

FIAF Congress Rabat 2001

Symposium

Colonial Cinema: a Borrowed Heritage

Call for Communications

- Candidates are invited to develop ideas on one of the topics presented in the enclosed document. The presented topics constitute a general framework of investigation and are in no way restricted. Originality and diversity in the proposals are welcomed.

- The presentations should not last longer than 30 minutes, including screenings.

- Candidates who would like to participate in the symposium should submit a project of maximum 2 pages by 30 October 2000 to the following addresses:

M. Abdelkader BENALI
30, allée Léon Gambetta
F-92110 Clichy
Tel/fax: 0033 1 47 39 47 06

or

M. Abdellah BAYAHIA
Cinémathèque Marocaine
Quartier Industriel
Avenue Al Majd
Rabat
Maroc
Tel: 00212 7 79 81 13
Fax: 00212 7 79 48 79

- Please indicate your position as well as the institution for which you work.

Colonial Cinema: a Borrowed Heritage

Le terme de "cinéma colonial" fait-il encore carillonner les mélodies folkloriques de l'Atlas, les danses enflammées sous le soleil févreux de l'Afrique, les chants des prières ou les courbes chatoyantes des mosaïques?

Sumarised below are the main ideas formulated in the original document written in French. Please submit your contributions.

Following independence, colonial cinematography has been thought of either in terms of condemnation and refusal, or as simplistic visions. Until the beginning of the eighties, the aphorism "exotic cinema" permitted avoidance of the emotional charge that such productions were intended to dissimulate. Only since the nineties, have a new generation of researchers, particularly in France but also in the United States and Africa, shown interest in colonial cinema. Their work constitutes a renewal creating a link between the distanced view point of the analyst and the feeling of culpability and unease of the activist. Furthermore colonial cinema didn't meet the aesthetic criteria of the modernist vision of cinema history, was identified as a cinema of propaganda, and as a consequence, has been considered a "minor genre". This estimation is partly responsible for the lack of interest for this cinema.

Even though colonial cinema has increasingly been the subject of scientific research during the past years, it is however mostly valued as an archival document. These films are emblematic of a moment in history and constitute an aesthetic and ideological vision of a period many consider outdated. Considering the relevance of the conceptual heritage, the historiographical aspect, colonial cinema must be considered with methodological vigilance and analytical rigor. Because colonial and even post-colonial historiography has established its legacy on the dichotomy coloniser/colonised, the analysis of colonial films requires a complex and open approach. The colony is shown as a foreign space to be discovered whereas it is a colonised land being appropriated and "domesticated". If cinema has been used to establish this type of conception through political discourse, it works also as a means to approach the Other. Cinema becomes a way of affirmation and construction of a conscience. The colonial land is perceived as the antidote of the Occidental world. A series of oppositions is formulated between nature and culture, wild and civilised, group and individual, religion and science, etc. At the core of this duality, a polarity is established between the colonial hero and its opposite: "the native".

As a result, should we continue to consider colonial films only in terms of the implications in colonial thought and in the formal process used to integrate the colonial space as a system of representation? Furthermore this cinema proposes a reading which escapes the colonial pragmatic mechanism. The filmmakers didn't always travel to North Africa in response to an official mandate. They also created personal films that are now part of the colonial filmography. This explains why colonial films contain different dramatical levels

corresponding to a dual discourse. While analysing in depth the effects of the dramatic structure, we can see that the official vision is undermined with signs of an alternative opinion. The cinema that emerges has a language with its own coherence and complexity. If colonial cinema reflects the dominant ideology of the time, the structures of meaning are not so frozen. After the euphoric period of the thirties, dominated by the optimistic ideas of the "civilising mission", the message is less propagandist and more nuanced. We can wonder if this corresponds to a "loss of control over the signs" (F. Chevaldonné) or to an affirmation of the gap between the vision of the filmmakers and the colonialist discourse.

The Symposium of Rabat gives us the opportunity to go beyond the traditional duality between colonial cinema and the ideology that produced it. This is possible today thanks to the scientific work being done and the audiovisual material that is increasingly available. If the narrative film has been subject to numerous investigations, there are documentaries and news reels kept in archives and still to be rediscovered. Many films found recently have been restored and can be accessed and researched under the best conditions. The films can be considered in the light of several disciplines such as semiology, anthropology, sociology and aesthetics in order to explore their multiple qualities and to situate them in the context of history of cinema.

Proposals and themes

I The cinema in the colonies: audience and infrastructures

The aim is to examine, from statistics and historical records, how the cinema industry - production, distribution and exhibition- functioned in the colonies and to study film distribution in Europe, and particularly in France and Great-Britain. What was the type of audience for which the films were produced. How was the distribution organised in the colonies? What were the relations between the production companies and the local colonial authorities?

II Documentary : an instrument of colonial pedagogy

Colonial cinema was the expression of a type of anthropology finding its roots in the last century. In order to understand these documentaries, the link between the evolution in the films' conception and the expansion of colonisation is to be examined. An analysis of the structure and the content of documentaryfilms can also help to establish a true pedagogy of the colonial adventure.

III Narrative film and its connection to painting and literature

Colonial cinema used both the iconography of painting and the genre of the travel narration in literature. This strategy permitted the transition from an exotic vision to the colonial discourse. What is the relationship with the visual tradition of the last century? How does colonial cinema borrow the aesthetic and ideological concepts of an exotic

vision to create its own discourse? Is there any reference in the mythology developed by colonial cinema to the utopian literature of the 19th century?

IV Colonial film: methods of analysis

What are the scientific methods that the researcher can apply in order to be more objective and critical? The structuralist viewpoint alone cannot explain the complexity of the Occidental discourse and vision in its relation to the Other? What are the contributions of the humanities and social sciences to this analysis? Are the anthropological concepts the only ones to be considered? What is the aesthetic of the colonial cinematography and what are its references?

V Colonial cinema between the "Here" and the "There"

Colonial cinema is a genre with similarities to other cinematographic universes. Equivalents are to be found for example in Hollywood exotic, orientalist and historical narrative films? What would be the elements that could define the connection between the American western and colonial European cinema (biblical references, myths of the promised land and the frontier)?

If French and English colonial film is openly propropagandist, what is the vision of the Soviet cinema regarding Central Asia? How is the territorial identity of Australian and American cinema expressed? What are the images Japanese cinema gives of China and Korea? Etc.

VI Colonial cinema and "genre"

In which way does the principle of cinematographic genre function in the aesthetic and filmic categorisation of colonial film? What are the narrative, structural and aesthetic patterns that can be used to establish links with other existing filmic genres? Does colonial cinema possess a specific approach to space, common to other genres such as western and peplum?

VII Colonial films: exclusive or shared heritage?

Who owns colonial films? Are they only entered in Occidental collective memory or do they belong to the former colonised countries, following the fundamental principle of right to the image? How do these countries claim their right to collective memory and historical identity? Following which principle of appropriation (or rejection), is colonial film situated at the crossed road of memories? And on what epistemological implications are these two operations founded?

VIII From colonial cinema to North African cinema

The history of North African cinema, and African in general, is inseparable from the one of colonial cinema. Africans were first filmed individuals, they were the subject of the film, before they became individuals active in filming. How is this manifested in African cinematographic production today? and what effects does this have on creating a new aesthetic, economic and structural identity?