

BOOK REVIEW

Boukary Sawadogo. *African Film Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2018. 142 pp. List of figures. Bibliography and Filmography. Index. \$42.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1138579385.

Boukary Sawadogo, Assistant Professor of Communications and Media Arts at The City College of New York, brings his extensive knowledge and enthusiasm for African cinema to this highly informative and accessible textbook, *African Film Studies: An Introduction*. Sawadogo has published on many aspects of African cinema in both French and English, including his first book, *Les cinémas francophones ouest africains, 1900–2005* (2013). This present work, in English, expands on the scope of his previous book geographically, with its inclusion of contemporary cinemas from other regions of Africa (though little of North Africa) and the diaspora, and temporally, with its coverage of the four distinct periods of African filmmaking: the colonial years, postcolonial pioneer years (1960s–70s), second wave (1980s–90s), and postnational contemporary times.

Sawadogo describes the book's aim as “examin[ing] the art and business dimensions [of African film] in a way that sheds light on questions that might otherwise be overlooked” (12). Hence, he explores questions of aesthetic practices—with a focus on cinematography, film scores, and animation in African film—and issues concerning the film business—with a focus on production and distribution practices determined by shifting political structures, technological advances, access to means of production, and global forces. Finally, he provides an overview of both traditional and emerging critical approaches for the study of African cinema.

Sawadogo's compact, palm-sized 142-page textbook is an entry point for those new to Film Studies, and more specifically, to African Film Studies. The text succinctly covers the history, movements, aesthetics, and criticism of African cinema for those with a general interest in African film. The book is divided into three distinct parts, each comprised of one to three individual chapters. Sawadogo offers useful movie stills, diagrams, and charts to accompany the text. Additionally, each chapter provides a case study using select films to illustrate key concepts. Sawadogo concludes with informed recommendations advancing

the chapter's topic. Along with the standard bibliography and filmography, he lists resources, suggested books, films, and websites.

In the Introduction (Chapter One), Sawadogo sets out to define African cinema. This, he admits, can be a difficult task, especially in terms of the continent's vast geographical and linguistic differences, African filmmakers' varied choices with respect to genre and aesthetics, and the uneven colonial and postcolonial histories of African nations. Even with all of these considerations, Sawadogo recognizes that for most sub-Saharan African countries, with the exception of Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, funding and post-production are still tied to Europe. It is important to note that films from those three countries continue to be the exception throughout the book.

Part I, "The History of African Cinema" (Chapters Two and Three), spans African film production from colonial to contemporary times, and from Africa to the United States. Sawadogo upholds Ousmane Sembene, "father of African cinema" and "politically committed artist," as the standard-bearer of the first generation of African filmmakers, whose work sought to support and advance decolonial efforts, while often critiquing post-colonial governance (39). The second generation of filmmakers, many of whom were born after independence, enjoyed greater access to means of production, due to technological advances and a broadening of thematic and aesthetic possibilities as a result of changing political conditions. The inclusion of Sawadogo's photo of himself standing in front of a giant *Black Panther* (2018) movie poster captures both the excitement and symbolic significance of this film in the "parallel" development of African and African-American cinematic traditions (49). According to Sawadogo, filmmakers from the two locales (Africa and the U.S.) sometimes embark on co-productions, as they have a common opposition to Hollywood's stereotypic depictions and a shared sense of innovation.

In Part II, "Aesthetics in African Cinema" (Chapters Four, Five, and Six), Sawadogo contributes to scholarship on cinematography, film music, and animation; these last two areas, he claims, have been sorely neglected. He tackles issues ranging from why African film has been labeled "slow paced" to the significance of griot characters and their music in African film. Sawadogo's overview of the career of Moustapha Alassance (the father of African cinema animation) and the animated film tradition in Madagascar help to reinforce his claim that animation is a valuable tool for preserving oral traditions.

In the sole chapter that makes up Part III, "African Film Criticism," which is also the final chapter of the book, Sawadogo provides a concise literature review of the current state of African film criticism. He concludes with new approaches, such as Ken Harrow's "trash" aesthetic, which suggests assessing African film "based on its own creative value" (112), and Alexie Tcheuyap's postnationalist approach. Additionally, he calls our attention to emerging methodologies situated in gender, queer African film, film festivals, stars, and sub-cinema studies. Sawadogo recommends that African film criticism adopt

more aesthetics-centered analyses. In all, Sawadogo provides a handbook of sorts for the novice to African Film Studies, one what would also be useful in an introductory class on African Film.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Dima, Vlad. 2019 “Waiting for (African) Cinema: Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Quest.” *African Studies Review* 62 (1): 49–66. doi: [10.1017/asr.2017.153](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.153).
- Repinecz, Jonathon. 2020. “Senegalese Wrestling between Nostalgia and Neoliberalism.” *African Studies Review*, 1–21. doi: [10.1017/asr.2020.8](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.8).
- Thackway, Melissa. 2018. “‘The World Should Be Open to Film’: an Interview with Idrissa Ouedraogo.” *African Studies Review* 61 (3): 191–93. doi: [10.1017/asr.2018.71](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.71).