

‘A Poetics of Refusals’: Neorealism from Italy to Africa

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“I would very much like to ask Sembene what he thinks of Rossellini. Does he mean anything to him? Has Rossellini had as much influence on Sembene’s cinema as on mine, for example?” (Rouch 94).

Scholars have tended to write about African film as if it existed in an odd sort of isolation, only reacting against and rejecting the themes and styles of colonial and neocolonial European cinema rather than participating in international cinematic traditions. Even within discussions of non-Western cinema, connections between African and Latin American or Indian films and filmmakers have all too rarely been drawn in any detail. In what follows, I will ask what legacy Italian Neorealism might have left African film, tracing a political and aesthetic cinematic project as taken up in different national and historical contexts. I cannot answer French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch’s question above, of course, and as far as I know Ousmane Sembene has never directly answered it himself. I will argue, however, that it is not only possible but productive to read Sembene’s work as well as that of a younger generation of African filmmakers for a response to Roberto Rossellini and the Neorealist movement.

I must acknowledge that this project, a consideration of Neorealism’s impact on African film, is quite literally a twisted one. There is little evidence of any direct influence of the Italian cinema in Africa, whether in the form of assertions by filmmakers or allusions within their films. I will have to get from Italy to Africa, therefore, via Latin America and the concept of a revolutionary “Third Cinema.” The cinematic movements that I will discuss at different points in their development—Italian Neorealism in the 1940s and 50s, New Latin American Cinema from the late 1950s to the early 70s, and sub-Saharan (mainly West) African film from its beginnings in the early 1960s—have in common the search for a radically new way to make films that would be strikingly unlike the American ones flooding their markets. All three were based on a political and stylistic rejection of Hollywood that filmmakers, film historians, and theorists alike have characterized as realist, yet these realisms look very different and serve different ends. Neorealism was formative for non-European filmmakers with respect to both production methods and thematic concerns,

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yet I will not neglect to address the stakes involved in the establishment of such a genealogy; it will be important to remember that the flip side of influence is evolution. I will demonstrate that Latin American and then African filmmakers built on and developed some aspects of Neorealism, while rejecting others in favor of strategies and styles they felt to be more authentic as well as more effective. In doing so, and as a result of their particular histories and experiences with film, they engaged a theoretical discussion about realism in the cinema that had been largely absent in Italy.

Italian directors including Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti accomplished a certain realism, or, to use Roland Barthes's words, a "reality effect," via a blurring of the traditional distinction between documentary and fictional genres, using one (documentary) to inflect the other (fiction). Latin American and African filmmakers also mixed these genres in their quest for a realist cinema, yet strove to go beyond a Neorealist construction of the illusion of reality within fiction. Argentinean, Brazilian, and Cuban filmmakers such as Fernando Birri, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and Julio García Espinosa chose ultimately to focus less on a "documentarizing" of fiction as practiced by the Neorealists and more on a "fictionalizing" of the documentary. The work of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, which has been characterized both as neorealist¹ and "social realist," seems at first to be closer to the Italian model, whereas recent documentaries by David Achkar, Jean-Marie Teno, and Mahamat Saleh Haroun, from Guinea, Cameroon, and Chad, employ techniques and tactics of fiction to bring into question the nature of documentary realism itself.

In 1943, as Benito Mussolini's regime fell and Italian society began to reimagine and rebuild itself, film critic Umberto Barbaro described a group of 1930s French films as "neorealist" and called for a new realism in the Italian cinema as well (Bondanella 24). Italian filmmakers sought to create a realist cinema that would stand in stark contrast to the "white telephone" comedies and lavish productions of the fascist period. Neorealism attempted, like earlier realisms in the Soviet Union, France, and Great Britain, to represent the everyday lives of the poor or jobless, those ordinary citizens who had been invisible in mainstream studio films. Cesare Zavattini, screenwriter and filmmaking partner of De Sica and self-appointed theorist of Neorealism, asserted that the artist's task was to "excavate reality" (217). Zavattini never clarified the nature of this underlying or hidden reality, however, instead specifying a method—Neorealist films should be made not in a studio but in the streets and without professional actors, in fact, without the entire "technical-professional apparatus, screen-writer included" (225). Moreover, films should remain unresolved, with no plot closure, because "this is reality" (223). French critic André Bazin took most of his cues from Zavattini, praising Neorealist films and especially those of De Sica for being "full of realism," for their "concern with actual day-to-day events, [. . .] an exceptionally documentary quality, [. . .] this perfect and natural adherence to actuality" (18, 20). Bazin claimed for Neorealist filmmakers a mystical connection to a reality that he went so far as to apostrophize; "'My little sister reality,' says De Sica, and she circles about him like the birds around Saint Francis. Others put her in a cage or teach her to talk, but De Sica talks with her and it is the true language of reality that we hear" (69).

Both Zavattini and Bazin advocated an absolutely realist cinema while avoiding any analysis of reality or cinematic realism. De Sica and Rossellini, however, spoke quite differently about the Neorealist filmmaker's goals and connection to reality. De Sica denied not only the absolute hold on reality attributed to him by Bazin, but even one of the cardinal characteristics of the movement's films; "neorealism is not shooting films in authentic locales; it is not reality. It is reality filtered through poetry, reality transfigured. It is not Zola, not naturalism, verism, things which are ugly" (31).² For Rossellini, Neorealism

was “a need, appropriate to modern man, to speak of things as they are, to be aware of reality, in an absolutely concrete manner,” yet he continued that “for me, it is nothing other than the artistic form of truth” (89). Like De Sica, Rossellini acknowledged and even stressed the art implicit in any representation of reality, stretching his definitions to the point that a Neorealist film could be almost anything, any truth in any artistic form. His characterizations of Neorealism were consistently vague, from “above all, a moral position from which to look at the world,” (Overbey 1) to, famously, “following a human being, with love, in all its discoveries, all its impressions” (Armes, *Patterns* 90).

Returning to Bazin, moreover, we find that despite his unqualified praise for a seemingly miraculous realism, he recognized that “realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice” (26). Having called De Sica’s 1948 film *Bicycle Thieves* “one of the first examples of pure cinema. No more actors, no more story, no more sets,” Bazin continued that “in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema” (60). In this almost perfectly contradictory statement, pure cinema equals no cinema, yet can only be accomplished by aesthetic means, by creating, cinematically, a perfect illusion. Neorealism, for Bazin as much as for De Sica, was ultimately a question of style. Bazin concluded that “we would define as ‘realist,’ then, all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen” (27); this new style was not a magical convergence of film and reality, but a result of strategic filming and editing. (Neo)Realist filmmakers tried to make us think that their artifice is reality; they made the artificial *seem* real. Bill Nichols has eloquently described Neorealism as an “art of artlessness,” one which “provides a repertoire of techniques for giving the formal effect of representing a reality that evades the control of the filmmaker” (169). Realism defines reality, and not the reverse.

Neorealism was, then, as has been every literary or filmic realism, a style, and in this case a style based on what Soviet semiotician Jurij Lotman called a “poetics of refusals”:

Its active elements were always ‘refusals’: refusal to use a stereotypical hero or typical film scenes, refusal to use professional actors, denial of the ‘star’ system, refusal to employ montage and an ‘ironclad’ scenario, refusal to use a ‘prepared’ dialog or musical accompaniment. Such a poetics of ‘refusals’ can only be effective against a remembered background of cinema art of the opposite type. Without cinematography of historical epics, film operas, westerns or Hollywood ‘stars’ it loses a good deal of its artistic meaning. (20–21)

The “adherence to reality” invoked by Zavattini and Bazin was not the result of any perfect coincidence between a film and the reality it represented, but rather of a rejection of certain filmic conventions in favor of others. Peter Brunette follows Lotman to remind us that Neorealism’s “‘reality effect’ seems to stem from the ironic fact that we think an event or image is more real precisely because we have not seen it before on the screen” (38). It is important to remember, though, that we *have* seen these filmic conventions before—in newsreels and other documentary productions. Neorealist films rely on a spectatorial familiarity with the codes of documentary, which have been imported into fiction; although we have not seen this particular combination of documentary and fiction before, we must recognize its parts for the whole to be effective. Neorealism refused a certain kind of fiction filmmaking, but not the conventional realism associated with documentary.

Yet more than style was at stake in the critical insistence on Neorealism’s realism. Franco Venturini wrote in 1950, at perhaps the height of the movement’s popularity at home and abroad, that just as the pre-war French films were “unmistakably French,” Italian

Neorealism was a result of the search for “our ethnic realism [. . .] an original Italian style, the real beginning of an Italian film culture” (175, 191). An essential element of this indigenous film style was the use of non-professional (non)actors, even if Visconti’s *Terra trema* (1948) was the only Neorealist film completely to adhere to this principle (Overbey 13). Angela Dalle Vache has noted that these non-actors, these “supposedly ‘typical’ Italians [. . .] allegorize an imaginary nation called ‘Italy’” (256). They lent authenticity to Neorealism and post-war Italy became known around the world in their image. Zavattini, De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti wanted to show a previously invisible Italy in a newly Italian way, in a style that would reinvent Italy, artistically. One of the best proofs of their burgeoning success was the reaction of Vittorio Mussolini in 1942 to Visconti’s *Ossessione*, the Italian film perhaps responsible for the coining of the term “neorealist.”³ One year before the end of his father’s fascist dictatorship, Mussolini left the screening angrily declaring “This is not Italy!” (Bondanella 28). He meant, of course, that this was not *his* Italy and he was absolutely right.

Neorealist filmmakers, seeking to represent a new national reality, created one. They did so by using stylistic elements traditionally emblematic of documentary film—rough composition, “real” people and locations—without strictly documentary content. Despite his seeming desire to strip all that was fictional from film, Zavattini was not interested in making documentary films, but rather documentary-like fictions. Neorealism documentarized fiction in order to tell real-seeming stories, producing authentic illusions and the illusion of authenticity. Filmmaker Giuseppe De Santis considered this innovative mixing of genres itself to be a potential national characteristic; as early as 1941 he had written that “we should stop considering the documentary as a genre apart. It is only by blending the two elements that, in such a landscape as our own, we will find the formula for a true and genuine Italian cinema” (127). Martin Scorsese has confirmed De Santis’s hope in *Il Mio Viaggio in Italia* (2001), his personal history of Neorealism and its impact on his life and filmmaking, concluding that “the Neorealists had to communicate to the world everything their country had gone through. They needed to dissolve the barrier between documentary and fiction, and in the process, they permanently changed the rules of moviemaking.”

This change in the rules of filmmaking was of profound importance to filmmakers in Latin America, who were themselves trying to resist both Hollywood cinema and domestic national film industries. From the mid-1930s into the mid-50s, production in Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba, the countries on which I will focus for lack of the space even to gloss the whole story of the New Latin American Cinema, consisted mainly of genre films adapted from Hollywood models. Argentina, the largest producer of films in Latin America before World War II, had its gaucho films and Brazil its *chanchadas*, popular musical comedies. The Vera Cruz company, with studios in São Paulo, was created in the 1940s to make films that would compete on the international market, but hired for the most part foreign technicians and filmmakers. The self-titled “New Cinema” arose in the late 1950s and 60s, in reaction to this state of affairs, following the 1959 revolution in Cuba, and in the wake of Neorealism. Several of the filmmakers at the forefront of the movement studied in Italy and many acknowledged the direct influence of Neorealism on their work. We will see, however, that Latin American filmmakers soon rejected Neorealism, felt the need to go beyond it in order to create a realist cinema of their own. Unlike the Italian Neorealists, they wrote manifesto upon manifesto proclaiming their political and aesthetic goals, establishing a theoretical framework for an inquiry into the nature of cinematic realism.

There were many direct connections between Italian Neorealism and the New Latin American Cinema. Argentinean filmmaker Fernando Birri studied in Rome at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in the early 1950s, as did Cubans Tomás Gutiérrez Alea

and Julio García Espinosa. García Espinosa went to Italy after having seen Neorealist films in Havana and Zavattini himself then visited Cuba before the revolution to work with him on *Cuba Dances* (Chanan 116). One of the first feature films made after the revolution and within the framework of the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, Gutiérrez Alea's *Stories of the Revolution* (1960), was filmed by Neorealist cinematographer Otello Martelli, whose camera operator was Zavattini's son, and used an episodic structure similar to that of Rossellini's 1946 *Paisan* (Chanan 111). As early as 1953, Alex Viany's *Needle in the Haystack* constituted a first attempt at a Brazilian neorealism (Johnson and Stam 32).

Gutiérrez Alea has said that "from the beginning of the Revolution, our artistic foundation was in fact essentially Italian Neorealism" ("Beyond" 123). Brazilian Nelson Pereira dos Santos also claimed that "without neorealism we could never have begun" and many other Latin American filmmakers, including Humberto Solas and Ruy Guerra, have stressed the importance of Neorealism for their early work. According to Dos Santos, "neo-realism taught us [...] that it was possible to make films in the streets; that we did not need studios; that we could film using average people rather than known actors" (Johnson and Stam 122). There were many reasons for the importance of Neorealism; Latin American filmmakers were working outside of and against any dominant studio system with a comparable lack of resources. The only kind of film they could possibly make would be a low-budget production using post-synchronized sound and no movie stars, and Italian directors showed them that this was not only possible but laudable. The "classics" of the New Latin American Cinema, however—Glauber Rocha's *Terra em transe* (1967), Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), Jorge Sanjinés's *Blood of the Condor* (1969)—date from the late 1960s, by which time these filmmakers' enthusiasm for Neorealism will have waned.

Rocha, one of the leaders of Brazil's *Cinema Novo* movement, recognized the importance of Neorealism for Latin American film yet resisted any easy acceptance or imitation; "Our bourgeoisie has been colonized by Neo-Realism and the *nouvelle vague* [...] Fox, Paramount, and Metro are our enemies. But Eisenstein, Rossellini, and Godard are also our enemies. They crush us" (Johnson and Stam 88). We will see that this antagonism becomes crucial to conceptions of cinematic realism not only in Latin America but in Africa. Yet why would Rocha put Rossellini in the same bag as Paramount? In 1962, a group of Latin American filmmakers, including Rocha, met in Italy for a Festival of Latin American Cinema. Their discussions resulted in a series of resolutions entitled "The Cinema as an Expression of Latin American Reality." Another meeting six years later similarly resulted in the affirmation of filmmakers' dedication to "a cinema committed to national reality [...] which creates works permeated by realism, whether they be fictional or documentary" (López, "An 'Other'" 147, 149). The New Latin American Cinema would be a realist one and, as with the Neorealism that so influenced it, this meant that it would have to deal in national reality. Argentineans Solanas and Getino proclaimed, moreover, that "any form of expression or communication that tries to show national reality is *subversion*" (37, 39).

In manifestoes and theoretical texts from the 1960s, Latin American filmmakers advocated a revolutionary cinema that was both art and action, a transformational social practice, an instrument of change and consciousness raising. Solanas and Getino declared that this cinema of the struggle of third-world peoples against first-world imperialism was "the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time," representing "the decolonization of culture" (34, 37). García Espinosa coined the term "imperfect cinema" to signify a new "consciously and resolutely 'committed' cinema," (79) which would avoid the slick perfection of classical Hollywood seamless editing and

character-driven narrative. First used in a Cuban film journal in 1969, “Third Cinema” designated an anticolonial (and anti-neocolonial) cinema, set in opposition to a capitalist “First Cinema” and an artistic, intellectual, and auteurist “Second Cinema.” Rocha stated that “we cannot make films to express Brazilian or Latin American content using North American [or European] language” (107). Not only did filmmakers desire to show a Latin America that had previously been hidden because oppressed from within and without, but they needed to develop a new filmic language in which to do so.

The national reality at stake in Latin America during this period is importantly distinct from the one that Italian directors had been negotiating. Although national sub-movements such as *Cinema Novo* did exist, Argentinean, Brazilian, Cuban, Chilean, and other filmmakers felt themselves to be part of a larger movement, which they described as Latin American and, moreover, popular. Italian filmmakers had been fighting a primarily internal battle, searching for an authentic Italian identity somehow untouched by fascism, what Venturini called an “ethnic” realism. Latin American filmmakers, attempting to throw off centuries of European and then North American political, economic, and cultural colonization, advocated multi-ethnic solidarity among the so-called underdeveloped. Theirs was in fact a regional realism, and the concept of a “Third Cinema” allowed them to band together with filmmakers from other nations within Latin America as well as those from other “underdeveloped” parts of the world against dominant cinematic traditions.

The linkage between realism and “national” reality meant, then, somewhat ironically, that Italian Neorealism, based within a very different (and, importantly, European) national reality, would have to be rejected in its turn and relegated to Second Cinema status. Lotman’s description of Neorealism’s “poetics of refusals” seems to apply to the New Latin American Cinema as well, and Neorealism itself joined the refused “background of cinema art of the opposite type.” Prior national cinemas were also rejected, also in the name of a more authentic reality and realism. Birri, a theorist, documentary filmmaker, teacher, and founder of the Escuela Documental de Santa Fe, argued that earlier Argentinean films had presented “unreal and alien” images of the country, and the task of the new documentary was to provide a true image “by showing how reality *is*, and in no other way. [. . .] By testifying, critically, to this reality—to this sub-reality, this misery—cinema refuses it. It rejects it. It denounces, judges, criticizes and deconstructs it (“Cinema” 87, 94). Birri concluded that the task of the filmmaker was “to confront reality with a camera, and to document it, filming realistically, filming critically, filming underdevelopment with the optic of the people” (“Cinema” 90, 94). The common denominator of the New Latin American Cinema was “a poetics of the transformation of reality;” it “aspire[d] to modify the reality upon which it is projected” (Birri, “For a Nationalist” 96).

From the Bazinian “showing how reality *is*,” Birri moved immediately to the refusal and then to the transformation of this reality. Reality was no longer what it had been for Zavattini, something one “walk[s] out with a camera to meet” (226) and records in real time—reality was to be confronted, attacked, and changed. Solanas and Getino similarly stressed that a “revolutionary cinema is not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation: *rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation* [. . .] it provides *discovery through transformation*” (47). Gutiérrez Alea has described the development of his theoretical conception of revolutionary realist filmmaking:

So when we began to make films in a postrevolutionary situation, that Neorealist mode of approaching reality was very useful to us because in that early stage we needed little more [. . .] All we had to do was to set up a camera in the street and we were able to capture a reality that was spectacular in and of itself

[...] But our revolution also began to undergo a process of change. Though certainly not the same as that which occurred in post-war Italy, the meaning of external events began to become less obvious, less apparent, much deeper and more profound. That process forced us to adopt an analytical attitude towards the reality that surrounded us. ("Beyond" 124)

García Espinosa has also stated that the progression of the revolution had led filmmakers "beyond neorealism": "straightforward neorealist ideas could not really catch the speed and depth of revolutionary change" (Chanan 128). Their new cinema would not only record images of historical and social import, but analyze and interpret them so as to enable a corresponding change in reality. Bazin considered continuity to be "a fundamental quality of reality" (28) and he and Zavattini both rejected montage as anti-realist. For Gutiérrez Alea, on the other hand, montage was a central element of any realistic cinema, since "cinematic realism does not lie in its alleged ability to capture reality 'just like it is' (which is 'just like it appears to be'), but rather lies in its ability to reveal, through associations and connections between various isolated aspects of reality—that is to say, through creating a 'new reality'—deeper, more essential layers of reality itself ("Viewer's" 122). This new realism was one of critical reflection and not mirror-reflection or poetic adaptation; critical realism can only be achieved in the creation of a new reality that transforms the old.

Nichols has called Neorealism a "fictional ally" to documentary realism, since it "melded the observational eye of documentary with the intersubjective, identificatory strategies of fiction" (167). Unlike the Italian Neorealists, most of the Latin American filmmakers I have mentioned preferred the documentary genre to fiction, but never with an observational eye; their documentary was intersubjective without being identificatory. New Latin American filmmakers wanted spectators not to sympathize with suffering characters but instead to maintain a critical distance conducive to the initiation of transformative political action. Birri stressed the "documentary support" of their new cinema, yet continued that a strict distinction between fiction and documentary was no longer relevant; "A characteristic that has been progressively accentuated is the rupture with traditional genres: with what is traditionally understood by documentary; with what is traditionally understood or understandable as narrative" ("For a Nationalist" 96). Neorealism had "dissolved the boundary" between fiction and documentary, but had relied on a conventional understanding of the relationship between reality and documentary style in order to create documentary-like fiction. Latin American filmmakers wished, on the other hand, to break the easy illusion of reality associated, by force of convention, with documentary roughness, on-location shooting, unresolved plot lines, and non-professional acting. Beginning with Neorealism, they ended up rethinking realism itself in order to remake both Latin American film and Latin American reality.

As opposed to the example of Latin America, Italian film in general and Neorealism in particular rarely figure in discussions of African cinema. Although Frank Ukadike writes in his 1994 *Black African Cinema* that "the appropriation of neorealist techniques by Third World filmmakers has been well documented" (279), he cites not a single example or reference and De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti are completely absent from the book. Their names are equally absent from the first survey of African film written in French, Senegalese filmmaker and critic Paulin Soumanou Vieyra's 1975 *Le Cinéma Africain*, and the first in English, Manthia Diawara's 1992 *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*. Not a single one of the twenty African filmmakers interviewed in Ukadike's recent *Questioning African Cinema* mentions Neorealism or any Neorealist director. Vieyra, Ukadike, and Diawara have focused on the ways in which African filmmakers, working within a tradition of oral

narrative, have established a distinctively African cinema; all three avoid any investigation of the influence of European or even Latin American cinematic movements.

If we return to the quote that serves as the epigraph to this essay, we see why the question of influence has been such a critical one for the African cinema, why it has been important to refuse European influence and assert the newness of African film. Jean Rouch, whom Ousmane Sembene has famously accused of filming Africans as if they were insects, wonders what Sembene might think of Rossellini and asks “Est-ce que pour lui ça veut dire quelque chose?” which I have rather badly translated as “Does he mean anything to him?” The “ça” here, though, is almost a “tout cela,” and seems to refer not only to Rossellini but to the special place in the history of European cinema held by the director of *Rome, Open City*, the breakthrough Neorealist film. To retranslate, then: “Doesn’t all of this (the tradition of realist art cinema in Europe) mean anything to him (this African filmmaker, on whose continent I have spent so much time making innovative documentary films, which he insists on rejecting as patronizing)?” Rouch, who coined the term *cinéma vérité* after Dziga Vertov’s *kino-pravda*, sees himself as belonging to a European tradition of new cinematic realisms that includes Italian Neorealism. For Sembene, Rouch is the latest in a long line of European anthropologists and ethnographers who came to film Africans in Africa, their realism just another arm in the colonial weaponry.

Realism, then, has particular stakes in Africa, which like Latin America has long been defined by the images created of it and its people by exploring, conquering, and colonizing Europeans. Ukadike has stated that “from the beginning, the major concern of African filmmakers has been to provide a more realistic image of Africa,” more realistic than the images provided in films such as *King Solomon’s Mines* (1937), or any of numerous ethnographic documentaries (*Black African Cinema* 3). Films shot in Western Africa before independence were made by European and North American directors, using an imported crew, and for their home audiences; Africa served as an exotic backdrop. The only exception to this rule were the so-called “educational” documentaries produced by the colonial film units of France, Belgium, and Great Britain, which were shown to non-elite (and often illiterate) African audiences and designed to shore up colonialism by shaping the practices and ideology of the colonized. Against these foreign representations of Africa, filmmakers desired to create authentic images of a previously hidden regional and national reality. In the collective statement published after a 1974 seminar meeting in Burkina Faso on “The Role of the African Film-Maker in Rousing an Awareness of Black Civilization,” we read that film content should grow from African history, literature, and reflect “African realities” (16), that the African cinema should “nourish our people’s reflection on their own destiny, by presenting *African human, social, and cultural realities*” (62). A year earlier, the Third World Film-Makers’ Meeting in Algeria had united North and sub-Saharan African filmmakers with several from Latin America, including Fernando Birri. As had Birri for the New Latin American Cinema, African filmmakers declared that their goal was a critical and transformative realism, the production of “films reflecting the objective conditions in which the struggling peoples are developing, [...] which bring about the disalienation of the colonized peoples at the same time as they contribute sound and objective information for the peoples of the entire world” (Bakari and Cham 20).

Sembene’s short film *Borom Sarret*, released in 1963, three years after Senegalese independence from France, was the first film to be shot by a sub-Saharan African director in Africa. Considered the father of African cinema, Sembene is also the filmmaker most often associated with the development of an authentically African cinematic realism. The hour-long *Black Girl* appeared in 1966, his first long feature in color, *Mandabi*, in 1968, and eight more feature films in the years since then. Sembene’s early films, like those of

the Neorealists and New Latin American filmmakers, were shot with little equipment or funding, without studios, professional actors or actresses, or synchronized sound. He has consistently represented the everyday lives and problems of ordinary Africans, rejecting classical Hollywood editing and plot resolution. Sembene has always described himself as a realist filmmaker: he has tried to show “the true face of Africa” (Vieyra, *Sembene* 173) and has “never tried to please [his] audiences through the embellishment of reality” (Pfaff, *Cinema* 40). His films have also been repeatedly described as realist by reviewers and critics; Ukadike, for example, claims that they exhibit an “undiluted realism” (“The Creation of” 109).

It is thus surprising, at the very least, to discover that not a single study of Sembene’s work in relation to Neorealism exists. It has been quite common, on the other hand, for European and North American critics to call his films “neorealist” in passing, a shorthand which gestures toward the superficial similarities I have noted above. French reviewers of *Mandabi* at the time of its release, including Louis Chauvet and Jean Rochereau, described Sembene’s work as “neorealist” (Vieyra, *Sembene* 221, 231), as have more recently William Van Wert (214), Françoise Pfaff (*Cinema* 52) and Roy Armes (*Third World* 291). Speaking with Mauritanian filmmaker Med Hondo in 1970, a reviewer with *Positif* claimed that “Sembene Ousmane is just more Zavattini-De Sica” (“Entretien” 24). None of these critics have analyzed or reflected upon the implicit comparison. This labeling limits the terms of discussion to the vocabulary of the European canon and, whether as praise or critique, functions to pull Sembene toward it. He becomes a part of the “ça” or “tout cela” invoked by Rouch, without any investigation of the ways in which he, like Gutiérrez Alea and Rocha, might have transformed Neorealist aims, methods or style in and for an African context.

When an African critic has tagged Sembene as “neorealist,” however, it has been to a different end, if based on an equally limited reading of his work. In 1968, journalist Bara Diouf harshly criticized *Mandabi* for presenting an unflattering image of Senegal:

Its faults arise from the philosophy of Ousmane Sembène, borrowed from Europe. It is a question of this neorealism which is very fashionable [. . .] it is absolute pessimism. Yet it is not with a pessimistic morality [. . .] that we will build a nation. [. . .] Ousmane Sembène must disengage himself from European moral codes in order to adopt the true ideology that responds to our situation as an underdeveloped country. (Vieyra, *Sembene* 217)

“Neorealism” here once again stands for a European cinematic tradition, which now should be rejected in the search for an authentic African cinema, national morality, and reality. Sembene has responded to this reproach with a reassertion of his commitment to realism and, moreover, by allying himself with the Neorealist project to “excavate” an often unpleasant reality; “It’s curious that certain spectators don’t want to look reality in the eye. There are, for example, slums in Senegal. The scandal is in their existence and not in showing them. Certain people would like to mask the truth [. . .] We already saw this in Italy with the Neorealist films” (26). And, in fact, in 1951, Giulio Andreotti, then Italy’s Undersecretary of Public Entertainment, wrote an open letter to Vittorio De Sica, condemning *Umberto D.* as too pessimistic and thus harmful to the nation (Bondanella 87). Like the French and North American critics, though, Sembene does not further elaborate his cryptic comparison.

In the one mention of Neorealism in his history of African film, Diawara points to a fundamental difference between the two traditions. He argues that the Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes, when formed in 1969, was “less a cinematic movement aimed

at deconstructing traditional film narratives [. . .] and more a politico-economic movement committed to the total liberation of Africa” and therefore had more in common with the pan-African Organization of African Unity than with film movements such as the French New Wave or Italian Neorealism (45). The African cinema was born with independence from Europe, and has thus, even more than the New Latin American Cinema, been associated with the work of nation-building through the representation of national reality. Like the New Latin American Cinema and joining the Third Cinema movement, it has been a regional rather than strictly national movement, grounded, for both ideological and financial reasons, in an anticolonial pan-African solidarity.

Diawara’s opposition of political and narrative or stylistic concerns recalls Latin American filmmakers’ classification of Neorealism as a Second rather than Third Cinema. Yet for Birri, Gutiérrez Alea, and Rocha, the political aims of the New Latin American Cinema were to be achieved precisely by the deconstruction and then reinvention of film narrative. High praise of Sembene’s realism has all too often relied on such an opposition, and has often been accompanied by analyses of his films as only political acts, as if they lacked an aesthetic dimension. Describing Sembene’s body of work as “fastidiously realistic,” Michael Atkinson writes that “from the first mini-feature [. . .] Sembène’s work has ached with austerity—as an artist he is virtually style-free, almost unprofessional, but possessed of a voice as clear and uncomplicated as sunlight.” The birds of reality flutter around Sembene’s head as they had around De Sica’s, and we seem to have forgotten that realism is always a result of artifice, whether it be De Sica’s “reality filtered through poetry” or Birri’s “poetics of the transformation of reality.”

Burkina seminar attendees had emphasized the importance of creating a cinema in African languages (“Séminaire” 11), and Sembene’s *Mandabi* was the first feature film to be shot in a African language version. Filmmakers and critics also called, however, for the development of an African cinematic language, “a language properly adapted to Black Civilization” (171). This would entail, as we now might expect, another refusal; “a true African cinema can only be built by breaking away from the Western cinema” (14). Burkinabé filmmaker Gaston Kaboré has asserted, concluding with almost exactly the same words used by Rocha, that “we have a perception of space, a certain notion of pacing and rhythm, and a narrative tradition that we can invest in our films [. . .] we can’t be Africans and make films like Americans” (Petty 6). Sembene has been praised for his realism and he has also been praised for having shaped “a truly indigenous African cinema aesthetic” (Petty 7), but these two aspects of his work are strongly linked.

Sembene’s films are neither “style-free” nor “almost unprofessional”; over the course of his career, he has consistently experimented with the structure of filmic narrative in order to represent a previously hidden African reality in a newly African manner. African realism, like Neorealism and the New Latin American Cinema, is a question of style. Sembene has repeatedly described his role as that of a *griot*, and many critics have traced the ways in which he and other filmmakers have worked to adapt the structures of the African oral tradition.⁴ Although Mbye Cham characterizes Sembene’s realism as seamless and continuous, modeled on the linearity of oral narrative tradition (27), Diawara notes that the oral tradition is not linear but rather “abounds in digressions, parallelisms, flashbacks, dreams, etc.” (11). And, in fact, Sembene has used flashbacks and flash forwards in most of his films, including *Black Girl*, *Ceddo* (1976), *Camp de Thiaroye* (1987), and *Guelwaar* (1992), as well as reflexive techniques such as the non-diegetic and anachronistic music of *Ceddo*.⁵ In his attempts to depict contemporary African social and political reality, Sembene has worked toward an artistic and critical realism.

In a 1979 interview, Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye described her artistic goal to be a particularly African cinematic realism; “What I try to film [are] things which relate to our civilization [...] a typically African culture [...] I make films about reality.” When then asked to comment on the mixing of documentary and fictional genres in her films, she replied that “For me all these words—fiction, documentary, ethnology—have no sense. [...] At the end of my films people wonder if there is *mise en scene* or not” (“Four Film Makers” 18). Faye, who acted for and then trained with Jean Rouch, was all too familiar with a certain tradition of ethnographic realism. She rejected the division between fictional and documentary in terms analogous to Birri’s and refused, as had he and the other New Latin American filmmakers, documentary’s easy claim on reality by blurring the boundary between the genres. Sembene has similarly been aware of the risks involved in putting too much trust in documentary codes. Working against the unrealistic images of Africa and Africans put forward in fictional as well as documentary films, he has avoided a Neorealist use of documentary conventions to create a seemingly transparent reality effect. In his 1987 *Camp de Thiaroye*, for example, documentary-like black and white flashbacks break up the linear and engrossing dramatization of the events leading up to the French murder of Senegalese *tirailleurs* just returned from fighting in World War II, and remind us that neither is a direct recording of reality.

Sembene’s innovative realism is evident in another aspect of his work that distinguishes it from Neorealism. His films have fictionalized the reality of everyday life and contemporary social crises within African society, but he has also filmed stories of crucial events in African history. From *Black Girl*, based on a *fait divers* found in a newspaper, to *Emitai* (1971), which recounts the destruction of a village which had refused to give its rice supply to the French army, to *Camp de Thiaroye*, Sembene has sought to reveal the truth of African history against colonial accounts. In a short comparative study of Neorealism and the New Latin American Cinema, John Hess criticizes the Italians for having ignored history in their representations of national reality, for having narrated only in the present tense (115–6). Teshome Gabriel claims that Third Cinema, on the contrary, in Africa as well as in Latin America, has taken on the past “to redefine and to redeem what the official versions of history have overlooked” (57). Sembene, who has said that “the artist is there to reveal a certain number of historical facts that others would like to keep quiet” (*Gadjigo* 101), has accomplished the goals set forth by Latin American filmmakers in an art without the “artlessness” of Neorealism. Unlike the Latin Americans, however, who fictionalized documentary, he has documentarized fiction and avoided the documentary genre.

Documentary, given its history on the continent, has not been a popular genre for African filmmakers. Although Latin Americans and Africans have together participated in the discussions and debates surrounding Third Cinema, Vieyra was the only filmmaker of Sembene’s generation in West Africa to make more than one documentary. In one of the surprisingly few direct links between the New Latin American and African cinemas, Ruy Guerra, who was born in Mozambique but became one of the best-known *Cinema Novo* directors in Brazil, returned to his place of birth in 1978 to help create and run the national Institute of Cinema. From independence through the late 1980s and under his guidance, the Mozambican as well as the Angolan cinema consisted mainly of documentary films, but this situation has been unique to Lusophone Africa. In the 1990s, however, there has been a relative “boom” in documentary production, especially in francophone West Africa. I would like to close by pointing to the development of a fascinating new genre within the African cinema, a genre which itself mixes genres, the reflexive documentary film. A group of young filmmakers, including Jean-Marie Teno, David Achkar, and Mahamat Saleh Haroun,

has made films which layer autobiographical, biographical, and historical (both national and international), and first, second, and third-person narratives, combining photographs, newspapers, newsreels, and home movies with reenacted scenes and interviews in order to retell both colonial and postcolonial African history.

What we might call the New African Documentary shares the concerns and some of the characteristics of New Latin American documentary films, and has similarly involved an experimentation with form, particularly the use of montage, in the pursuit of a critical realism. Cameroonian filmmaker Teno, responding to a question about cinema and freedom, has demanded “freedom to choose the subject, the style, unfettered by the straitjacket of established definitions of and boundaries between documentary or fiction, freedom to say, loudly and clearly, what ninety years of oppression had not allowed us to say” (70). Whereas Sembene, like and unlike the Neorealists, dissolved generic boundaries from the side of fiction, Teno, Achkar, and Haroun have created a new language for African documentary. Teno’s 1992 *Africa, I Will Fleece You* contains three intertwined narrative strands: an exposé of the continuing (and unnecessary) dependence on French books that has inhibited the growth of a Cameroonian publishing industry, a brief history of postcolonial Cameroon and a critique of the repression of journalists who question the current government, and the director’s memories of reading as a child, shown in the form of fictional reenactments in black and white. Achkar’s 1991 *Allah Tantou* slips back and forth between personal and national historical narrative, recounting the history of postcolonial Guinea through the story of his father, Marof Achkar, who served as the Ambassador and representative of newly independent Guinea to the United Nations until his imprisonment by Sékou Touré’s government.

Haroun chose to play himself in his 1999 *Bye Bye Africa*, the first feature film from Chad, which he says “constantly goes back and forth between fiction and reality” (Barlet 22). The film has been difficult for reviewers to classify, and has been variously called documentary, “documentary fiction,” “fictional documentary,” and “docudrama.” Haroun narrates the story of a return to Chad after ten years in France, after the death of his mother, a trip taken with video camera in hand and a story which becomes that of the situation of the cinema in Africa. Surprisingly, Haroun describes this reflexive, postmodern film as (neo)realist—“To film is an act of love [. . .] reality is stronger when one watches with love. I believe that neorealism is not dead in Africa: it is the genre which best recounts my story, my people, and my history” (Barlet 23)—implicitly referring to Rossellini’s definition of Neorealism as “following a human being with love.” After Rocha’s antagonism toward Neorealism as a colonizing influence, after Sembene’s tentative acknowledgement of shared political goals and filmmaking methods if not comparable styles, Haroun reclaims Neorealism as an influence and as potentially useful for an African cinematic project. He does so by using the vaguest of all of the definitions of the movement offered by the Neorealist filmmakers, leaving the term as open as possible to any kind of realism he might wish to explore as he places himself within a global history of cinema. We must follow Robert Nelson’s suggestion and speak of “appropriation” rather than “influence” in order to acknowledge African filmmakers’ transformation of a Neorealist inheritance.

Like Italian Neorealism and the New Latin American Cinema, African realism has been based on a series of refusals. Filmmakers have rejected colonial images of Africa in the name of an authentic national reality, renounced the simple and unquestioning documentary realism that had been used to define them, and cast off dominant foreign cinematic languages in order to create their own realist style. In a comparable postcolonial situation to Latin America but with independence a much more recent event, African filmmakers have until recently distanced themselves from any possible European influence

at the same time as European filmmakers and critics have been all too willing to assert an influence that would deny the difference of the much younger cinema. Fifteen years ago, Roy Armes pointed to a “still-unwritten history of world cinema in which Western and non-Western modes of expression are entwined” (*Third World* 310). In order to begin to write this still-unwritten history, we must investigate the place of African cinema in the context of world film history, the ways in which other national and international cinematic movements have influenced African filmmakers but, most importantly, the ways in which these filmmakers have taken these influences in new and particularly African directions. This is an indispensable task since, as Kaboré reminds us, “cinema is of vital importance to Africans because it can portray the world as Africans experience it. By creating their own cinematic images, Africans can confront and transform their reality” (Martin 165).

Notes

1. When referring to the Italian film movement of the 1940s and 50s I will use “Neorealism,” with a capital N. Otherwise, “neorealism” is the more general term (often used anachronistically by critics to describe other films with a somehow comparable style).
2. Peter Bondanella has taken critics and film historians to task for focusing only on the realism and social commentary within Neorealist films at the expense of the artifice acknowledged by filmmakers (34, 95).
3. Several critics claim that “neorealism” was first used in a cinematic context in 1942 to describe *Ossessione*, either by critic Antonio Pietrangeli (Bawden 498) or by film editor Mario Serandrei in a letter to Visconti himself (Monticelli 72).
4. See, for example, Manthia Diawara. “Popular Culture and Oral Traditions in African Film.” Bakari and Cham 209–18.
5. For a detailed analysis of Sembene’s use of reflexive techniques in *Black Girl*, see Landy.

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