African Performance Review
Vol 2 No 1 2008
pp96-98

Book Review

Eckhard Breitinger
Professor of African Theatre
University of Bayreuth, Germany

Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn eds., *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen*, Oxford, James Currey, Ohio University Press, Athens and Double Storey, Cape Town, 2007, 374 pp, $26.95

Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn brought together a broad range of historians, mainly from South Africa, but also some from the US to revisit an important theoretical battle field in American historiography. In 1988 *The American Historical Review* (Vol. 93/4) carried a forum section in which leading historiographers from Robert Rosenstone to the luminary of New Historicism, Hayden White, expressed their concern about the representation of history in American movies and coined the term "historio*photy*" *[the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse]* (1193) as opposed or parallel to (proper) historiography.

Black and White in Colour has taken up these conceptual issues and translated them into the African context and the African historical environment. The criteria, what kind of film qualifies as a "Historical" (analogous to "Musical"), were handled generously. There are films by the West African directors Gaston Kabore, Souleymane Cissé, Sembene Ousmane that are set in precolonial Africa, there are films dealing with colonial conquest/Zulu Wars, films on the Second Chirumenga in Zimbabwe or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, i.e. films dealing with a very distant past and the immediate past or rather actual present of the new South Africa. The book also includes essays on films like the Hollywood blockbuster *Out of Africa*, the German Oscar winner *Somehwere in Africa* or *White Mischief* that essentially use the African environment as an atmospherically loaded setting on which European character drama can unfold. (I happened to run into the n-th filming of *King Solomon's Mines* in Stellenbosch in 2006 where the touristy town centre was converted into a late 19th century setting

by dismantling streetlights, taking down shop signs and covering the tarmac with a thick coat of sand).

The films examined in this book are different in origin, intentionality and particularly in their inside or outside perspective, but the historicist approach of most contributors is almost uniform. Following Rosenstone's classification of "false invention / true invention" (R. Rosenstone. *Visions of the Past*, Harvard UP, 1995: 72-76), the essays focus on historical correctness. Some meticulously list where directors made their historical blunders (e.g. p. 49/50 Robert Baum blaming Sembene's presentation of royal insignia that do not belong to the Senegambian culture). Consequently, the essays give preference to subject matter and themes, limiting themselves to the description of the real historical events and their deviant filmic representations. Robert Harm's criticism of Alex Haley's *Roots* highlights the unreliability of Haley's chief informant, the "Griot" Fofana; he points to the contradiction between the hero worshipping of African warriors and their easy victimisation by a few white slavers and the silence about African collaboration in the trade, because it did not fit into the Civil Rights Agenda back in the US.

With J.J. Annaud's *Black and White in Colour* (Oscar, 1977), Bill Nasson complains that Africans remain "background characters" (157) while Sembene's *Camp Thiaroye* accords "heroic credit… and villainous blame" (164) as in a Western.

A different type of criticism refers to the personalisation in historical films. This applies to Raoul Peck's *Lumumba,* said to be hagiographic rather than historiographic. Concentrating all the contradictory "socioeconomic and political forces ... threatens to turn the film into the portrait of a saint rather than a complex political figure…"(223) The same applies to *Hotel Rwanda* where the complexities of ethnic conflict and random violence remain unexplored while the personal moral integrity and humaneness of the protagonist, Rusesabagina, occupies centre stage. With the figures of the generals Gordon in *Khartoum* and Graziani in *Omar Mukhtar: Lion of the Desert*, the film projects a concept of "the centrality of "big men" in historical change" (158). Shamil Jeppie thus raises a fundamental question about the difference in presentation and narration between historiography and film "historicals. Hollywood and the box office seem to demand personalisation, simplification, linear narration and closure or even happy ending, while proper historiography had recently given preference to social forces, economic developments, history of mentality and - following Hayden White's emphasis on the importance of narration - an openness to contradictions and relativity, to the different perspectives of observation and narration.

It could be argued that his apparently uncompromising stance results in the avoidance to really <u>read</u> the film texts as scrutinisingly and analytically as historians read their written sources. We read too little about film techniques and strategies to generate meanings, atmosphere, emotions, the importance of camera angles and camera motions to establish narrative perspectives, of long shots and close ups, about the composition of images in individual frames/takes. Narrative

sequences in the cutting and editing are not really mentioned. We hear about the role of landscape shots as visual means of essentialising Africa, but to my understanding as a literary (and media) critic, historians seem to be too occupied with history to be really ready to engage with the medium of film on its own terms. But one can certainly read the intertexts between the historians' discourse and his/her criticism of filmic discourse and learn a lot about both.