the conservative nature of the North American film market. In addition, online film distribution companies are providing alternatives to standard distribution outlets, especially for Francophone filmmakers who use to suffer censorship of their films by French agencies, which used distribution as means to silence dissenting voices from former colonies (Diawara, 1992, pp.33-34), especially if these filmmakers had escaped vetting to obtain finances for their films, which were distributed exclusively in arthouse cinemas with a comparatively small audience, and non-commercially as objects of anthropological study in embassies as well as in departments in academia. This was greatly abhorred by most African filmmakers who

⁵The first film to benefit from this is *Dr. Bello* (2013) which was shown in one of the biggest theatre chains across North America, which is AMC Theatres as noted by Baker, C. Daniel. “AMC Theatres Strikes 1st Ever Distribution Deal With Nollywood Studio.”

⁶Two New Nollywood films – *Battle on Buka Street* (2023) and *Ijakumo: The Born-Again Stripper*(2023) – made headlines when they premiered in the prestigious Regal Cinema chain theatres as well as taking in decent returns at the box office – Uimonen, Kirpi. “Nigerian Representation on Big Screen is Culturally Important.”

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believed it greatly destroyed their films' marketability and chances to be bought for commercial distribution (1992, pp.33-34).

Notwithstanding, the various developments in film technology and distribution have had some positive impacts on the different cinemas of the African continent like leading to an unprecedented explosion in creative innovation than at the beginning of African cinemas. Today, we see more filmmakers indulge in exploration of styles and genres and this regard, four films come to mind: *Night of the Kings* (2020) by Ivorian Philippe Lacôte, *Saloum* (2021) by Congolese filmmaker Jean-Luc Herbulot, *King of Boys: The Return of the King* (2021) by Nigerian film and television director Kemi Adetiba, and *Nganu* (2023) by Cameroonian Kang Quintus. Starting with *Night of the Kings*, the film falls under the category of the "prison film genre," but also employs elements of fantasy, the action genre, political cinema, and a modern form of griot cinema. You also see in *Saloum* a bold experiment in which the filmmaker directly references the cinematic languages, iconic techniques, and tropes of different genres. The film starts as a highly stylised action/war film similar to Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), before veering into the boundaries of Spaghetti Western, horror, zombie, and an African "maraboutage," witchcraft story. Equally, you have *King of Boys: The Return of the King*, which is an "Original Netflix" TV series and a sequel to the Nigerian cinema film *King of Boys* (2018). This is an African crime drama, mixed with elements of traditional Yoruba fantasy cinema, the gangster film genre, and elements of action cinema, as well as a political drama thrown in the mix. And finally, we have *Nganu*, which is a biographical film or "biopic" on the life of Cameroonian MMA champion Francis Ngannou and is presented as a family and social drama, a crime/gangster cinema genre, as well as an action film.

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Furthermore, these developments also helped some African filmmakers to finally be implanted in “show business” which was somehow actively discouraged by the French through the Bureau du Cinéma, which played the role of producer and distributor.⁷ This is an important point given that the establishment of cinema, especially amongst Francophones, never fulfilled its elementary function of selling to the masses. It rather became elitist, where filmmakers would completely disregard their immediate markets/public to cater to film festivals. It must also be noted that, except for a few filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène and Daniel Kamwa, to name just these, who experienced wide success on the continent with *Xala* (1977), and *Pousse-Pousse* (1976) respectively, the majority of French-sponsored African films do not make profits.⁸ One of the major benefits of the numerous distribution outlets is that filmmakers can directly negotiate their earnings as well as configure films based on an expected profit margin.⁹ This is the main reason for the alternative explorations of styles, as indicated above, as well as the apparent or palpable improvement in Nigerian cinema under the guise of what is now called “New Nollywood,” which boasts of a competent homebrew technical team who are summoned for projects distributed worldwide. Most of the technical crew and even actors are often returned expatriates with a passion for cinema, and who have probably worked making music videos. I believe African cinemas will eventually get to the

⁷ In an interview, Jean-Pierre Bekolo described his nightmarish experience trying to distribute *Quartier Mozart* (1994) by himself and swore never to undertake the venture again, especially given that the film’s sales, as he confessed, did not matter much to the funding bodies who will continue to finance filmmakers irrespective of their films’ success at the box office - Adesokan, Akin. “The Challenges of Aesthetic Populism: An Interview with Jean-Pierre Bekolo.”

⁸ Labouba, Manouchka Kelly, “Videastes vs. Cineastes: Sub-Saharan African Cinema,” 15–16.

⁹ We see this in the documentary film by Kamdem, Régis. *Nollywood : Le Cinéma Nigérian à la Conquête du Monde*. (2019); where we see Nigerian producers directly negotiating distribution deals with French and American film distributors for their films to be played in different commercial venues. However, we also discover through the same video that France seems to have a sort of jurisdiction over audio-visual productions from Francophone countries in terms of distribution rights, since Nigerian filmmakers had to go through French producers in Paris, to distribute to Francophone African countries.

This might also explain the absence of independent Francophone African cinema on platforms like Netflix, as well as the attempts by contemporary Cameroonian filmmakers like Thierry Ntamack and Lucy Mamba Bos to auto-finance through crowd-funding, and distribute through their own production houses.

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level of Korean cinema, which, since the early 2000s, has consistently beaten Hollywood blockbuster films in their domestic markets, which is not yet the case with African films.

Conclusion

The aimed to prove that popular cinema, which is often negatively criticised within African film studies as a sort of intoxicating drug or opium for the African masses, has been instrumental in giving impetus and rejuvenating a moribund African cinema which until recently had directed its focus and energy towards gratifying Western patrons and film festival jurors. Before the advent of popular/commercial video films from Nigeria and Ghana, the African film was an abstract idea in the minds of most Africans who either did not even know of its existence, or gravitated towards it even after being exposed to it. These films were not considered “entertaining,” as they did not dwell on the daily lives of Africans, but rather were ideological and focused on certain philosophical ideals. Most of the scripts produced, as some filmmakers later insinuated, were imposed and may explain the 180-degree turn of some filmmakers who, after making highly acclaimed art films, went on to make light-hearted popular entertainment as if to disavow their earlier works. This is the case of Daniel Kamwa, who went from *Notre fille ne se mariera pas* (1980), which was shortlisted for the Academic Award, to make popular films like *Pousse-Pousse* (1979), which remains a bestseller in Francophone African cinema. The same is true for Jean-Pierre Dikongue Pipa, who, after his critically acclaimed *Muna Moto* (1974), continued with comedies. And finally, we have Idrissa Ouedraogo, known for the “Cinema Calebasse,” declaring in an interview with Nwachukwu Ukadike that his personal best in his filmography is *Kini et Adams* (1997), a light-hearted comedy co-produced with South Africa. It is as if they are disavowing their earlier works, but what is clear is that arthouse cinema might not have emerged naturally from within African cinema, and contrary to the general

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observation concerning popular cinema, this is naturally adapted to the culture using it. While in the West, cinema, and especially popular cinema, has been used to promote bourgeois culture and ideology, in Asia and Africa, as indicated with Béni, it has been used as a decolonising text and a sly means of resistance to overbearing imperialist domination and control.

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