

FILM REVIEW

Sylvestre Amoussou, director. *L'Orage Africain: Un continent sous influence*. 2017. 88 min. French, with English subtitles. Benin, France. Koffi Productions. Vimeo. \$5.00.

In his previous feature-length films, *Africa Paradis* (2007) and *Un pas en avant* (2011), Sylvestre Amoussou sought to provide alternatives to established narratives concerning the African continent. This is most evident in *Africa Paradis*, in which the director depicts an imaginary (yet perhaps not inconceivable) future world in which Africa is prosperous and powerful, while Europe is poor and underdeveloped. For Amoussou, film functions as a medium in which to re-imagine and re-articulate the continent's current situation through a fictional disruption of the current world order, a project that he continues in his latest production, *L'Orage Africain: Un continent sous influence*. What would happen, this new film asks, if an African state were to nationalize the extraction of its natural resources, forcing Western companies to either abandon their investments or to begin working according to an African country's terms?

This tense political drama begins just as President Ezo Essogbe of Tangara—played by Amoussou himself—declares the immediate nationalization of “all the means of production run by Western companies in Tangara.” According to this “Africa Plan,” foreign companies' exploitation of the country's coltan, diamonds, uranium, and other resources is to cease immediately. All future profits, the president tells the nation, will go to the state's coffers and will be used to provide for the people of Tangara. Making clear that this is not a war against the West, but rather a rightful assertion of independence, the president emphasizes his willingness to cooperate with Western nations on an equal basis. The international consequences of nationalization are immediate and dramatic: the price of raw materials rises considerably as a result of the financial markets' fear that other African nations will follow suit. In response, a group of Westerners in Tangara, a mixture of corporate and national representatives led by the sinister Patricia Thouvenel, hatch a plot to derail nationalization. After Thouvenel's attempt to bribe the president fails—he is resolutely incorruptible and firmly committed to democratic politics—the Westerners decide to “pretend to accept the situation,” while covertly launching a campaign of disinformation and destabilization that has the ultimate aim of forcing the UN to intervene

in Tangara. Thouvenel hires foreign mercenaries who, through a series of staged protests and violent attacks, undermine public support for nationalization while creating the impression that Tangara is an unstable country. Although the president suspects that these events are part of a Western attempt to discredit him, he lacks the hard evidence that he needs to support any concrete action against those responsible. Eventually, however, the lone investigations of a Tangarese journalist provide him with the proof that he needs to convince the Chinese and Russian presidents to veto any UN military intervention in the country. Following the arrest of Thouvenel and her co-conspirators, the film ends with a scene of national celebration, the flag of Tangara flying high.

The film is well-paced and slickly produced. Scenes consist mostly of conversations and debates between the characters, a choice that serves to create a considerable amount of narrative tension. The emphasis is placed not so much on individual characters, who are granted little interiority, but on the encounters and conflicts between them. The film's dialogue—frequently hyperbolic in its tone and delivery—serves to render the whole production somewhat surreal, an effect that is heightened by the decision to locate the action in a *fictional* African country. This use of a speculative register allows the film to critique corporate involvement in the African continent as a whole, while preventing it from being interpreted merely as a commentary upon one particular nation. A certain surreality is also evident in the representation of the Western conspirators who, in their frequent clandestine meetings, utter numerous colonial and neo-colonial clichés, so convinced are they that Africans are inferior and “not ready for democracy.” This casting of all of the film's white characters as villains may strike some viewers as a problematic oversimplification, at least insofar as it risks reducing capitalism's exploitation of the continent to a binary opposition between Africa and the West. It should, however, be seen as a part of the film's scathing satire of the continued collusion between Western nation states and corporate interests in Africa. It might also be understood as a riposte to the troubling racialization of villainy across the history of European and American cinema.

The film's vision of a new African geopolitics contains several interesting details that provide further insight into the kind of intervention that Amoussou is trying to make. Tangara's success ultimately relies upon cooperation with other non-Western countries, the support of Russia and China being instrumental in the country's victory over its Western aggressors. This is consistent with the President's emphasis, throughout the film, upon the importance of the nationalized industries continuing to work with foreign partners, Western or otherwise. The film is not a call, then, for an isolated socialist state, but rather for an outward-looking national community that exists on an equal footing with other countries. Ultimately, *L'Orange Africain* is a hymn to the power and potential of the African nation-state, a formation that is shown to be able to provide wellbeing to its people, despite international interference. It therefore provides an important counterpoint to accounts

of contemporary African cultural production that understand it as implicated in a “postnational” consciousness. Amoussou has directed a film that, although speculative in its register, makes an exciting and arresting case for the continued attraction of the nation-state on the African continent.

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