society that systematically marginalizes and makes the black population and cultures socially invisible” (p. 243). Afro-Bahian artwork draws attention to and critiques the unequal conditions of poverty, violence, and invisibility making art a site of racial struggle and a testament to the persistence of black people.

Axé Bahia includes extensive treatment of Candomblé, but also includes other influences, offering a well-rounded picture of Salvador’s cultural forces that inform the work. Many of the authors note that this artistic cultural influence of Afro-Brazilians has not translated into their material gain. Afro-Brazilians remain largely poor and marginal in Salvador and in Brazil in general, despite being the majority of the population. Yet the authors did not touch on why such rich artistic production does not bring improved material conditions. While many academics have dissected the intricacies of Afro-Brazilian culture in their written work, this catalogue gives much-needed attention to historical and contemporary visual practices. Additionally, the copious, colorful, and powerful visual images of the artwork in Salvador demonstrate that the visual is just as important as the written. Essays provide ample context to the artwork, making the book very accessible to those uninitiated in Brazilian history and culture. For those already immersed in the study of Brazil, the essays will provide depth around the particular figures, events, and historical processes that informed Salvador’s culture and image as we know it today.

The term axé takes on various meanings. It can mean “Blessings,” “Peace” (p. 31), “amen” or “let it be so” (p. 90). Axé is “the intangible energy or vital force that infuses life” (p. 31) and it describes the presence or force of the orixás. Axé is present in humans, animals, and inanimate objects, yet “it is most visible in ritual and art” (p. 31). This book is an important scholarly contribution, an affirmation of black life, and, following the definitions, a conduit of much axé.

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book review

African Filmmaking: Five Formations
edited by Kenneth W. Harrow
East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017. 301 pp., chapter bibliographies and filmographies, index. $32.95 paper
reviewed by Aaron Louis Rosenberg

Kenneth Harrow’s new edited volume on African filmmaking is a collection of essays that in a sense functions in a fluid and manifestly effective way. To start with, the volume’s editor makes clear to us that we should not expect the essays contained in the book to provide a complete presentation of cinema throughout the African continent, as such would obviously be difficult to achieve in any single volume. Instead, each one of the five extensive chapters seeks to provide an introduction to and overview of the historical trajectory of five ostensibly regional cinematic traditions which, as Harrow explains, “coalesce around key features of geography and language” (p. ix).

The book moves from an essay on Franco-phone cinema, more or less entirely from West Africa, to a study of Anglophone West African films in Nigeria and Ghana and on to an exploration of the lengthy history of filmmaking in Egypt. The remaining two studies are concerned with the national cinemas of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, commonly referred to as forming the major portion of the Maghreb, and an examination of filmmaking in South Africa from the late nineteenth century up to the second half of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

In all cases, the essays provide a plethora—at times a seeming avalanche—of information about filmmaking in these regions, addressing topics such as methods of funding, government control and censorship, scriptwriting, actors’ careers, technological and practical challenges, successes and failures, and virtually every relevant aspect of the practical elements of filmmaking one might think of. Included with each chapter is a wide-ranging filmography that can easily serve as a jumping off point for several years of viewing pleasure and contemplation. Despite the fact that the book does not attempt to address East and southern African filmmaking, there are a few nods in that direction contained in the chapter on Anglophone Nigerian and Ghanaian films. In these chapters the author acknowledges, for example, the collaborations between East African and Nigerian studios.

The collection does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the topic under consideration and as a result—and quite justifiably—there is no conclusion appended to the volume. The chapters themselves in many cases do not seem to be working toward overarching synthetic conclusions about the cinematic products and productions they contend with, which, once again, seems perfectly in keeping with the spirit of the historical breadth and contemporary open-endedness of the material encompassed within each study.

The volume also—and perhaps rather conspicuously for someone such as myself, who comes from a comparative literature and cultural studies background—is decidedly light on film analysis and the use of theory to explain the importance and artistry of the works under consideration. While there are a few stabs made at what I would call “textual” studies of the narratives of the films themselves in terms of plot, imagery, and characterization as they relate to sociocultural phenomena, this is not the main objective of the chapters and such analyses as are included in the book barely scratch the surface of these rich and complex works. I do not make this observation in order to find fault with the book, for as I have explained, the authors do an excellent job of providing the reader with information, albeit of a different sort, through their surveys.

The collection of essays presented here will serve the lay reader as a fitting and stimulating initial foray into the complex of histories and artifacts which together constitute these multiple African cinemas. At the same time, they offer even the most expert scholar of African filmmaking so much and such exact data as far as the contextualized historical trajectories of the cinematographic traditions that are dealt with here, they cannot help but find something of use within this veritable forest of filmographic facts. Taken together with more general works such as those by Manthia Diawara and Olivier Barlet as well as Valérie Orlando and Ken Harrow’s own works on African cinema from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, this volume will serve as a crucial resource in terms of information about the specific historical data surrounding various African filmmaking traditions as well as the implications of these creative endeavors in the larger schemata of the formation of African identities in these regions.

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