

Learning from intercultural philosophy: towards aesthetics of liberation in critical African filmmaking

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Abstract

Cinema is neither neutral nor a universal medium. Particularly in African contexts, cinema contributes to European exceptionalism, imposes European values as the norm, and acts as an instrument of cultural and psychological control. It seems that African cinema is ontologically, politically, and aesthetically Eurocentric. By introducing an intercultural philosophical approach to the realm of cinema, we aim to move away from Eurocentrism in African cinema towards a more intercultural and dialogical orientation as an input for the liberation of humanity. Based on findings from a dramaturgical analysis of five films, we argue that African cinema shows a deficiency in communicating liberation and it often fails to portray African people's values, will, and interests as it has been alienated from its nature and purpose. Overall, African cinema seems to be either in a state of assimilation or confusion. By exploring aesthetics of liberation in African cinema and art (as described in African and intercultural philosophy,) we search for alternative film aesthetics and a mode of filmmaking that seeks to liberate the image and the minds of the filmmakers and spectators of African cinema. Inspired by Kimmerle's aesthetic-ethic alternative 'Living (with) art', we propose an alternative for critical film making based on aesthetics of liberation with an intercultural orientation: Living cinema. Living cinema is a dialogical and liberational cinema with aesthetics of liberation at its core. Based on aesthetic-ethic

principles of African philosophy and interculturality, the liberating function of living cinema can be found in reconnecting the aesthetics and filmmaking with African values. Simultaneously, it might be contributing to the liberation of world cinema as it has an impact on both the hegemonic and the suppressed cinema.

Keywords: aesthetics of liberation, critical filmmaking, intercultural philosophy, eurocentrism, living cinema, African cinema.

Introduction

Cinema appears as a neutral or universal medium of art and expression. Nevertheless, as it originated in Europe with European values, cultural codes, and political interests, it is naturally – ontologically – Euro-centric and gradually became an instrument of domination. Eurocentrism (Western-centric, Eurocentricity) is a paradigm that sets the European existence as qualitatively superior to other forms of human life (Kimmerle 1992). Thus it becomes a philosophical and artistic instrument of domination of the West over others (*ibid.*). Taking the birthplace and the evolution of cinema into account, one could claim that embracing European values and norms as an ontology for the European existence and cinematic exercise of self-expression cannot be a problem. The problem arises when this ontology politically intends and works to be the only authentic universal standard for all aspects of life with non-peaceful means of execution. And yet, this is what has happened to the other people of the world, such as Africa.

Aiming to be a universal paradigm of cinematic thinking, doing, and living with domination at its core, Eurocentric African cinema, for instance, has served as an instrument of Western – physical, political, cultural, psychological, and structural violence (Fanon 1965, 1967). One of the violent accomplishments of Eurocentric cinema, for instance, is the distorted cinematic representation of black people. The Black-Other seems to be cursed to be depicted as uncivilized, irrational, evil, and ugly, if not exclusively excluded (Turner 2008; Shohat and Stam 2014). Unfortunately, this cinematic injustice has not been committed only by racist films of mainstream cinema – Hollywood and European cinema – but by its extension also by – African cinema. While it is important to acknowledge exceptions, African cinema contributes to European-Americanization exceptionalism, imposes Western ethos as the universal ethic, and acts as an instrument of Western coercion rather than achieving the promise to emancipate the image and the minds. On top of this, according to some research, little has been done to unfold the matter with non-Eurocentric lenses (Zacks 1995; Turner 2008; Bakari 2018).

In an attempt to move away from Eurocentrism in African cinema, we can learn from intercultural philosophy as an approach to creating a platform for a dialogue between the hegemonic Western philosophy and excluded philosophies such as African philosophy. Intercultural philosophy is an orientation that alleges that Eurocentric assumptions and definitions about the origin and nature of philosophy produce a one-sided image of social reality (Bekele 2015). One of the assumptions of intercultural philosophy is that a philosophy with a particular linguistic and culture cannot provide the world with universal truth and valuable answers for fundamental human problems (Wimmer 2002). Thus a new sphere of linguistic and cultural holistic-ness is needed. This could be achieved in two ways: by deconstructing the Eurocentric dominance and by constructing a multi-cultural and lingual social reality based on the ethos of aesthetic dimension (Kimmerle 2009). In this case, African philosophy could be treated as a particular as it is a self-consciousness of African cultures; and thus part of the new-universal as it is an input to a new and holistic image of social reality. Hence, intercultural or dialogue philosophy is a mode of liberation that aims to deconstruct the old paradigm, Eurocentric-universality, and replace with a new one that promotes a holistic worldview.

Intercultural philosophy presumes a four-dimensional communication: “how I consider myself, how I understand the ‘Other,’ how the ‘Other’ sees her/himself, and how the ‘Other’ understands me” (Mall 2000; Yousefi 2007). This very nature of interculturality makes it peaceful, as it is a communicative reason, and at the same time a violent approach as it is an expression of deconstruction. Kimmerle, one of the neo-Hegelians formerly, argues that it is possible to realize a counter-movement of neo-colonialism and be productive in realizing a holistic worldview by using art and philosophy (Kimmerle 1992). He called this dialectical nature of dialogue a “Philosophy of difference and dialogue” (Yousefi 2007; Schepen & Graness 2019). The philosophy of difference and dialogue, according to Kimmerle, is a paradigm of self-consciousness of one’s identity and the otherness of the others, and this is the base of true emancipation. True emancipation, in this case, seems to have two dimensions: negative and positive. The negative dimension of emancipation deals with the notion and practice of liberty from the other-Self subjugation in understanding the self-Other, whereas the positive liberty intends to empower the Other - self in being conscious of one’s world and will to have a dialogue. This shows that intercultural philosophy, as a midwife of a new paradigm, is a mode of liberation with dialectical dialogue.

Based on the above arguments, intercultural philosophy seems an appropriate approach to move away from Eurocentrism in African cinema towards a more intercultural and dialogical orientation as an input for the liberation of humanity. This article contributes to an intercultural philosophical approach in the

realm of cinema (see Müller and Venkatachalam 2022, this issue), by focusing on aesthetics, which has gained limited attention in intercultural philosophy and cinema so far. African aesthetics is an African philosophical approach to addressing the works of African art about the life-worlds and experiences of black people. Hence, the main aim of the article is to explore alternative film aesthetics and a mode of filmmaking that seeks to liberate the distorted image and thus the minds of the filmmakers and the wider spectator.

In the following section, we first describe Eurocentrism in African cinema with its ontological, political and aesthetical layers. Based on findings from dramaturgical analysis of five films we will argue that African cinema is not yet liberated, but instead, it has a problem in communicating liberation in Africa. Subsequently, we explore aesthetics of liberation in African cinema and art, based on African and intercultural philosophy. We end the article with proposing an alternative based on aesthetics of liberation with an intercultural orientation: ‘living cinema’.

Eurocentrism in African cinema: the ontological, political and aesthetical layer

Eurocentrism in African cinema seems to be at least threefold: ontological, aesthetical, and political. Fundamentally, the ontology of cinema directly deals with the origins of cinema that has two aspects: idea and technology (mainly the camera), which have been made based on the philosophy of European modernism. The question of which came first: idea or technology – is essential in the historicity of cinema. In answering the question, there seem to be two trends refined by two leading theorists of cinema: Erwin Panofsky and Andrea Bazin. For Panofsky, for instance, the establishment of cinema is not an artistic urge that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of the new cinematic expression but a technical invention (Panofsky 1934). For Bazin, on the other hand, the idea precedes the technology. The idea that came first was “the idea and wish for the world re-created in its image,” and he named this idea “the myth of total cinema” (Bazin 1967, p. 22). The ‘myth’, according to Bazin, is inclusively European (ibid.). Following Bazin, Stanley Cavell (1979) sees cinema as the result of Cartesian scepticism – the ultimate proof of the ‘cogito’ – the foundation of Eurocentrism. This shows that the myth of total cinema is a wish to see the recreation of the image of the world that puts the modern European man as the centre and standard.

Secondly, cinema is politically Eurocentric. The political aspect has been a key role in justifying whether cinema is a means of the Western hegemony. This is so as it sets the foundational values which govern both the framing of the ontology as well as the aesthetics of cinema. The Western-dominated global cultural project that includes cinema has been known as the “cultural industry” (Adorno 1975). In this industry, the masses, artists, and spectators are not the measure, but ideology (Adorno 1975, p. 12). This ideology, for instance in cinema, has been designed not only in its aesthetic values but in its mode of production and distribution (*ibid.*). The mode of production, for instance, heavily depends on the technological aspect of cinema since technology dictates the form of the artwork. Thus, as long as the foundation of the camera is primarily based on Cartesian skepticism, mechanical modes of production, and instrumental rationality, the industry aims to impose Eurocentric-universality as an ideology (Horkimner 1974 quoted in Piran 1977). Due to this reason, the camera, in particular, and the technology of cinema, in general, are alienated from its objective – creating a liberational beauty – because of the diseases of reason and the corrupt political system (Marcuse 1955). Aesthetics, however, by appropriating the liberational dimension, can liberate not only the political system, the instrumental rationality of cinematic technologies, but the esthetical and metaphysical foundations of cinema.

The third layer of Eurocentrism in African cinema is aesthetic. To understand the development of the aesthetic crisis of African cinema from its roots, we have to take a look at the African alternative aesthetics – from assimilation to confusion, to decolonization, and to post-blackness - with help of Fanon’s aesthetics of decolonization (we shall return to this later). By and large, however, like in other forms of African art, the alternative African cinematic aesthetics has been suffering from a counter-alienation crisis. As a result, the crafting and transferring of cinematic languages and techniques and the execution of films are still dominated by Western values, norms, and cultural codes. As the tip of the iceberg, initially, cinema was introduced to Africa with the Aristotelian/illusionist aesthetics and then followed by the Marxisian aesthetics as it was perceived by the pioneers of African cinema as a way out. Following the end of the cold war, however, the hegemony of both aesthetics of Western universalism had to come to an end. This end has had a new beginning that endorses the new orientation of aesthetics of European experimental and art aesthetics such as aesthetics of estrangement that manifested themselves in different forms and styles like in films of surrealism, expressionism, and neo-realism, among others (Diawara 2010). This means that the theory and practice of filmmaking are Eurocentric in design, mainly in aesthetics and the method for situating it. The good news, however, seems to be on the aesthetics dimension itself in its ability to negate the yoke of Eurocentric universality of art and philosophy.

In summary, Eurocentric hegemony in African cinema is based on the European Self and the Other, in which the political, ontological and aesthetical layers of African cinema are deeply intertwined. While this trio of unjust seems to be the foundation of the alienation – and there might be more layers such as the epistemological – it is clear that African cinema ought to be liberated from its threefold Eurocentric impositions. In the current article we are specifically interested in aesthetics, and possibilities in how the alternative aesthetical layer of African cinema can contribute to liberation of African and global cinema. In the next sections, we therefore further explore the development of African aesthetics and its contribution to the aesthetics of liberation with an intercultural philosophical orientation, but first we will describe the methodology and main findings of dramaturgical analysis.

Dramaturgical analysis of five African films¹

The significance of this philosophical work will not be only related to the question that it has raised to be discussed, the decolonization of the image and the mind, and the objective of the journey, to introduce the aesthetics of liberation and critical mode of filmmaking. Rather, it is so in terms of the philosophical and cinematic approaches it employed: intercultural philosophy and dramaturgy. Thus to make our theoretical engagement fit with the filmmaking realm, we have used dramaturgical film analysis. In general, analysis of African cinema has been approached mainly from three conceptual positions: Neo-Marxism, Neo-Structuralism, and Postmodernism (Zacks 1995). These three methods are only focused on text-based analysis and as such lack holisticness (interculturality, intersectionality, and interconnectedness), and openness for change as they are value-oriented (ibid). Unlike these three methods of film analysis, dramaturgy is a type of critical sense-making of art that follows a triangular approach to examine an artwork (the work vis-à-vis the author), audience, and context. In dramaturgy analysis, the context, artwork, and audience are inseparable and this helps to shed a light on the social context where the films originated and beyond. It also helps to understand how the context and the film work are interconnected with the world view of the filmmaker. In other words, it gives us a space to analyze the notion of self-consciousness of one's culture/s while it encourages us to inquire about the intervention of the medium as it is the manifestation of

1 This article is largely based on the MA thesis research of Yonas Belay Abebe (2021) "Aesthetics of Liberation and Critical Filmmaking in Africa: a perspective from intercultural philosophy", at Addis Ababa University.

Eurocentric modern philosophy. Thus, in the history of African film studies, the presented study can be seen as introducing alternative analytical framework.

The objective of the qualitative analysis method was to collect secondary data from books, chapter(s) of books, articles, reviews, and interviews. This method is also helpful when it comes to the understanding of the social and artistic context and the composition of the film as well as the communication between the artist and the audience. To collect the necessary data from the practice of African cinema, we analysed five selected Sub-Saharan African fiction films. In general, African cinema can be described in three categorical periods: the first period 1895 – 1955, the second period 1955-1995, and the third period marks from 1995 to the present (Bakari 2018). We have selected five films that represent the three different postcolonial cultural orientations of Africa and the two phases of African cinema, namely: (1) *Bamako* (Sissako: 2006 - Mali), (2) *Atlantics* (Diop: 2019 - Senegal), (3) *Rafiki* (Kahiu: 2018 - Kenya), (4) *I am Not a Witch* (Rungano: 2018 - Zambia), and (5) *Teza* (Haile: 2008 - Ethiopia).

Although the accessibility of the films was also one of the limitations of the selection, we have attempted to design a critical and inclusive framework for the selection that supported a fair representation of the cinema of Sub-Saharan Africa. Space limitations in the current article do not allow for elaboration on the findings of each film. Instead, we provide a few main conclusions.

Overall, the findings indicate that the focus of African cinema remains on the changes of style and technique, rather than on transforming an alienated reality. As such, the study shows that African contemporary cinema has been alienated from the nature, and legitimate purpose and role that were conceived by its pioneers. While filmmakers aimed for African cinema to change the misrepresentation of African 'Black Image' that has been depicted by the white and occidental filmmaker, as exotic 'Other'. They dreamed and attempted to fight back and help the image, pride, and value of black people to revive. They also achieved some remarkable achievements, in terms of style and technique changes. Yet, African cinema has never been liberated in a sense of achieving social transformation - decolonizing the gaze and the mind. That is the reason why the decolonization struggle is still on-going as the alienation continues. Thus, one could say that African cinema is either in a state of assimilation or confusion: it is not yet liberated, but instead shows a deficiency in communicating liberation as it has been alienated from its nature and purpose.

Thus, while cinema might be used as a means to address the phenomenon of liberation in contemporary Africa, it raises the question: if cinema is ontologically, politically, and aesthetically Eurocentric, is there a possibility to liberate itself, let alone to use it as a medium of emancipation of the colonized mind? In

addressing this question, we'll be able to address further the third layer of the problem of African cinema and the solution towards it using the aesthetic-dimension as a solution to the ontological and political layers of the problem. In this section, we therefore further explore if and how aesthetics can contribute to liberation of African cinema.

Towards aesthetics of liberation

Throughout the history of art, and despite changes in taste, there is a standard that remains constant, that is aesthetic form (Marcuse 2007). Aesthetic form not only defends the independence and ontology of art but also performs a very strong function of criticism and negation as well. Moreover, it would appear to have a remarkable ability to transform reality (ibid., p. 41). In transforming reality, aesthetics form emancipates sensibility, imagination, and reason - this nature and functionality of art is called an aesthetic of liberation (Marcuse 1969, p. 9). The aesthetics of liberation is a foundation of great art. Great art has a dialectical nature: deconstructive, negative and irrational on one hand, and constructive and rational and valuable in achieving liberation on the other (ibid.). Thus, in great art, the content becomes a form, which is the essence of the aesthetics of liberation.

Based on this definition of great art, Marcuse identifies two types of revolutionary art in terms of their functionality (purpose). Revolutionary art level -one strives to achieve a change in style and technique (Marcuse 1978, p. 3). For example in literature and cinema, the introduction of the avant-garde, expressionism, and surrealism genres has been considered as an example of revolutionary art level-one. A work of art to be called revolutionary art level-two, liberational, on the other hand, has to be authentic (Marcuse 1978). To be authentic, a work of art has to be combative: negative, irrational and destructive. The purpose of the authentic art, therefore, is to transform the alienated social reality and opening the horizon of change – liberation (ibid. p. 3). In other words, it is to negate the established reality, the perception, and understanding in seeking “the appearance of the image of liberation” (ibid.). However, as the notion of revolutionary art is inspired by the ethos of the working classes in the advanced capitalist countries, it has little relevance to the situation of the oppressed race globally (Marcuse 2007, p. 177). Furthermore, what is at stake in the specific situation of the “oppressed racial minority” is the most general of all needs, namely, “the very existence of the individual and his group as a human being” (ibid.). Instead, Marcuse suggested the aesthetics of liberation as a solution to the problem – liberating not only the oppressed minds but the oppressors too.

In the direction of liberating the oppressed race using aesthetics of decolonization, Fanon (1965) categorized creative work into three phases: These are: (1) the unqualified – assimilation, (2) the disturbing – return, and (3) the liberational – combating². For this purpose, he further developed another trilogy as the value measurement of the phases: (1) the nature of art, (2) the purpose of art, and (3) the content and form of art. In fact, the foundation value of his aesthetics is humanism and he considered liberation as a return from alienation to humanism (ibid.). In decolonization, according to Fanon, there are three stages: (1) humanness – which is the natural stage of all human beings, (2) alienation – where violation introduced by modernity and colonization and (3) liberation in which human beings reunite with their humanity and can see beyond (ibid.). Fanon outlined his aesthetic dimension mainly in his two influential books entitled *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965). As an extension of Marcuse's aesthetics in the realm of the colonized works of art, Fanon focuses not on producing revolutionary art in a narrow sense in which some changes in relation to style and technique occur. His focus is on a revolutionary aesthetic where authentic art becomes a means (content) and end (form) of deconstruction of the anti-thinking mechanisms of colonial legacies (Fanon 1965, p. 61). In this case, reconstructing a new paradigm that can resolve the counter-alienation crisis is vital.

In the book *Intercultural Aesthetics*, Kimmerle (2009) describes the close connection between ethics and aesthetics in African philosophy. Based on the work of Kane Chukwulozie Anyanwu, Kimmerle explains that in African aesthetics and ethics, “beauty is striven after in connection with good action at the beauty in motion” (Kimmerle 2009, p. 45), which means that “good action has to be a beautiful action at the same time” (ibid.). However, many Africans are living in between ‘modern’ and traditional ways of life, which means that traditional moral standards are under pressure due to imposed modernization, neo-colonialism, industrialization and commercialization. Thus, in post-colonial Africa, the aesthetic-ethic notion of art of Africa that stands in preserving the traditional conception of ‘being good’ as beauty and can’t be retained as it was before colonization. In fact, the taste and judgment towards what is beautiful and attractive has to be formulated based on the present social context. Thus, the functionality of African art ought to be determined by its contribution to the project of liberation of Africans from alienation; the aesthetics has to be oriented towards what is good and beauty is liberation, thus to become aesthetic-liberation. In this context the aesthetic concept of living cinema takes a meaning of living liberation. Following Kimmerle (2009), we argue that African cinema could play a vital role

2 Paul C. Taylor (2010) has added a fourth categorization of African art, i.e., Post-Blackness. Post-Blackness is a new aesthetic orientation that takes race politics not as a center of the liberation struggle but as one of the themes of the artwork.

in reconnecting with African aesthetics-ethics, which can lead to a moral renewal on a global scale, which is based on aesthetic principles.

The search for liberation is not only a concern of Africans but also the West. The state of alienation that has been imposed by the violent modernization and urbanization impacts the African and the West cultural and psychological spaces. Therefore, as Kimmerle indicated, a source of hope can be found in bringing together the weak forces in both cultures: (1) in the African context, philosophers desperately trying to heal the absence of moral standards in the life of the big cities by reconnecting it with traditional ethical values; whereas (2) the struggle for an aestheticization of life in the Western world, experimental cinema as an example, meets big problems and is still marginalized by the mainstream philosophy and art (Kimmerle 2009, p. 52). That is why an intercultural philosophical dialogue between Africa and Europe needs to take place because “in a joint venture may lay a strategic chance” (ibid.). This relational artistic strategy, being liberated through others' liberation, is not only the source of the communal social structure but also the aesthetic beauty and happiness, which is based on playfulness.

Proposing an alternative: living cinema

In order to revive from its ruins and re-position itself as an art force to be reckoned with, African cinema needs to detach itself from Eurocentrism – the main source of the alienation of the image and minds – and aim towards cinema deconstruction. To achieve inclusive liberation, however, the deconstruction process of African cinema has to be combined with re-construction. In the reconstruction journey two things have to go hand in hand: working on alternative ideas and re-framing the platform for intercultural dialogue. The foundation of African cinema, which is the ontology, has to originate from African values, and the values have to be in the frame to contribute their own share to the ontology of global cinema. African values would be the immaterial mother-board of the ontology of cinema as the ontology of African philosophy is even beyond humanness, holistic; a philosophy where the visible and invisible worlds meet harmonically. This implies, above all, its inclusiveness. Therefore, the liberation process needs to start with reconciling with one's own self, African values.

On the other hand, since cinema is a global medium and mode of production of cultural and knowledge, it is important to make sure that everyone is included in the frame as well as in re-crafting the frame. An inclusive approach is needed to address the fundamental problems of alienated cinema. From intercultural philosophy we learn that dialogue can be a way to such liberation. This means

that liberation of African cinema should be extended to the oppressed cinema of the 'Other' as well as the oppressor: the liberation of the oppressed could not be realized without the liberation of the oppressor. Intercultural philosophy is thus not only an instrument of communication, but it is also a tool of deconstructing forms of injustice. African cinema, as a medium and part of the cultural discourse, has to embrace the rejection of the imposed values while it is working in constructing an inclusive alternative that could lead to the emancipation of the image and the minds of Africa and the world. It is in this dialogical way the reincarnation of African cinema ought to be realized and not in isolation.

In search for a dialogical alternative, we find inspiration in Kimmerle's aesthetic-ethic alternative 'living (with) art', which refers to the dynamic unity of art and daily life including the "essential task of contemporary philosophy to stress the importance of the connection between aesthetics and ethics" as "a counterforce against the total determination of life by industrialization, growing dependence on technical means and commercialization" (2009, p. 51). We propose to extend this alternative to filmmaking as a way for cinema to be restructured and start living with its own nature, purpose, and role. 'Living cinema' is a liberational dialogical cinema that can be a pathway for liberational African cinema with aesthetics of liberation at its core. It means to live in criticality, interculturality and liberation. This liberating function of cinema can be found in reconnecting with African values, based on aesthetic-ethic principles.

Some core principles of living cinema could then include complementarity of the individual with the community; the interconnectedness of the visible and the invisible world; harmony of reason, emotion, and spirits; the philosophy of difference and dialogue as a mode of doing knowledge, and finally; the aesthetic-ethic oriented cinema as a method of self-consciousness. This marriage of liberation with interculturality shows that African cinema has to be holistic in nature, liberational in purpose, and a mediator in role with dialogical orientation. The introduction of these values to the aesthetics and ontology of African cinema would be automatically contradicted the Western cultural hegemony. Thus, the change in the aesthetic dimension leads to a new paradigm shift in the philosophy of cinema.

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