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African Cinema Animation

translated from Italian by Emilia Ippolito with Paula Burnett

If the topic is "African Cinema Animation," a question will most certainly be asked: what do we really know about it? Does anybody know anything about it? Amongst the forms of expression of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cinema animation is unanimously considered to be the most underestimated, the least explored and the most misunderstood of all. Within this dispiriting framework, African cinema animation suffers the worst-case scenario. Let us have a look at the written sources: apart from some monographs on the film and theatre director William Kentridge (Republic of South Africa), the precious but thin collection of works by the Swiss, Bruno Edera,[1] and the equally thin chapter on this topic in my world history of cinema animation,[2] what we—non-African people—know about this issue comes from a forty-eight-page booklet, *Hommage au cinéma d'animation d'Afrique noire.*[3]

Here is a significant quotation from Jean-Claude Matumweni Mwakala's essay "*Aspects sociologiques du cinéma d'animation africain* [Sociological Aspects of African Cinema Animation]" included in the above-mentioned collection:

As we all know, you need large investments to produce a film. The countries which have a prosperous and high quality film industry have invested large amounts of money in this sector. Africa has no cinema industry, and the existing investments are based on co-productions. The norm is therefore a lack of financial means; however, there are a couple of observations to make: for example, the waste of funds carried out by public authorities. The Ndaya International Foundation had obtained funds to finance the series *Kimboo*—which cost around twelve million French francs—together with France. It is known that film directors in Arab countries can count on policies of public financial support for th

Is he right? He probably is. However, why does he mention "children" and "young people's education" without considering that cartoons can be regarded as for an audience which is not composed only of children?

I could add for the benefit of the viewer who is not up-to-date on the subject, that some productions existed in the past in Egypt (for example, films featuring the character Mish-Mish Effendi by the Frenkel Brothers—see Figure 1), and that a consistent production still exists these days; that the Maghreb region has also contributed to it extensively; and that other works have been produced in the past fifteen years, thanks to the method of co-production, to which Jean-Claude Matumweni Mwakala refers in his essay.
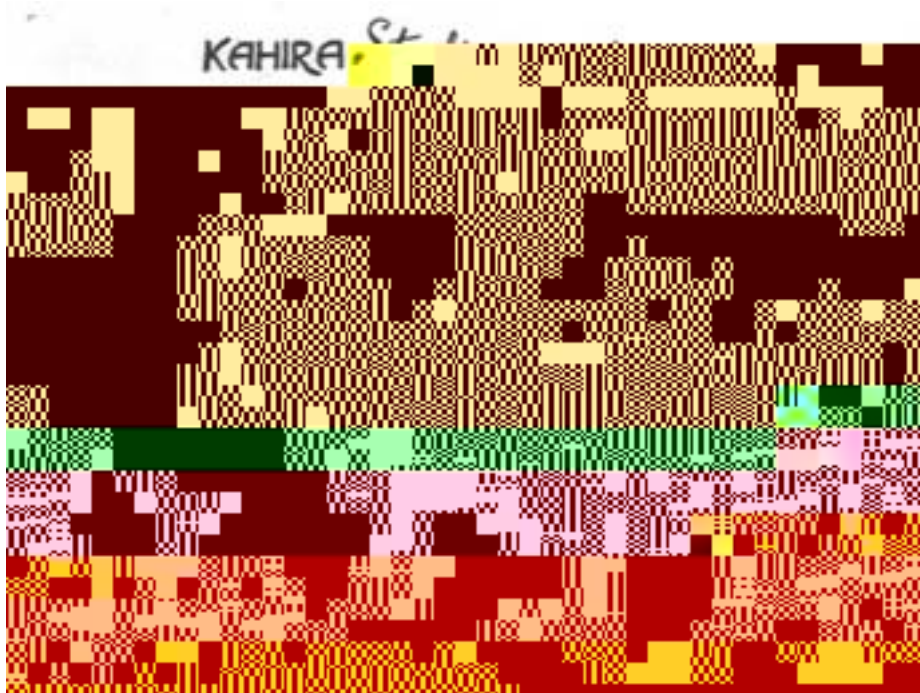
children's literature. Cinema animation is a cinema, twin brother to live-action, with a specific

history, a specific aesthetics, a specific market, etc.

viewed and awarded prizes at various festivals all over the world; he himself has travelled a

lot and has been a member of the jury at prestigious festivals (to my knowledge, at least at

Annecy and Clermont-Ferrand). In spite of these facts, he can be considered as a *naïf* auteur.

In the short 2001 film *Kokoa 2* (a remake of a film from 1985, about a chameleon fighter

which changes its colour to red whenever it gets angry with its adversary—see Figure 2), he

entertainment meant only for children, or else political, ethnic, or educational propaganda—

these are non-material filters, but no less influential.

People who accept these filters also accept all their consequences. They will make

films or television series which will be filtered, harmless, pre-digested, all the same,

(1996) is a series of twenty-six twenty-six-minute episodes in French, directed by Jean-Louis Bonpoint. In February 1998 Pierre Sauvalle, originally from Senegal, who studied at the Gobelins school in Paris, founded together with Aida N'Diaye a company called Pictoons. They acquired high technology, trained a lot of young professionals, and started producing television advertisements and soundtracks. Pictoons is the most important example of African animation meant for a global market, in open competition with European, American and Asian productions. The first series, *Kabongo le Griot* (*griot* means story-teller; it is a typical persona of African culture, which is based on story-telling), came out in 2000-2002. Its characters are a mix of international standard animation and, in the graphics, *fang* or *dogon* masks, typical of local cultural tradition (see Figure 3). There is also the mixed-techniques series (3D computer animation plus live action) *Grands Masques et les Junglos*, directed by Didier M. Aufort. This series is also in French. I5.9(llme)4.6(G2r)-.6(5ah.)-10(I)11 Fe

Norman McLaren, great artist and friend of oppressed peoples, dreamed of animation as the language of developing countries. McLaren spent several years in China and India, teaching the basics of animation techniques to people who had only the most basic means at their disposal. We, the younger ones, also shared this dream with him.

Animation can in fact be quite cheap and technologically simple. In order to safeguard their personal inspiration and national cultural traditions, people from Angola, Liberia, Paraguay, Haiti, Bali or Nepal, can paint or draw their sketches on film and pay for it with their own savings, the same way they would create an oil or watercolour painting. If well done, their film will stay in the viewers' memory and cinema history books along with *Titanic* or *The Lord of the Rings*. It was a dream and it has not come true. However, never say never.

Since we are speaking about colonisers and colonised, please forgive this digression. In different contingent circumstances, I have witnessed two examples of colonisation during my life: Western colonisation of the West (the Franco-American, then only American, colonisation of Italy during the fifties and sixties) and Western—English—colonisation of Australia.

The colonisation of my homeland has these days become homology. Italian cinema made by Italians for Italians (I mean "live" cinema, because of the inconsistency of animation products) has been limited to a few television comedians acting for the big screen.

The situation of the Aborigines was and still is different. They have been dispossessed of everything for centuries, and now the authorities offer them a sort of cultural compensation. I have witnessed a project of cultural re-enactment based on animation in Bourke, New South Wales. The aboriginal community, always tending towards visual means of expression, rapidly appropriated simple technological tools and started producing films. These films—this is the most important factor—refused to be "folk," and to propose traditional stereotypes. These films spoke of the Aborigines, their life, and their desires. A

keep the viewer's attention high); non-comprehension of the film as an audio-visual product, with a strong tendency to ask a friend composer for a couple of notes of soundtrack as a comment, or to fill in the gaps.

I would say that the student-made films I have dealt with all had these faults, to different degrees. I had heard nothing but good about Carlos Spivey, who is in California at the UCLA and Loyola Marymount University, but his works disappointed me. *Mama Seed Tree*, which means to communicate the idea of the continuation of life in the mother's womb as in mother earth's womb, has weak images and the soundtrack is inadequate. *Whisper* (fixed images opened up by software) or else *The World Is a Drum* are equally confusing.

So far we have spoken about black Africa. William Kentridge, an anti-racist white South African auteur of about twenty film animations, who refuses to identify his own work with the cartoon as such, is certainly the most important artistic and intellectual figure on the African continent. It is impossible to separate him from the context in which he has operated and is still working at present. Born in Johannesburg in 1955, he has always been politically and socially active, and won international acknowledgment in the mid-nineties when apartheid finally came to an end (1994). It would be wrong to look for overtly political messages in his film and graphic works (based on charcoal and very few colours). Kentridge is a complex and at times cryptic creator, who makes painful reference to the facts of his homeland, often interiorising them like a poet, in other words leaving them to be expressed by his protagonist, who will then become "everyman" on earth. It is not by chance that his latest work is taken from a highly interiorised novel, foreign to him, *La Coscienza di Zeno* [Zeno's Conscience], by Italo Svevo (2002).

The first animated feature film from the continent produced in 2003 in Zimbabwe, *The Legend of the Sky Kingdom*, is made by white Africans, the designer and producer Phil Cunningham and the director Roger Hawkins, both directing a multi-ethnic group of artists.

The film is about three children who escape from an underground city where they are slaves, and go on to reach the Sky Kingdom after a perilous and difficult journey. The technique, a variation on animated puppets, ha

design. Their model was not Walt Disney, rather the Fleischers or else Felix the Cat. As for

the name, Mish-Mish, it means "tomorrow with apricots," and we will translate it as "jam

tomorrow:" this was the answer given to the Frenkels whenever they asked for funding for

their work. However, Mish-Mish and the Frenkels became so popular that they were able to

start a successful advertising agency before the tensions between Egypt and Israel pushed

them to emigrate to France in the fifties.

Film animation in Egypt saw a renaissance thanks to Ali Muhib and his brother

Husam, who gave birth to the Film Animation Department within the national television

channel which was inaugurated in 1960. In 1962 Ali Muhib directed *The White Line*, a film

animation plus twenty-five-minute live action, which was a cross between a short musical and

a documentary film. It was a lively and excellent film, which made fine use of the split-screen

technique (unusual at that time), in a style reminiscent of Piet Mondrian. After eight years of

work at the Department, during which he trained many young colleagues, Ali Muhib

successfully switched to advertising. In 1979 he directed the first Arab animation film series,

Mishgias Sawah, composed of thirty episodes.

Mohammed Hassib (1937-2001) was one of Muhib's pupils; he separated from him in

1964 to devote himself to advertising, educa   Abd.DepaAliab Q(0.4(piah)Tj/TT4 1 -3i)-3.59 -2.3 TD-0.00

Abdellaim Zaki (1939) wrote television soundtracks, live-action feature-film titles, and animation commercials for several Arab countries such as Sudan, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (over one thousand), as well as didactic films. Ihab Shaker (Cairo, 1933), painter, caricaturist, illustrator, puppet-master, was the most famous animation film director beyond the borders of his homeland. In 1968 he directed *The Flower and the Bottle* in Egypt,

government still supports its animation cinema—hopefully he and his colleagues will be able to preserve a national culture in the right way.

The first Algerian animation film, *La fête de l'arbre* [The Tree Party], (1963), was produced by Mohamed Aram (Hussein Dey, 1934), only one year after the country became independent. Aram learnt animation techniques on his own; he trained his team and directed films in his spare time—he was mainly a scriptwriter. His first works were educational productions in black and white. *The Tree Party* was an invitation to re-grow the vegetation destroyed by napalm. *Ah, s'il savait lire* [Ah, If Only He Could Read] (1963), was intended to fight illiteracy, and *Microbes des poubelles* [Litter Bugs] (1964), deals with health problems caused by urban life. The large number of productions, over twenty between 1963 and 1999, did not help him solve his problems—a consequence of the lack of support from the cinema authorities in his country. Two of his helpers were Mohamed "Mad" Mazari and Menouar "Slim" Merabtene, directors and comic-strip designers. Mazari directed *Mariage* [Wedding] (1966), and Merabtene *Le Magicien* [The Magician], (1965). One more Algerian worth mentioning is Mohamed Toufik Lebcir, author of *Branches* (1991), based on the *Thousand and One Nights*, and *Atakor* (1993), the pilot episode of an eponymous series.

Now let us try and change our point of view. Let us completely abandon the notion of quality and consider the financial aspect only. Only rarely does history follow the rules of predictability, therefore I cannot see why African animation history should be any different. Here is a good example. South Korea was, until fifteen years ago, only a cheap-labour country. People who wanted to do film animation or

What will happen in fifteen years' time to the powerful Senegal, Egypt and Republic of South Africa, where production companies aimed at television series are developing these days, or to the Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe? Will they have developed, as Jean-Claude Matumweni Mwakala says, "a prosperous and high quality cinematography, investing in this sector?" Will they have a well-structured, aggressive and competitive cinema animation industry on the globalised scene, like the South Korean one at present? And if the answer is positive, how will they behave towards the Masscult and Midcult (in MacDonaldian terms)? My answer, though with limited interest—I must admit that I believe more in auteurs than in series—is that only then will we be able to answer the frequent and indispensable question: "What is typically African in African cinema animation?"

A cowboy in the nineteenth or twentieth century, or else these days, was as exotic in Boston or Manhattan as in Berlin or Manila; however, the Western genre is "typically" American. A giant robot can be found only in toyshops in Tokyo; however, the space-work animation of Goldrake is "typically" Japanese. The mentality and behaviour of the district of Trastevere in Rome is not comprehensible to Italians from Udine and Cagliari; however, Alberto Sordi's or Nino Manfredi's comedy is "typically" Italian.

I mean that cinema and television naturally depend neither on folklore, nor on old or new national or local traditions; for example, nobody in Italy has ever been able to make a good film on the very Italian character of Pinocchio. Cinema and television create their own mythologies (they are autotrophic, in this respect). These mythologies become national brands.

We can therefore say that Highcult auteurs' film animation represents the African soul, but as it has been re-written by those auteurs. It in fact represents only those auteurs. The only "typically" African feature in their films is the soundtrack, taken from an eternal music, everlasting languages, French and English accents which never had to be invented.