Introduction: Film Festivals and/in Theory

Filmmaking by Africans and Film Festivals

Egypt is the stark exception in Africa when it comes to the history of the production and exhibition of films. This is due to Egypt's quite distinct experience of European rule, which meant that from the early days of British occupation (1882–1922), locals still had resources and power that people within other African countries did not at the time. While Egyptians started to make films from the early twentieth century, soon after the invention of the medium, for much of Africa the possibility of Africans making their own films arose only in the decolonization period, from the 1960s onwards. Similarly, unlike in Egypt, where cinemas played local films to local audiences, in most African countries local films—when they started to be made—were not screened in local cinemas or on television. The cinemas tended to be owned by foreign companies or people with commercial interests seeking to make a profit. For them, it was far more lucrative to play B-grade Hollywood films, which had already made financial returns on the international market, than it was to screen films by Africans that had yet to establish an overseas market or recoup their costs. Neither were these films by Africans welcomed by local television stations, which, until the liberalization of the media across Africa in the 1990s, were state-owned and usually operated within nationalist frameworks favoring government propaganda or cheap foreign content. Initially, film festivals—both international and African-focused—tried to fill the gap.

The first film festival in the world, the Venice Film Festival, was founded in 1932, and was followed by a wave of other such festivals in Europe, such as Cannes (1939), Locarno (1946), Edinburgh (1946), Karlovy Vary (1946), and Berlin (1950). It took until the 1960s, during decolonization, for African countries to start hosting their own arts festivals, among which there was a strong film presence. The first regularly held film festivals were the Festival International du Film Amateur de Kelibia (FIFAK), founded in Tunisia in 1964; the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage (JCC), also created in Tunisia, in 1966; the Festival Pan-Africain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou (FESPACO), which originated in Burkina Faso in 1969; the Cairo International Film Festival, founded in Egypt in 1976; and the Durban Film Festival, created in South Africa in 1979. Festivals focusing on African film but from outside of the African continent were initiated in 1979, beginning with the Festival des 3 Continents in Nantes, France.
In the late 1990s, a new wave of these African film festivals began flourishing, particularly in Western Europe, while in Africa, a flowering of new international film festivals took place, the first of which was the Zanzibar International Film Festival, founded in 1998. Around the same time, “A-list” international film festivals, such as the Toronto International Film Festival, began to introduce curators and/or programs dedicated to films by Africans. These film festivals and their directors, curators, and audiences, insofar as they have engaged with the filmmaking and film cultures of Africans, are the focus of this book.

Alongside the rise of film festivals, another movement has sought to connect African-made films with audiences in Africa. Beginning in the mid-1980s, a revolution in filmmaking on the African continent started in Ghana, fully took off in Nigeria and then spread to other parts of the continent. This revolution is now popularly known under the umbrella term “Nollywood,” which technically refers only to the industry in southern Nigeria. Two decades after the continent’s first film festivals attempted to put African-made films in contact with African audiences, here was a movement in which entrepreneurial individuals, often self-trained in filmmaking, were using new, cheap, digital technology to make films on video formats, and then distribute them via VHS and VCD. These films are locally funded, often through the profits gained from a filmmaker’s previous works, and are viewed in people’s homes or in the makeshift video halls that exist across the African continent, in lieu of more formal cinemas (which have generally been in decline since the 1990s, for reasons I will explore later). This video movie revolution and the groundbreaking scholarship around it has provided common ground for those interested in a whole range of screen media in Africa and their relationship to cultural, social, political, and economic contexts (see Haynes 2010); it has inspired and challenged scholars who study films by Africans to think much more about the “different material conditions of creation, circulation, and consumption” (Garritano 2013: 7) of audiovisual cultural products, and about the political economies of production, distribution and exhibition of films by Africans.

The impulse behind much of the African video movie scholarship is the same as the impulse behind the study of film festivals, a relatively new academic sub-field, and one that seeks to rematerialize film studies, albeit from an entirely different angle to video movie scholarship. At the intersection of African screen media studies and film festival studies, this book—the first to focus on the relationships among film festivals, curators, filmmakers, and audiences who have some link to Africa—aims to take up the gauntlet presented by African video movie scholars by looking not at the video movie industries themselves but at those entities—film festivals—that, because of their assumed investment in concepts such as “high art” and “quality film,” have frequently been positioned as their polar opposite.

While most contemporary scholarship on African screen media acknowledges outright that there have been, and continue to be, many trends and cultures of filmmaking across the continent and in the African diaspora, many scholars have advanced this argument through the analysis of films (Pfaff 2004), genres (Adesokan 2011, Green-Simms 2012), nationally located cinemas (Vieyra 1983, Haynes 2000, Garritano 2013), particular filmmakers (Murphy and Williams 2007), or critical concepts such as “tradition” and “modernity” (Akudinobi 2014). When the