ALEXIE TCHEUYAP

African Cinema and
Representations of (Homo)Sexuality

In *Les Couples Dominos*, a pioneering essay on African sexuality, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury analyzes the forms of sexual politics in (traditional) Africa and in mixed (black and white) couples. One of the key points she makes is that on this continent, sex is intended mostly for reproduction, which means that (female) pleasure is not a priority. Sex is also usually very straightforward, and men do not usually start with any preliminaries. It is very conventional, and certain practices, such as homosexuality or ‘manœuvres anales’ for example, are almost unimaginable, if not immoral. Africans do not see any sense or pleasure in enjoying the ‘dirty parts’, parts through which all the stinking ugly substances are drained.

But Kuoh-Moukoury and other thinkers such as Pius Ngandu Nkashama and Massa Makan Diabaté also acknowledge the radical cultural metamorphosis that African societies have experienced since independence: the explosion of sex and its accompanying discourse, its transformation into a public and even political issue. In his introduction to *Érotisme et littératures*, Gérard Clavreuil discusses how these theorists investigate new forms of sexuality, and even determine a hierarchy of sexual practices in cultural productions:

1 I am deeply indebted to Julie Papaioannou, who helped in translating this essay.

eroticism is considered as the ‘human’, ‘acceptable’, and decent part of sex, while pornography is the ‘dirty’, ‘immoral’, and wild part of it. It is in this sense that Kuoh–Moukoury contends that “À l’heure actuelle, on est en train d’assister à une explosion de la sexualité, et même de la pornographie, sans être passé par la belle époque de l’érotisme.”

According to Kuoh–Moukoury, this explosion of sex consumption, discourse, and representation is quite unprecedented in Africa. The most obvious evidence, to mention just two names, is the openness of the literary discourse on sex in the books of Sony Labou Tansi and in Calixthe Beyala’s latest novel, 

Femme nue, femme noire (2003). Both authors’ representations of sexuality are radically different from those of their predecessors Mongo Beti or Camara Laye, for example. A new generation of African artists seem to agree, as Michel Foucault puts it, that sex has become

something to say, and to say exhaustively in accordance with deployments that [are] varied, but in their own ways compelling. Whether in the form of a subtle confession in confidence or an authoritarian interrogation, sex – be it fine or rustic – [has] to be put into word.

Contemporary African cultures now offer more: sex is not only being put into words, but also into images. Quite interestingly, the surprising popularity of Mapouka video productions in Côte d’Ivoire clearly indicates that Africans’ attitude to sex representation has completely changed. This metamorphosis is not only due to the daring and provocative choreography in the videos, but also to the high number of close-ups of the intimate parts of the ‘devils’ illegally shot in some private urban houses and sold in Europe or North America. Both pleasure and voyeurism appear to reign now in Africa. In films, sex seems to have become trivial, or in any case not taboo anymore. Not only is it now seen, whether live or on the screen, but it has also become an important indicator of transformations that contemporary African cultures now experience. This essay addresses some of the questions related to the representation of African sex on the screen.

2 “At present, we are witnessing an explosion of sexuality, and furthermore of pornography, without having experienced the belle époque of eroticism.” Quoted in Gérard Clavreuil, Érotisme et Littératures (Paris: Acropole, 1987): 50.


4 Mapouka is a popular and controversial dance developed from a traditional rhythm in Côte d’Ivoire. It was promoted and expanded very quickly during the military regime of Robert Gueï.

5 This is what these women are called.