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The Thematic and Formal Importance of the Cinema in Ayi Kwei Armah’s Writing

IN THIS ARTICLE, I will seek to establish the impact made on Ayi Kwei Armah’s writing by the arrival in modern Ghana of imported films from the West as well as by the development of television under the presidency of Kwame Nkrumah. Despite the brevity of Armah’s career at Ghanavision, it is obvious that questions related to the cinema as a popular form of artistic expression could not fail to attract the attention of a politically committed writer whose whole enterprise between 1968 and 1978 is characterized by the desire to communicate with a large African audience.

Western cinema as destructive myth

In the first instance, the cinema is presented in a very negative manner in his work, insofar as its principal function seems to be limited to transmitting the cultural and social codes of the West. In the wake of Frantz Fanon,1 Armah is convinced that modern Africa’s ills are due in large part to the pathological fascination exercised on the imagination of the new leaders by the imported life-styles and manner of the former rulers. This fascination goes hand-in-hand with the denigration of everything produced in Africa. The connection between this type of self-denigration and the influence of Western films is made apparent in his first novel, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, when Estelle Koomson, the wife of a senior Nkrumah minister, accompanies her contemptuous dismissal of the local beer by carefully studied gestures reminiscent of “the manner of a languid white woman in the films.”2


2 The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (London: Heinemann, 1967): 131. Further page references to this edition are in the text.

In a more general manner, the novel is saturated with images of light and brightness evocative of the way in which the new elite’s vision of reality has been reduced to the superficial shimmer (or “gleam”) of the cinema screen. The central protagonist attains the source of this light when he enters Koomson’s home (“it was amazing how much light there was in a place like this,” 145) and contemplates the dazzling brilliance reflected, among other things, by the “highly polished wood” of “one of the new television sets” (146).

In his second novel, *Fragments*, the problem is presented from a slightly different angle, the Ghanaians’ fascination for Western technology here being associated with the degradation of the society’s traditional rites and beliefs. With the exception of old Naana, the Onipa family thus fails to recognize the spiritual implications inherent in the outdooring ceremony of their newborn child, reducing the occasion to a mere show aimed at raising funds. The nature of their alienation is illustrated metaphorically by the fact that the guests are so numerous that they are invited to sit on chairs borrowed from the local cinema.3

Elsewhere in the novel, the fascination exercised by the screen on the people’s imagination is explicitly compared to the traditional functions of the old Melanesian cargo cults. In the same way as the Melanesians placed their hopes in the return from overseas of the departed ancestor, so the minor Ghanaian employee sees in the acquisition of a TV set the possibility of penetrating, as if by magic, into a universe of wealth and harmony. How else are we to explain that extraordinary scene when the rush to obtain a set gives rise to an outbreak of passion totally disproportionate to the event described? Having seized the last set, one of the employees squeezes it in his arms as if he were holding a woman. When his less fortunate colleague smashes the set with a stone, the first lets out a groan of despair whose intensity can be understood only if we consider the object destroyed as the very symbol of what the narrator refers to as “the wreckage of his [...] shattered dream” (217).

More generally, the pictures which reach Ghana from other lands serve to allow the masses much-needed respite from the seedy conditions of everyday life, as is indicated by the names given to the capital’s cinemas: Orbit, Dune, Royal. In the same way, these pictures reinforce the images of opulence and glamour transmitted by the Hollywood myth-factory,4 an aspect reflected in the names given, as if in derision, to the sordid bars of backstreet Accra: Silver Shooting Star, Kalifornia Moonbeam Cafe, etc.

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4 Armah’s portrayal of Hollywood as one of the main instruments for the propagation of Western illusions is made quite explicit in the third novel when Naita relates the concept of romantic love to the “white Hollywood way”; *Why Are We So Blest?* (London: Heinemann, 1972): 122.)