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Film as a Weapon: The Cultural Question in African Liberation

by Iyorchia D. Ayu

There exists a consensus that film is an important cultural form. However, there are equally divergent conceptualizations of the role of this cultural form in society since it made a powerful intervention in Western societies at the close of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Within a short period, precisely between 1908 and the 1930s, film, or the cinema, and its relationship to social life had become a cultural fact in the development of mass culture in Western societies. Interestingly, this period of rapid technological changes, of transformation in cultural tastes and artistic devices, corresponded of necessity with profound political changes at international levels, the most decisive being the climax of imperialism in its colonial phase, closely followed by decolonization. Very soon, what had started life as a western cultural development became internationalized for varying purposes, and since then has gone through several transformations in both form and content. Over these years, and in different cultural settings and at different historical conjunctures, film and its related cousins have come to define different forms of reality, serving diverse and contradictory interests in the world.

Conceptually too, films, depending on one's point of entry and departure, have come to mean different things to different people. To some, film is simply a forum of entertainment and recreation, value-free, carrying no particular point of view, objective and neutral in its conception and portrayal of the world. The cinema theater in this perspective is, therefore, a place where fabricated fantasy is offered to a fatigued audience in search of relaxation.

To some, films are simply an art form where the film maker displays his mastery of the craft or technique through masterly handling of character, acting techniques, choice of costume, scenery and finesse in editing. This purely aesthetic conception is the dream world of the actor, producer, director.

Besides this view of film as technique is the conception of film as a commodity, just like all other commodities. Here, the success of a film is determined by the size of "the Box Office" and associated returns. Giving the audience what "they want" becomes the guiding philosophy without giving due attention to content. Finally, the last conception is that of film as a social and political weapon with definite points of view, definite orientations, and an overall objective.

More than the three previous perspectives, this paper addresses itself to the key concern of cultural production. It argues that, in spite of claims to the contrary, whether explicit or implicit, a film is not a neutral cultural product. All films are social products and take the coloration of

the material conditions and social relationships, including the cultural coordinates, of the society in which they are produced. Irrespective of the primary motives or intentions of the producer--leisure, commerce, aesthetics, and sociopolitical struggles--in the final analysis, all films serve as a material weapon in the hands of the class which controls, directs and processes it for mass consumption. Films are therefore coded social and political commentary on the daily struggle between man and nature, between man and man in society; hence, they try to advance the point of view, ways of seeing, of conceptualizing reality, interpreting social action of individuals and groups and, by so doing, open up possibilities of future action. These possibilities could be for the purpose of maintaining the *status quo* or for bringing about change.

With this as a frame of reference, we wish to offer, in an essentially sketchy form, an assessment of the development of the art with particular reference to the decolonization struggles in Africa. At the end, we will try to suggest possible new directions for the cinema in the context of African liberation and development.

Film as Commodity and Leisure

Globally, the history of film is the story of American domination.¹ There is no disputing the fact that since the 1930s, Hollywood has ruled the world. While the period 1896-1908 is considered the prehistory of American and world cinema, or the era of its gestation, the industry developed very rapidly in four major phases: the first, 1908-1912, was a period of rudimentary film technology with early attempts at monopolies, when nine companies formed the Motion Pictures Patent Company, and distribution was monopolized by the General Film Company. These trusts fought to exclude others from the industry by intimidating those who hired their projectors and films. Also important was the introduction of the Star-System and full-length feature films in 1912.

The second phase, 1912-1929, saw the introduction of sound and the consolidation of the industry's major studios, following the intervention of Wall Street.

Phase three, 1929-1936, saw further concentration and the expansion of American monopoly to world monopoly. The industry now integrated with other industrial concerns, especially electrical companies like Western Electric, AEG Siemens, ATTC, and RCA, which were linked to or controlled by a few powerful American business families--Mellons, Rockefeller, Dillon, Morgan, etc. It marked the consolidation of the eight majors--Universal, Paramount, Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox, MGM, United Artists, Columbia,

and RKO, and at the same time, decisive involvement of concentrated finance capital--the banks.

In the final phase, between 1936 and the 1970s, the film industry had become dominated by a few powerful conglomerates linked by banks, electronic industry, real estate and leisure, both domestically and on an international scale. In the area of leisure and culture, these conglomerates were not just involved in film production, but actively dominated the associated areas of video, TV films, advertising, the record business, and tourist attractions including amusement parks, sports centers, mechanized gaming machines, T-shirts, toys, and publishing. Their assets, turnovers, and profits were all in the billions. Culture had effectively become a commodity on a world scale through the simple logic of integration, diversification, and internationalization.

One observer of the political economy of the America film industry, Janet Wasko, has correctly noted that film in a capitalist economy is a commodity. But more than that,

it is a special kind of commodity because it is an art form, a communications medium and an ideological tool. Nevertheless, it is still a commodity produced, distributed and exhibited under market conditions that must in some way affect what types of films are made, who makes them, and how they are distributed and exhibited to the public.²

As a capital-intensive industry in both production, distribution and promotion, and moreover, being a high risk business but profitable on a long-term investment basis, the film industry required tremendous goodwill from the captains of capital, hence the centrality of the banking sector. The character of financing (1950s, 1960s and 1970s) was one of debts rather than equities. Therefore, the banks had a decisive say in what they termed "a bankable package" of script, star and budget.

Though not too overt, the control of the industry by the banks was undertaken through lending arrangements, determined largely by middle class, white, film company executives. They read the scripts, chose the stars, determined which producer to support and selected the pattern of distribution. In other words, film executives with white, middle class, capitalist and politically conservative dispositions have become the surrogate bankers for capital.

This constrains who can and cannot produce a film, what film can and cannot be produced. For someone who wants to move beyond the glamour of Hollywood (in its solid fortress of shrewd, professional, business calculation), whose political outlook is anything

but conservative, this has clear implications for film content, style and form. To quote Wasko once more:

... the balance of power in the banking/film industry relationship lies inherently with the banks, for these financial institutions hold powerful positions in the economy in general, as well as maintaining crucial political ties and affiliations.³

Inevitably, the way of life offered as film diet is that which does not in anyway subvert the interests of captains of capital. It is of necessity a very sanitized and safe diet which sets out under the cover of "entertainment" and the "profit motive" to reinforce the ideology of the American ruling class.

Hence, thematically, the dominant Hollywood presentations are those of money, adventure, sex, violence, self-improvement, glamorous fashion, happy endings, stars, comedy, etc. On the minus side of the score sheet are derogatory stereotypings of the underprivileged ethnic minorities.

Within the first compartment, one finds a consumer society packed with "lovely homes and lovely clothes and lovely cars and lovely lives."⁴ All of them are worn, inhabited and driven by a diverse collection of stars:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) heroic masculinity
with strong wills |) John Wayne
) Marlon Brando
) Steve McQueen
) Paul Newman
) Al Pacino
) Sylvester Stallone |
| (2) female servility
and sensuous
sexuality |) Marilyn Monroe
) Jayne Mansfield
) Elizabeth Taylor |
| (3) feminine strength of
purpose |) Jane Fonda
) Vanessa Redgrave
) Barbara Streisand
) Shirley McLaine |

Contradictory as the pattern looks, it is a true representation of the "American dream" of individualism, money, success, glamour, and adventure. It is an image that is antithetical to a struggling individual, or underdeveloped society, much as it invites all into this world.

In the negative compartment are the docile, mentally inferior, lazy, and superstitious ordinary lot who are given to lying, stealing, or the menial jobs of servitude; they are physical achievers in the world of sports or natural musicians, the unhappy non-whites persistently angling for and raping white ladies--the supersexual men of black America.⁵ It is a genre which takes off from the production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in 1909, reinforced in 1935 by D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" which saw the outcome of the American Civil War as giving blacks "a stronghold" on the economy of the South. As Bogle stated of Griffith's films, "blacks are always big, baaad niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh."⁶ It is a classic blaming-the-victim portrayal which over the years became the staple image of the oppressed, particularly blacks, in America.

Such rationalization of oppression was and is still constantly celebrated in the genre of the Western.

It is this contrasting imagery of justified success and equally deserving failure which is carefully packaged with the highest possible technical and aesthetic finesse with attention to every minute detail and with vast financial commitment. Such blockbusters, beginning with "The Sound of Music" in 1966 cost enormous amounts to produce as indicated below:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Film</u>	<u>Cost of Production</u>
1966	"The Sound of Music"	\$7.6 million
1971	"The French Connection"	\$2.4 million
1975	"The Towering Inferno"	\$14.0 million
1979	"Star Trek"	est. \$40.5 million

If one includes the amount spent on distribution, marketing and promotion, these figures triple.⁷

Inevitably, captains of industry and finance capital have quietly metamorphosed into captains of consciousness, exercising hegemony over those they exploit. And in the age of imperialism, these underdogs are not just those within centers of capitalism but even more are those in Third World countries.⁸ As Guback concludes quite aptly:

this means that the films which are available at any moment on screens stem from commercial decisions rather than from consideration of aesthetic quality or more detached concerns about where a society ought to be going and how to get there.⁹

In the hands of those in power, therefore, film is a tool or weapon for social control, exploitation and massive capital accumulation. Such

In the hands of those in power, therefore, film is a tool or weapon for social control, exploitation and massive capital accumulation. Such films offer escapism, diversion from the concrete realities of social, political and economic existence, levity and excitement for the youth rather than cultivation of the serious habit of thinking critically and possibly taking a decisive step to end this inhuman system of exploitation.

Hollywood in the Third World

This narcotizing effect of the Hollywood culture outlined above is also true of films produced by many mini-Hollywoods scattered around many Third World countries. Of these, the best known examples are the Indian Film Industry and Kung-Fu films of Hong Kong.

They offer no departure from Hollywood. Apart from appropriating local myths, songs, and colored faces, it is the same banal copying of the star-system: sexual suggestiveness (even if tempered by local puritanical taboos as in Indian films), success, affluence etc., with an unapologetically commercial market approach. Commenting on the Indian film industry, Jeremy Turnstall has summarized the situation as follows: "Unattached youth, drink, romantic love, night clubs, cars, and palaces constitute the standard obsession of Indian films," and he further adds that "in a land of poverty, production, arranged marriages and with hundreds of people sleeping on the streets outside the cinema, the demand for film realism has been limited."¹⁰

New Hollywood models such as James Bond are copied by the Indian Film Industry, turning Indians and consumers of the so-called "Indian Films" into dreamers permanently slumbering and dreaming to escape to Hollywood or America and to transform themselves into stars.

This internationalization of Hollywood through distribution monopolies (in Nigeria it is by Lebanese, Indians, and Americans), co-productions with distributors and other Third World film monopolies like the Mandan Chain in India, or even wholesale transplantations of Hollywood-type studios, professionals, cameras and capital/film linkages as well as the distressful effect of these on authentic national cultures is a serious challenge to many oppressed nations.

It is this adoption of Hollywood into Third World countries in the name of national film cultures which one wishes to refer to as "assimilationist" as opposed to films with "liberative" potential. This potential invokes that crucial phase of struggle to overcome oppression, especially when the oppressor knows that a people are reasserting their cultural self after years of oppression and resistance and that they are about to rediscover their lost identity. At this juncture, the imperialist

culture stealthily introduces new distortions through the vortex or pyramid of culture it constructed by creating an alienated middle class resident in urban areas.¹¹ The products of such assimilationist institutions, apart from aping the cultural values of the master, remain, like the master, patronizing, contemptuous of and repressive to the masses and their culture. This is the ultimate outcome of the so-called national film products of many neo-colonial Third World nations.

Given current class configuration and international relations, it is difficult to imagine a contrary filmic scenario in spite of the sound and fury.

Repression, Resistance, and Liberation

Let us recapture certain critical nuances in the development of the film industry with reference to the African struggle for identity. As far as film is concerned, there is no other starting point than the fabrication of explorers and their literary associates such as Graham Green--*The Heart of the Matter*--whose exotic tales of "savagery" and the "burden" carried by the white man in his civilizing mission became the subject of the early "African" films. If Griffith poured scorn on blacks and rationalized slavery and the barbarism perpetrated upon American blacks, so also did his British counterparts justify colonial rule in Africa. The film became a veritable vehicle for such inhuman rationalizations--all in the service of imperialism and capital accumulation. One reinforced the other.

Africa entered the film world through these jaundiced colonial lenses as a reservoir of animals, mountains, forests or jungles, and savages, of which the African and African tribes were the wildest savages of them all. On the screens, too, even the beasts appeared better--more intelligent, cultured, less prone to violence and sex. Since 1918, the "Tarzan" films and Martin Johnson's *Congorilla*, reproduced in Walt Disney's "African Lion," have remained the established repertoire with only slight modifications as far as the dominant stream of Western film culture is concerned. Hence Africans/blacks enter predominantly (though not always) as scenery props, picturesque crowds with spears, looking timid, bizarre, unintelligent, still waiting to be patronized, civilized and protected.

But, as Cabral pointed out in 1972, such distortions do not and have not killed the people's culture.

Repressed, persecuted, humiliated, betrayed by certain strata which have come to terms with the foreigner, taking refuge in villages in forests and in the minds of these victims of domination, culture weathers all storms to recover through the

struggle for liberation all its power of expansion and enrichment. That is why the problem of a "return to sources" or a "cultural renaissance" does not arise for the masses of the people. It could not, for the masses are the torchbearers of culture; they are the source of culture and at the same time the one entity truly capable of preserving and creating it- of making history.

It is this attempt to "return to the source," to recover lost identities and cultures, though of varying qualities, which marks the signpost of combative and liberative cultural intervention by many African and other Third World intellectuals, artists, and film makers. "Liberation," as Cabral stated, "is now an act of culture," an attempt to clearly grasp reality, concrete knowledge of the local and international configuration of the struggle. It is this "act of culture" that structures, propels and dictates the momentum of other forms of struggle, methods of fighting, and the objective of struggle.

In the film industry, these varied responses have meant a shift from the "unqualified assimilation of Hollywood" in industrial structure, themes, purpose, and styles, through what Professor Teshome H. Gabriel calls "the phase of Remembrance", to the final phase of "Combat".¹²

According to Gabriel, "the phase of Remembrance," of "cultural reassertion," of "clash of cultures" sees the filmmaker and his society indigenizing and controlling talents, production, exhibition and distribution. Dominant themes include the clash between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized, the clash of urban versus rural cultures, folklore and mythology. Cited examples here include the early films of Sembene Ousmane, particularly "Mandabi," and the folkish "Wend Kuuni" by Gaston Kabore of Burkina Faso. Though these films try to break away from Hollywood, they tend to romanticize the past. In the Nigerian case, though one is not familiar with Ola Balogun's films, his theoretical oeuvre suggests that his films are of this mold. Balogun rightly decries the dominance of Western films and their distribution monopolies, but suggests as a solution "a return to the Values of African Civilization"¹³ (my emphasis). No further clarification is offered as Balogun moves to questions about the most acceptable and effective format, about state policies on imports, about funding of local productions and promotion strategies. The "Combative phase" conceives of filmmaking as a public service institution. Owned, produced, marketed and operated by the people, it is "a cinema of mass participation," acted out and consumed by the communities. Examples of such films include Sembene Ousmane's "EMI TAI" (The Angry Gods), which tries to capture the physical and spiritual tension in a rural

community; the films of Soulemane Cisse of Mali--"Baara" (Work) and "Fanye" (The Wind). Cisse's "Baara" has been summarized as follows:

"In "Baara" (Work), a young engineer recently returned from training abroad befriends a peasant boy who is having difficulties in finding acceptance among his lumpen colleagues. The engineer finds his new friend a job in the firm he is running and involves him in union activities. The engineer's keen interest in the worker's Union and his support for their demands earns him a solid popularity among the worker's Union, however, management of the firm kills the young engineer, thereby provoking a general revolt, precisely the very eventuality they wanted to avoid."¹⁴

But in spite of this revolutionary outlook, Cisse allows the engineer to carry the contradictions of his society as he is seen oppressing his wife, not allowing her to work outside the home and denying her any meaningful form of self-expression.

But even here, such filmmakers who are not part of wider political movements, to use Miguel Littin's graphic expression, tend to "look down on the masses from a balcony, and throw leaflets to them...."¹⁵ They usually espouse the viewpoint of concerned, or even committed, petty bourgeois intellectuals with inadequate understanding of the inner feelings, yearnings and aspirations of the masses. Nonetheless, they serve a useful purpose of addressing their middle class colleagues, of convincing and converting a segment of them who are either confused but disenchanted, or vacillating between their privileges and the interests and aspirations of the masses. Furthermore, it signals the arrival of the activist phase of resistance. It is this which translates itself into the final phase of liberation. This is the period when the filmmaker is deeply involved in the ongoing struggles, working among the people, learning from them, correcting their prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions, and helping them to interpret and overcome the repressed, humiliating and brutal reality around them. He has now discovered that "the masses are the torchbearers of culture," "the sources of culture," "the makers of history."¹⁶ He is forced by historical necessity to organize and mobilize the masses; since he understands them better by virtue of participation and shared experience he does so, capturing powerfully their true reality through the medium of the film. It is a film whose language, theme, form, content and perspectives the masses understand comprehensively. In turn, it moves them; they respond to it by taking cultural action to freedom. The film is no longer a fact of culture but a cultural factor of mobilization towards liberation. Victorious, the people institutionalize

these factors of mobilization and use them to attain higher forms of human realization. Within this genre, we have (i) The Algerian L'Office National Pour le Commerce et L'Industrie Cinematographique (ONCIC), born out of the heroic Algerian Struggle for Liberation, (ii) Cuba's Institute of Film Art and Industry (ICAIC), and (iii) Chile's short lived Chile Films under the popular Unity Socialist government of Salvador Allende.¹⁷

In contemporary Africa, the following films of struggle suggest themselves: "Kwanza," "Namibia: The Last Colony," and "Passing the Message," which explores trade union struggles in South Africa.

"Kwanza," for example, details the day-to-day running of SWAPO camps in Angola, showing industries, schools, health care, and how the camp is defended against apartheid South Africa. "The Last Colony" is a testimony by doctors, journalists and clergymen of torture, judicial murder, and unbelievable social class and race inequalities in apartheid South Africa.

These films are not just passive recordings of struggles. They actually constitute part of the struggle and provide clear directions. Thus, much as "Passing the Message" documents the struggles of African trade unionists who talk about self-improvement, it also draws their attention to the wider struggle and warns against the temptation of focusing rather narrowly on purely economic demands.

In terms of format, these are essentially low-budget films, using the 16 mm camera with video-tape techniques, a limited crew, etc., defying Western conventions of budget, technique, stars, glamour, money, sex and success. Yet they are successful films, functional, appealing to their audiences, which demand more, affirming the thesis that appetite grows on what it feeds.

In those countries where they have taken root, these combative and liberative films have contributed enormously in checking the advance of imperialism and its culture; in fighting against other domestic oppressive cultures such as work exploitation, corruption, feudal repression, and the oppression of women. By promoting the authentic cultures of the producing classes--labor, peasants and artisans, and those of hitherto marginalized social groups such as youths, the aged, women and the disabled--they have managed to elevate their societies above such base values and sentiments as tribe, race and religion which the ruling class continues to manipulate in countries like Nigeria for their own selfish interests.

Today, as ever, Africa is going through a profound crisis, made worse by the recolonization efforts of the IMF and local hired hands. African intellectuals, including its filmmakers, have a choice. Either they will continue to assimilate, half-digest and reproduce alien cultures such as Hollywood-modelled films and by so doing partake in the

ongoing enslavement of their people, or they will take the decisive but difficult step of cultural resistance and liberation.

For me, the obvious choice is cultural struggle for African Liberation. As Amílcar Cabral said:

Whatever its form, the struggle requires the mobilization and organization of a large majority of the population, the political and moral unity of different social categories, the gradual elimination of vestiges of tribal or feudal mentality and the rejection of social and religious taboos incompatible with the rational and national character of the liberation movement. . . the dynamics of the struggle require the exercise of democracy, criticism and self-criticism, growing participation by the people in running their own lives, literacy, the creation of schools and health services, leadership training for persons with rural and urban laboring backgrounds, and many other developments which impel people to set forth upon the road of cultural progress.¹⁸

It is submitted boldly that only this liberative route can connect film culture and genuine national liberation in Africa.

¹ See Jeremy Turnstall, *The Media are American*. London: Constable (1977) and Thomas Guback, "Film as International Business," in A. Mattelart and S. Siegelau (eds.) *Communication and Class Struggle*. New York: IG (1979).

² Janet Wasko, "The Political Economy of the American Film Industry," *Media, Culture and Society*. (1981) 3: 135.

³ Wasko, *Ibid.*, p.151.

⁴ John Baxter, *Hollywood in the Thirties*. New York: A.S. Barnes (1968).

⁵ This characterization is derived from Lawrence Reddick as summarized in Kyalo Mativo, "Resolving the Cultural Dilemma of the African Film," in *UFAHAMU*, Vol. XIII, No.1, Fall, 1983, p.114. See also Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York, The Viking Press, 1973).

⁶ Bogle, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷ The promotion of these films sometimes costs more than production. For example, "The Omen" cost \$3 million to produce, and \$6 million to promote!

⁸ More than 50% of the profits from American films come from abroad. In 1979 Nigeria imported 105 feature films (against 11 produced locally), all from the U.S. The previous year 20% came from the U.K. while the other 80% came from the U.S.

⁹ Thomas Guback, "Film as International Business," in Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelau (eds.), *Communication and Class Struggle*, New York: International General (1979), p. 361.

¹⁰ Jeremy Turnstall, *Op. Cit.*, p. 120.

¹¹This is derived from the solid analysis of culture and liberation by Amílcar Cabral. See Cabral's "The Role of Culture in the Liberation Struggle."

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Ola Balogun, "Cultural Perspectives in the African Mass Media," in Onuora E. Mwuoneli, *Mass Communication in Nigeria: A Book of Readings*, Enugu, Fourth Dimension, 1985.

¹⁴Kyalo Mativo, "Resolving the Cultural Dilemma of the African Film," in *UFAHAMU*, Vol.XIII, No. 1, Fall, 1983, p. 142.

¹⁵An interview with the famous Chilean film-maker, Miguel Littin (1974), in Michael Chanan (ed.), *Chilean Cinema*. London: British Film Institute (1976), p. 65.

¹⁶See the Cabral quotation above.

¹⁷Mario Relich's review of "Films of Struggle," in *West Africa*, 13 August, 1984, pp. 1632-33.

¹⁸Cabral, *Op. Cit.*