The third cinema: deconstructing negative stereotypes of africa assignment

The Third Cinema: Deconstructing Negative Stereotypes of Africa By Daniel Olufemi The arts, literature, music, internet, motion pictures, print and broadcast media and other artifacts of modern media culture share a common cultural conception ??? educating and shaping public perception. They provide the codes of recognition for self-definition and construction of meanings across socio-economic, political, gender and ethical issues.

Thus, an individual's lifestyle, fashion taste, arts appreciation, choice of consumer products, definition of beauty, et cetera is largely a factor of media exposure. The contemporary definition of feminine beauty as a woman with the tall and thin physique for instance, is as symbolized in movies and TV commercials. Cognizant of these socio-cultural dynamics, the Euro-American societies have endlessly exploited the media to foist their value system on the rest of the world.

The outcome is a polarized world along dominant culture and sub-culture divides, in other words ??? the ' us' versus ' other'. Africa, Asia and Latin America and the ethno-racial communities in the dominant Euro-American societies or the Third World societies constitute the so-called ' other', among which Africa is worse off in the cultural disequilibrium.

Decades after sovereignty by the 53 countries that make up the continent, the regime of repression dating back to the arrival of the slave ships and subsequent colonialism has been sustained through the vast cartel of cultural producers of the Euro-American system. ' Godfathered' by the multinationals, governments and the non-profits, the cultural producers

recycle and proliferate a mixed bag of hegemonic ideologies and image to devalue the African essence and potentials to attain natural capacity.

The largely denigrating images, iconography, symbols, text, news and narratives stereotypically depict a savage and primordial people, endlessly beleaguered by an epidemic of poverty, starvation, diseases and genocides, compounded by corrupt, incompetent and despotic leadership. Swamping both the traditional and modern media, the images showcase thatched roof mud houses, sprawling shanties with rusty corrugated ron sheets, germs breeding latrines, drinking wells with a ' zillion' bacteria, skinny domestic animals with suppurating sores and a flock of undernourished kids swamped by masses of flies, wolfing rations in refugee camps. Chavis (1998) observes, nouns and adjectives such as hut, dark, tribe, primitive, nomad, animism, jungle, cannibal, savage, underdeveloped, third world, and multiple others are favorite in telling the stories Africa in news and endlessly providing references for conceiving the worldview of Africa and its people.

However, the cinema has proved the most manipulative in fostering the Eurocentric agenda of the dominant culture. Kellner (2005), remarks that media spectacles, " demonstrates who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the forces that be, and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be oppressed. " Stagecoach, a 1939 western film directed by John Ford, starring John Wayne exemplifies Kellner's viewpoint.

Through an assortment of discourses and iconography, the film accentuates the superior race between the Caucasians and the native Indians, representing the former as civilized, gallantry and invincible and the latter as savage, primitive and feeble. The Gods Must Be Crazy (1990) tows a similar path; disparaging the value and belief system of the Bushmen of Kalahari land in favor of the Europeans visitors on exotic sightsee of Africa.

Regrettably, the off-putting portrayals have increasingly depleted the African cultural identity and self-worth. Today not only have Africans progressively been vanquished as the ' other', but have their mindset colonized to perceive selves as the ' other'. Resulting from witting and unwitting acculturation of the dominant ideologies coded in different tones and shades, crisscrossing the continent, the typical Massai breakfast consisting cow milk and maize has been replaced with oatmeal and scrambled egg.

The treasured ' Asoke' by the Yoruba bride and groom is no longer the in-thing and dumped for the western bridal gown and tuxedo. The music of music of Michael Jackson, Beyonce, and Jay Z, Justin Bieber, and other western pop idols profit more airtime on the African radio or television stations than those from African music greats including, Angelique Kidjo, Salif Keita, Miriam Makeba, Papa Wemba, Hugh Masekela, Fela Anikulapo Kuti Manu Di Bango and Vvonne Chaka Chaka. Tarzan a television series was designed for the European spectatorship as part of the

Eurocentric agenda to destroy the Africa value system, but enjoyed wide patronage among Africans while it aired. The destinies of the African economies in constant comatose lie in the hands of the Bretton Woods, IMF

Paris Club and World Bank overlords because the army of economist sages on the continent, lack the competencies. Literatures for elementary, secondary and tertiary education authored by the likes of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka and Bessie Head are substandard to those authored by their foreign counterparts.

Fanon (1990) asserts, " Having judged, condemned, and abandoned his {the African}cultural forms, his language, his diet, his sexual behavior, his way of sitting, reposing, laughing, amusing himself to the oppressed one, with the energy and tenacity of a shipwrecked man, hurls himself into the culture which is imposed upon him. " Doubtless, Africa is in dire need of a soul searching and returns to the old memories have been veiled by eras of Eurocentric power.

For Africans this is critical to knowing who they originally were, what they have become and repositioning self for representation of the authentic African past and identities. The cinema provides countless possibilities in this regard. African filmmakers can use the cinema to spur a cross-cultural dialogue by learning the ropes from the Latin film experience, which evolved as a resistance movement against the propaganda machinery of the colonial power in the late fifties.

Between 1950s and 1970s, the film movement spread like a wild fire to other countries like Brazil, India, and Mexico where film revolutionist began applying the principles in their works. This led to a surge in manifestos by radical filmmakers canvassing for militant films. Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of Cinema Liberation in the

Third World by solanas and getino (1969) was a leading lights; coming on the their film heels La hora de los hornos (Hour of the Furnaces), which took a hard swipe criticize colonial tyranny in Latin America.

It also categorized the world cinema into three: The First cinema, Second Cinema and Third Cinema. The first Cinema was defined as those in the similitude of mainstream American cinema with large-scale production process, strong commercial interests and discourses of bourgeois values. They are also feature length films of standardized duration, exhibited in big theaters, mostly with escapist spectacles, heroic protagonists, violence, sexual fixation, glamor, eccentricity and male patriarchy, et cetera.

Gerima (1989) characterizes the cinema as the cultural toys that " have made a drastic inroad into our central nervous system, governing and fashioning our behavior ??? our minds are occupied territory. The motive for this mental occupation is the subjugation of our labour, our land and our raw materials. " The Second Cinema is the Euro Art Cinema (cinema d'auteur), or high modernist which emerged in the 1960s, and rejects the production premises of the First Cinema. Many US ' independent' films fall under this category.

The cinema is primarily disposed to the expressions of the auteur director in narratives, but its adaptation of the production premise of the First Cinema is one of the major criticisms in the following light: '…a misplaced ambition to develop a film industry to compete with First cinema, and this could only lead to its own institutionalization within the system which was more than

ready to use Second Cinema to demonstrate the democratic plurality of its cultural milieu.

This groups were politically reformist ??? for example in opposing censorship ??? but incapable of achieving any profound change. They were especially impotent in the face of kind of repression unleashed by the victory of reactionary, proto-fascist forces. " (Chanan, 1997 pp 375-376). The Third Cinema, on the other hand, represents the cinema of the Third world or people with common histories of racial and political oppression.

Conceptually, the term Third Cinema, draws reference from the coinage, ' Third World', by Alfred Sauvy, a French demographer and journalist who in an article in the French magazine L'Observateur in 1952 classified France citizenry into three groups ??? the commoners (Third Estate), the clergy, (Second Estate) and the nobles (First Estate). The classifications subsequently metamorphosed into the depiction of the three geopolitical and economic blocs of the world, following the Non-aligned Bandung Conference of 1955, which attracted a coalition of 29 countries mostly from Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Following this, the expression ' Third World' became the designation for the poor and the underdeveloped countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia, while Europe, United States and Australia are addressed as The First World, and Russia and other socialist states; the Second World. Against his backdrop, the Third Cinema is propelled by anti-imperialist ideologies and actualization of cultural self-determination of the oppressed. Solanas and

Getino, (1969) aptly describes the cinema as " anti-mythic, anti-racist and anti-bourgeois'.

The unconventional production, distribution and exhibition process further distinguishes the cinema, coupled with the engagement of the spectatorship as active participants in the narratives making the audience, joint-reformists and shapers of their destinies in contrast to the passive state to which the mainstream cinema puts its spectators. The mainstream cinema in the conception of Althusser (1972) and Adorno, (1972) constituean apparatus of regression for the purpose commodification of the subject.

The distinguishing features also inform the swipes by critics who described it as lacking the aesthetic and production vibrancy matching those of the First and Second Cinemas. In his " Aesthetics of Hunger" (1965), Rocha waves off the criticism, advocating a continuum of " hungry" cinema of " sad", ugly films" that not only address hunger as a thematic discourse, but exhibit it in production elements. The poverty of styles in the cinema, Rocha hints, typifies the abject poverty the powers that be have continually unleashed on the world's marginalized, (Stam, 2009, p. 5). Espinosa, Cuban theorist, in his essay " For an Imperfect Cinema" (1969) elucidates that an imperfect cinema allows for a spectator auteur who constructs meanings rather than those imposed by the artist auteur. This he says makes the Third Cinema a unique creation of the masses and for the masses. Adapting the aesthetics attributes of the First Cinema he asserts will be self-destructive and bring about schism between the author and the spectator. The African Cinema is replete with unique aesthetics and production styles.

These are perceptible through the sight and sounds of nature, languages, proverbs, arts and crafts, dance, songs, food, costumes, including the tradition of the griot's story telling that stress the ultimate triumph of the good over evil. Equally unique to the cinema are the discontinuities in framing, editing and the use of long shots and takes in film sequence. Stifling these aesthetic peculiarities however, is external funding source, which largely comes from Euro-American financiers who are also in control of both production facilities and theaters.

The funding preconditions result in self-censorship by the filmmakers and limiting screenings to mostly round-table events and international film festivals, because there are scarcely authentic representations that the African audience the Cinema. Hall, (1993) poses the interplay of questions to which the Third Cinema filmmakers should repeatedly respond. These includes, how best to express the national concerns? What areas of social experience should the cinema intervened?

What should be the production approach of the cinema, the sources of finance, the roles of the independent producer, the place of the author, and of auteurism within Third World cinema? Should the Hollywood continuity codes and production values to which third World audiences are fondly familiarized be sustained or should the cinema stick to it radically discontinuous and anti-populist aesthetics such as the " aesthetics of hunger" suggested by Espinosa. And, to what reference should the filmmakers integrate indigenous popular cultural forms and anti-illusionist, anti-narrative, anti spectacular, and avan-garde?

These evidently are crucial questions far less debated today by third filmmakers and enthusiasts. Whatever responses are provided, the combative nature of the cinema must be sustained, while celebrating the humanity and contribution of the people with the ultimate aim of deconstructing prevailing stereotypes. The burgeoning Nigerian video-Film industry, " Nollywood", apparently offers a model of sorts in this regard. Notwithstanding the quarrel with its technical and production quality, it continues to warm itself to the hearts of the people, not only in Nigerian, but also across Africa, the US, Caribbean and part of Europe.

Amazing Grace (2009) an epic film, set in the ancient ' Efik' community in present day Eastern Nigeria exemplifies how Nollywood, is influencing positive worldview of Africa. The film tells how the ' Efik' people had existed in peace and harmony without gunpowder, without mirror and no westerner clothes, until the arrival of the white man, who disrupts the peaceful existence. The opening sequence begins with a festive gathering of the community members, showing young maidens in singing and dancing competition, while their male counterparts display their prowess in a wrestling match.

The display attracts wide applause, hilarity and general high spirits of the spectators. Depicting two film spaces, one sequence of events recalls history, and the other tells the story from the point of view of a narrator in a plantation farm across the seas. The narrator observes that the arrival of the European slave masters and community brought about a spate of abductions, tortures, killings and arson, in addition to defiling and raping

young and old women, and brutally dealing with dissenting young men whose bare body were lacerated with whips, while eing held to the stakes. Without food and water, and trekking many miles barefooted, while the captors ride on horseback, the captives comprising children, adults young and aged, in manacles are shredded of personal dignity and identity. In the face of the misery, the slaves relentlessly seek solace in ' Obasi,' the Supreme Being to whom they repetitively sing a sacred Efik folk song. But the notion of a supreme and omniscient ' God' of the savages as the biblical God of the slave masters is inconceivable; thus, the dismissal of ' Obasi' as a pagan god.

Scene after scene, the film exposes the cold-bloodedness, ignorance and frailty of the white slave merchants; contrasting the uncommon humanity of the captives, so named and treated as cargoes, savages, primitives and animals by the vanquishers. When John Newton (1725 ??? 1807), the captain of the slave ship, played by Nick Moran is tossed overboard during a raging storm, Etim, the lead male character risks his own life diving in the sea to save Newton.

In the end, the near death experience transforms Newton, becoming a clergyman and renowned writer of numerous hymns including the famous hymns, " Amazing Grace", adopted from the original melody of the Efik song, sang by his former slaves. Amazing Grace provides a compelling account of the slave era from the African perspectives and significantly demonstrates how a Third Cinema can be employed to relive the old memories of African essence while undoing the misrepresentations by the dominant cultural

producers. Daniel Olufemi, Media Arts Department, Long Island University, New York

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