

## From Ethnography to Essay *Realism, Reflexivity, and African Documentary Film*

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Renowned French anthropologist, Marcel Griaule, was a pioneer in the domain of European ethnographic filmmaking. In the late 1930s, Griaule produced two short films in the context of his research on the Dogon in what is now southeastern Mali. He described his documentary process as follows:

The shooting was all done live like real newsreels. You cannot ask the natives to do a reenactment or even a rehearsal. For them everything is spontaneous and if you burden them with details, all is lost ... The documents recorded by our camera are therefore precise and faithful accounts and unquestionably authentic. (Leprohon 1945, p. 185)<sup>1</sup>

Griaule's simplistic conception of filmic realism and the racism on which it relied ally his work with a tradition of French colonial documentary dating back to newsreels shot in the first years of the twentieth century. And in the decades following the release of Griaule's *In the Land of the Dogon* (1935) and *Under the Black Masks* (1938), even as many documentary filmmakers working in Europe and North America began to experiment with form as they questioned conventional conceptions of objectivity and realism, representations of Africa and Africans in nonfiction films remained for the most part the same. Immediately following independence, African documentarists were eager to counter colonial stereotyping in films that would represent their continent and cultures from the inside. A second generation of nonfiction filmmakers adopted a reflexive approach to personal and political African histories and realities, rejecting not just colonial content but also its form. In what follows, after tracing in more

detail this history of documentary film in Francophone West and Central Africa, I will argue for the inclusion of their films in a global category of reflexive documentary and the essay film in particular.

Documentary filmmakers for both private studios and governmental agencies worked in the service of French colonialism. European cameramen appeared in sub-Saharan Africa soon after colonial armies, eager to record images of newly acquired assets. As early as 1905, Pathé, Gaumont, and other major French studios, competing with companies from Great Britain, Belgium, and the United States, began sending cameramen south of the Sahara Desert for documentary footage in the form of newsreels or *actualités*. Alfred Machin called himself and other European cameramen “image hunters” (Machin 1909, p. 9), and Pathé released, among others, his *Hippopotamus Hunt on the Blue Nile* (1908), *Panther Hunt* (1909), and *Elephant Hunt* (1911). Machin, who published articles about his expeditions with titles that included “The Cinematograph and the Conquest of the World” (1909) and “Shooting Guns and Film Across Central Africa” (1911), was capturing animals and Africa on film. From its beginnings, colonial film claimed to offer spectators back in the metropole what G. Dureau, the editor of *Ciné-Journal*, described as “a living illustration of all of the corners of the world where the French flag flies.” The cinema, Dureau continued, “is the exact representation of the nature and the people we cannot all go see. It evokes the distant lands of which an atlas or the words of a teacher can give only a confused and usually false idea” (Dureau 1913, p. 1).

Looking back at these earliest years of colonial filmmaking, André Liotard and Samivel in 1950 stressed the importance of the advent of what they called a “cinema of exploration.” Prior explorers, Europeans whose self-proclaimed profession consisted of travel in areas of the world they considered to be premodern or uncivilized, had produced drawings and photography that Liotard and Samivel deemed “rare and episodic documents.” Film, they contended, would by its very nature provide “impartial testimony” in support of colonialism; “it was life itself that [cinema] was henceforth going to be able to collect in canisters...thus began a new era of the conquest of the Earth, that of the camera” (Liotard et al. 1950, pp. 7–8). Machin and his colleagues had inaugurated a tradition of documentary whose assertions of objectivity and a perfect match between reality and representation denied its colonial and racist bias, and although their films focused on landscapes, flora and fauna, they also began to highlight the customs of the African peoples encountered along the way. Marc-Henri Piault argues that ethnography and the cinema were born at the same time not by accident, but as the “twin children of a common endeavor of discovery, or identification, or appropriation” (Piault 2000, p. 10). Manifestations of a desire for scientific observation “in the field,” both grew out of expansions of enterprises for which colonial conquest was critical (Piault 2001, p. 6). Over the course of approximately 40 years, ethnography would move steadily to the forefront of French colonial documentary cinema.

Between 1913 and 1928, Gaumont Actualités released a number of films in a program entitled “Educational Series, Geography, Africa.” *In West Africa* (no. 4355), subtitled “Trades, Types, and Customs,” opens with images of a tailor working on his sewing machine, after which we see women with elaborate hairstyles, men getting haircuts, women cooking dinner around a fire, artisans working, fishermen going out to sea, and women pounding millet. *Through French Equatorial Africa* (no. 6022) shifts seamlessly from indigenous animals to the daily activities of local peoples:

A river in Africa. Ducks take flight. Hippopotamus heads rise from the water. Shots, a hippopotamus is dead...A village in the savanna, huts with straw roofs. The local population, the women walk swaybacked, wearing cloths around their waists... Daily activities in the village. The women carry baskets on their heads. A group of women and children. Men working: they arrange tree trunks in a grotto, others carry bricks dried in the sun on their shoulders.

This Gaumont summary concludes with four keywords – “Customs. Traditions. Landscapes. Fauna” – not merely claiming to introduce the spectator to Africans as well as Africa but giving first billing to the newsreel’s ethnographic attractions. According to *Cinéma magazine*, the cameraman with the Vandenberg expedition in Central Africa recorded “the bizarre habits and customs of Negro peoples” such that, “thanks to the cinema, a voyage to African lands could be completed without fatigue” (Anon. 1923, p. 243).

Swedish cameraman Oscar Olsson’s *In the Heart of Savage Africa* (1922) was a huge success in Paris, and critic Georges-Michel Coissac considered it to be a “great documentary,” one that “calls documentary films into question and shows how captivating they are, even awe-inspiring, as long as they are real.” Describing the film, Coissac asserted that, “For the first time, the audience was transported to a place until now known only to audacious explorers, among the savannas, the virgin forests and their wild animals, the Negro peoples and their customs” (Coissac 1922, p. 516). Landscapes and animals were again paired with people and their customs, and Coissac, like Dureau, Liotard, and Samivel, stressed the self-evident, unquestionable realism of the film’s representation of all of these as its most powerful quality. In 1926, two major French documentary film productions shot in sub-Saharan Africa were released: Léon Poirier’s *Croisière Noire*, a feature-length recording of the Citroën expedition in Central Africa, and Marc Allégret’s *Voyage to the Congo*. Both offered ethnographic images and information as part of their travelogues, and Allégret’s filmed journey with writer André Gide was subtitled “Scenes of Indigenous Life in Equatorial Africa.” Even Marcel Carné, who would go on to direct the masterpieces of French poetic realism *Port of Shadows* (1938) and *Daybreak* (1939), praised colonial documentaries, including those of Olsson, Poirier, and Allégret, in the same terms as Machin in an article entitled “The Cinema Out to Conquer the World” (Carné 1930, pp. 9–10).

French documentary images of Africa were from the beginning conceived of and deployed as propaganda, designed to rally support for the colonial project, and particularly so in the years during and after World War I.<sup>2</sup> The Cinematographic Section of the Armies (SCA) was established in 1915 and soon produced and distributed *The Colonies' Aid to France* (1918), which begins by showing the metropolitan viewer, in two contrasting maps introduced by intertitles, the expansion of French colonial possessions between 1870 and 1912 credited to the vision of Jules Ferry. Traveling first from Morocco to Indochina to display the contributions of the colonies to the war effort in the form of food and ammunition, the film's emphasis then shifts to the accomplishments of the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, colonial troops forced to fight in Europe, with a section devoted to their "games and dances" (Figure 16.1). Like the studio newsreels and travel films, then, the films made by the SCA often included ethnographic details. In *Toward Tchad* (1922), after a series of images of European adventurers traveling through North and then sub-Saharan Africa and accompanying shots of landscapes and wild animals, the intertitle "Small Trades" appears, followed by images of women spinning thread, a weaver at work, the dying of cloth, a wrestling match, traditional wrestling, dancing, and drumming.



**Figure 16.1** *L'aide des colonies à la France*, Henri Desfontaines, 1918, Section cinématographique des armées.

The Committee of Colonial Propaganda by Film was created in 1928 to produce a collection of newsreels glorifying the French colonies for the upcoming Colonial Exhibition, “a visitor’s book in moving images that will evoke the glorious past, show the laborious present, and announce the fertile future” (Anon. 1928, p. 23). The number of documentaries shot in the colonies quickly increased, some for the first time had sound, and at least 300 were projected at the Exhibition in 1931 (Bloom 2008, p. 130). Such films, including *The Colonial Expansion of France* (1930) and *History of Greater France* (1931), praised France’s “civilizing mission” across the centuries. According to Coissac, they provided for a kind of virtual tourism that would encourage spectators to extract resources from the colonies; “Thanks to films, we wander through any and all lands, not as tourists but as prospectors; they open themselves up to us in all of their features and with all of their resources and possibilities” (Coissac 1931, p. 387). And even after World War II, the SCA’s *From Trêves to Abidjan* (1946) includes a brief ethnographic pause amid explanations of military training maneuvers underway in French West Africa. French pilots bargain for their purchases at Bamako market, after which they and the film’s spectators are treated to a performance of the Dogon masks.

I began this chapter with Marcel Griaule, an academic anthropologist who studied the Dogon and in whose filmic work of the late 1930s ethnography became the primary and not an auxiliary project. In the second half of the twentieth century, Griaule’s disciple Jean Rouch brought French ethnographic filmmaking in Africa to the forefront and to a global audience. Rouch was not working alone; the Committee on Ethnographic Film within the Museum of Man in Paris, which he co-founded with André Leroi-Gourhan in 1952, sponsored a large number of ethnographic undertakings by self-proclaimed filmmaker-anthropologists, including Serge Ricci, Guy Le Moal, and Georges Bourdelon. Ethnographic documentaries were also funded by the French National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS), the Ministry of National Education, the National Pedagogical Institute, and the Cinémathèque of Public Education. Although Leroi-Gourhan took pains to distinguish the ethnographic documentary from colonial propaganda and exotic documentary films (Leroi-Gourhan 1948, pp. 42–43), most of these films, in both their content and style, perpetuated the colonial representations of Africa and Africans of the newsreels, travel and adventure, and army films that preceded them. In Ricci’s *Water Wedding* (1953), for example, a French voice-over describes life along the river among the Bobo in what is now Mali and western Burkina Faso as we see men weaving nets and fishing, women gathering and smoking fish, selling the fish at market, and singing and dancing. When we hear the voices of the people on screen, they are muted and neither synched nor translated. Only Rouch, the most prolific of the group, would substantially diverge from this model.

With *Jaguar* (1955/1967) and *I, A Black Man* (1958), Rouch began to transform his documentary and ethnographic practice, allowing his African subjects to become actors and contribute, often in their own French, to the voice-overs of his films. He trained many of his actors to become filmmakers themselves and

established the first film production facilities in Africa. Rouch called this method “shared anthropology” and these films “ethno-fictions,” claiming, contrary to Griaule, that he saw “almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction” (Rouch 2003, p. 185). He continued to narrate his films, but his voice became less authoritative and more speculative, and African voices were for the first time telling at least part of the story. This transformation was more dramatic in *Little by Little* (1969), filmed almost ten years after the end of the colonial era, in which the character of Damouré visits Paris to see “how people live in houses with many floors.” Damouré, like the cameramen sent by Pathé and Gaumont and the Museum of Man, is on a mission to learn “geography, habits, customs,” but he reverses their route to travel from Africa to Europe. In Rouch’s later films, Africans were not only objects of documentary, though Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene nonetheless famously accused Rouch of filming Africans as if they were insects. Rouch could perhaps never escape the formative influence of Poirier’s travel documentary, which he had seen as a child. His memories of the film were so strong, in fact, that when he arrived in Niamey for the first time, he could not see the African reality before his eyes; “it was these views from *Croisière noire* that, fifteen years later, welcomed me on this plateau of dusty laterite above the valley of the Niger River” (Rouch 1957, p. 32).

During and after the wave of independence from France in the late 1950s and early 1960s, West and Central African filmmakers sought to reclaim the cinema and their cinematic image from their former colonizers. Many new African governments established national cinema services, which funded inexpensive and straightforward educational films that were often co-sponsored by the French Ministry of Cooperation and the International Audiovisual Consortium (CAI) in Paris (Tapsoba 1996, p. 50). Togo, for example, according to François Kodjo, emphasized “creation toward a goal and not for artistic pleasure” (Kodjo 1979, pp. 608–609). Aside from such productions, most early African film was not documentary, but historical fiction film, and many well-known directors, including Souleymane Cissé (Mali) and Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso), got their start with short documentaries and then shifted to feature films as quickly as their funding permitted. Pioneering Senegalese filmmaker and film critic Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, one of only a few filmmakers of his generation to work consistently in documentary, responded to Griaule, Rouch, and their colleagues with what he called social anthropological or sociological films (Vieyra 1990, p. 128). Vieyra is best-remembered for his pre-independence docu-fiction *Africa on the Seine*, shot in Paris in the mid-1950s, but he returned to Senegal to direct *A Nation is Born* (1960), a celebration of independence from France, *Lamb* (1963), a humorous study of Senegalese traditional wrestling, and *Mól* (1966), a representation of the life of a fishing village near Dakar via the story of a young man.

Vieyra was at the origin of a revolution within a global documentary cinema whose relationship with Africa had been one of exoticization, oppression, or neglect. In a first wave of West and Central African documentaries, from the early

1960s through the early 1980s, Blaise Senghor (Senegal), Moïse Zé (Cameroon), Pascal Abikanlou (Benin), Tidiane Aw (Senegal), Safi Faye (Senegal), Timité Bassori (Côte d'Ivoire), Momar Thiam (Senegal), and others joined Vieyra to challenge the so-called realism of colonial film. In Vieyra's words, and in documentaries as much as in feature films, "African cinema is reestablishing the truth about Africa because Africans themselves have taken charge of their cinema. The vision becomes an interior one" (Vieyra 1990, p. 132). Many of these early African documentary films can be described as autoethnographic, a term used by Mary Louise Pratt to describe "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms" (Pratt 1992, p. 7). Working against the French tradition that preceded them, filmmakers began with an inherited style, in which footage of rituals, customs, and traditional occupations was accompanied by an authoritative, explanatory voice-over. Their films were in many cases funded by the same Paris-based institutions that had supported and continued to support French ethnographers working in Africa.

The narrator of Blaise Senghor's *Great Magal to Touba* (1962) details for the spectator the stages of the yearly Mouride pilgrimage to the mosque in Touba, Senegal. The 20-minute film, which was awarded the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, begins with a map identifying Dakar and Touba, after which an on-screen text and formal third-person voice-over commentary in French first describe and then follow the pilgrims' journey. Although Senghor was Senegalese, he was criticized by fellow Africans for depicting the ritual from the outside, as had European documentarians (Haffner 1984, p. 32). Moïse Zé, in his 15-minute *The Mvet* (1965/1972), chose instead to narrate his representation of Cameroonian musical traditions and rituals in the first-person singular and plural and to share his voice-over with a woman, Jackie Maman. Zé asserted that his deep knowledge of his topic and his use of the first person allowed him to break away from a "traditional ethnographic cinema" that he described as "an abusive enterprise," for which foreign filmmakers arrive with a foreign crew to film local populations who neither contribute to the finished product nor profit from it (Sormery 1974, p. 8). As independent African filmmakers continued to work in documentary, many would join Zé in breaking away from conventional ethnography, for the most part by experimenting with multivocal and multilingual voice-overs and by challenging Griaule's insistence on the production of a "precise and faithful account."

I labelled *Africa on the Seine* a docu-fiction and, as Frank Ukadike, Jude Akudinobi, and Maria Loftus have noted, a number of African directors since Vieyra have combined nonfictional and fictional strategies in their portrayals of previously misrepresented African realities (Ukadike 1995, p. 91; Akudinobi 2000, p. 346; Loftus 2010, p. 37). Whereas Sembene as early as *Borom Sarret* (1963) reached toward nonfiction in his portrayals of fictional characters, early African documentary filmmakers reached toward fiction, as had Rouch. They reacted against the inaccuracies, racism, and condescension of the European documentary tradition by entangling fiction and nonfiction, questioning the purportedly uncomplicated

realism of colonial ethnography while also pointing to the absence of ethnographic evidence filmed from an African point of view. Pascal Abikanlou both fictionalized and personalized the poetic voice-over narration of *Ganvié, My Village* (1967), in which a man returns to his home village in Benin and describes the daily lives of its inhabitants in the first person. Safi Faye, who had acted for and trained with Rouch, studied filmmaking in Paris, where she also undertook doctoral work in ethnology. Like Abikanlou, she chose to blur the boundaries between fictional and nonfictional narrative strategies in her films *Kaddu Beykat* (1975) and *Fad'jal* (1979), both of which portray the lives of the inhabitants of a traditional Serer village who face very contemporary social, cultural, and economic pressures. Faye asserted that “For me all these words – fiction, documentary, ethnology – have no sense... At the end of my films people wonder if there is *mise en scène* or not” (Martin 1979, p. 18) (Figure 16.2). Complicating Coissac’s “as long as they are real,” she has described her films as “reenacted documentaries” (Faye, 2010).

A new generation of African filmmakers turned to documentary in the early 1990s, building on the work of Vieyra, Zé, Faye, and others. They have mixed documentary and fictional modes in their representations of African social and political histories but have rejected autoethnography in favor of experimental films that foreground first-person narrative strategies. In films like *Allah Tantou* (David Achkar, Guinea, 1991), *Africa, I Will Fleece You*, and *Vacation in the Country*



Figure 16.2 *Fad'jal*, Safi Faye, 1979.

(Jean-Marie Teno, Cameroon, 1992 and 2000), *The King, the Cow, and the Banana Tree* (Mweze Ngangura, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1994), *Dakar Bamako* and *Letter to Senghor* (Samba Félix Ndiaye, Senegal, 1992 and 1998), *Rostov-Luanda* and *Life on Earth* (Abderrahmane Sissako, Mauritania/Mali, 1997 and 1998), *Bye Bye Africa* (Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, Chad, 1998), *Open Window* (Khady Sylla, Senegal, 2005), *Si-Gueriki* and *Indochina: Traces of A Mother* (Idrissou Mora Kpai, Benin, 2003 and 2011), and *Black Business* (Osvalde Lewat, Cameroon, 2009), they have continued to challenge outsider claims to unquestionable authenticity as they work to transform the language of realism on which colonial documentary, from newsreels to ethnographies, relied. Ndiaye, whose extraordinary documentary career spanned four decades, when asked “Do you often use your camera to explore sociocultural traditions, as did the Senegalese director Safi Faye?” answered with a straightforward “No.” Asked if the first-person voice-over in his films meant that they lacked objectivity, he denied the claim of any documentary film to objectivity; “Your reality is not the reality of your neighbor!” (Pfaff 2010, pp. 167–168).

The films I have listed are often described in French as “creative documentaries” (*documentaires de création*), but they also fit the more specific description of the essay film, a subset of reflexive documentary that has been defined and examined by a number of British and North American film scholars. African cinema, however, has been notably absent from these debates. It is significant that the only films with any connection to Africa that are repeatedly cited in overviews of reflexive documentary are Trinh Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1982) and Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1982), both shot only partially on the continent and neither by an African filmmaker. Catherine Russell analyzed both in *Experimental Ethnography*, an impressive study of films that question the colonial realism of the documentary enterprise, or “radical film practice within a specifically ethnographic milieu” (Russell 1999, p. 4), but neglected to mention even a single African director. African films are equally lacking in Hamid Naficy’s *An Accented Cinema* (2001), a study of reflexive films made by postcolonial directors in exile that similarly included both Trinh and Marker.

In the late 1970s, Jay Ruby distinguished between reference, reflection, and reflexivity in documentary film, concluding that “to be reflexive is to reveal that films ... are created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records” (Ruby 1988, p. 75). More recent discussions have been guided by Bill Nichols’ analysis of what he calls the reflexive mode of documentary, which “arose from a desire to make the conventions of representation themselves more apparent and to challenge the impression of reality which the other three modes [expository, observational, and interactive] normally conveyed unproblematically” (Nichols 1991, p. 33). The reflexive filmmaker, Nichols continues, engages in “metacommentary” and speaks about “the process of representation itself” (p. 56). Reflexive documentary works to break what Roland Barthes called the referential illusion, the sense that a text embodies the reality it is

attempting to represent, a sense fully present, as we have seen, in French colonial documentary. Barthes argued that the would-be objective historian strives to sustain this illusion in part by avoiding the use of the first-person pronoun, “so that history seems to tell itself” (Barthes 1986, pp. 131–132). Reflexive documentary filmmakers may deploy a first-person filmic voice precisely to break the illusion of objectivity, emphasizing, as did Ndiaye, that even a nonfiction film is a partial narrative told from a particular point of view.

In the early 1990s, Michael Renov analyzed Jonas Mekas’ *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) as both a diary film and a reflexive essay film, citing an early review of the film written by Alan Williams. Renov outlined a history of the essay from Michel de Montaigne in the late sixteenth century to Roland Barthes and then to Mekas, contending that the essay film is doubly reflexive, “a mode of autobiographical practice that combines self-examination with a deeply engaged outward gaze” (Renov 2004, p. 69). Nora Alter returned to Montaigne 15 years later to find “essayistic tendencies” in film going back to Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Alter, like Renov, points to the hybrid nature of essay films, emphasizing the ways in which they “fus[e] the two long-established categories of film: fiction and documentary” and also “self-reflexively offer their own film criticism” (Alter 2007, p. 44). Laura Rascaroli retains Renov’s focus on a personal and first-person voice to argue that filmic essayists are “strong auteurs,” inheritors of an avant-garde tradition dating back to the French New Wave (Rascaroli 2009, p. 7). And Timothy Corrigan argues that the essay, both written and filmed, is both fiction and nonfiction, narrative and non-narrative, verbal and visual (Corrigan 2011, p. 3). Unlike Rascaroli, however, Corrigan stresses the incoherence of the essayistic subject, who is expressed in but also produced by film.

Although Rascaroli argues that the essay films she examines “form a diverse, paradoxical, heretical body of work,” her list of filmmakers contains only the most celebrated European and, to a lesser extent, North American auteurs: Mekas, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Agnès Varda, Harun Farocki, Chantal Akerman, and Ross McElwee (p. 2). She uses the term “transnational” to refer to her inclusion of North America films, and the cinemas of other continents are completely absent (p. 193, n.6). Corrigan, after describing what he calls the five modes of the essay film, states that although “virtually every country in the world produces essay films,” he has excluded non-“Western” film from his purview, “in large part because of the historical and cultural origins and evolutions of the essay,” which he traces back, per his title and like Renov and Alter, in writing to Montaigne and in film to Marker (p. 7). Yet even if the genre of the written essay has its origins in France, it has been widely adopted and adapted around the world. A documentary filmmaker from a formerly colonized and currently “underdeveloped” region would seem to be ideally situated to perform what Corrigan describes as “the simultaneous enactment of and representation of a destabilized self...a self whose place in a public history is at best on its margins or in some cases in an excluded or inverted position” (p. 80).

European and North American film critics and historians, like their colleagues in literary fields, have tended not to recognize reflexivity within African cinema, preferring to read African films as informative ethnographic documents rather than works of art. Although Rascaroli mentions in passing that Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino included the essay film as a potential “militant form of expression” in their 1969 manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema” (p. 29), both she and Corrigan neglect this tradition, one which, along with the European avant-garde and local narrative traditions, has nourished experimental subjective and political films in Africa as well as Latin America. As we have seen, African filmmakers had particular reasons to challenge both authoritative third-person voice-overs and unproblematized documentary representations of reality, strategies that carry a particular resonance in colonial and neo-colonial contexts. African essay films, both intimate and political, continue the process of reappropriating documentary for and from Africa, often from a position of partial exile and at least partially in French. They constitute a powerful argument against the exclusion of African film from the documentary canon and from studies of reflexive filmmaking, enacting and representing destabilized selves as they engage in an international filmic conversation about the methods and goals of documentary realism. In order to support my case not only that African essay films exist, but that they enrich our understandings of both the essay film and contemporary African cinema, I will focus on Mahamat Saleh Haroun’s *Bye Bye Africa* (1998), a film that in many ways exemplifies the essay film as described by Renov, Alter, Rascaroli, and Corrigan.

Born in 1961 in Abéché, Chad, Haroun was wounded during the civil war in his late teens and escaped first to Cameroon, then to China and Europe. He went on to study both filmmaking and journalism in France. Haroun’s first films were short fictions, *Tan Koul* (1991), *Maral Tanié* (1994), and *Goi Goi the Dwarf* (1995), after which he released two mid-length documentaries, *Bord’Africa* (1995) and *Sotigui Kouyaté: A Modern Griot* (1996). Haroun has maintained his Chadian nationality even though he is based in France, and *Bye Bye Africa*, his first feature-length film, was also the first feature-length film from Chad. Over the course of his career, Haroun has become one of few filmmakers from Africa to gain recognition at prominent festivals both on the continent and abroad. *Bye Bye Africa* was awarded the prizes for Best First Film at the Venice Film Festival and Best Film at the Amiens International Film Festival. *Abouna* (2002) won for Best Cinematography at the 2003 FESPACO biannual African film festival and was selected for the Director’s Fortnight at Cannes. *Daratt* (2006) won the Bronze Stallion at FESPACO and the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival. *A Screaming Man* (2010) won the Silver Stallion at FESPACO, the Jury Prize at Cannes, and the Robert Bresson Prize at Venice. As a result of these successes, the government of Chad sponsored the renovation of the Normandy theatre in the capital of N’Djamena, announced plans to open a national film school, and funded Haroun’s *GriGris* (2013), which was then selected for the Official Competition at Cannes. Haroun has made several mid-length documentaries, including *Sotigui Kouyaté, A Modern Griot* (1996)

and *Kalala* (2005), but *Hissein Habré: A Chadian Tragedy* (2016), projected at a special screening during the Cannes Festival, is Haroun's first feature-length documentary since *Bye Bye Africa*.

In *Bye Bye Africa*, Haroun acts, narrates, and films central character Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's return to Chad after ten years in France. The story of an individual who goes home after the death of his mother, the film also becomes a commentary on the situation of the cinema in Chad and on the African continent. *Bye Bye Africa* is both autobiographical and staged, personal and political, and from the start avowedly reflexive. The film has variously been called documentary, documentary-fiction, fictional documentary, docu-fiction, docu-drama, and, on the website for Haroun's production company Pili Films, "a fiction that imitates a documentary style." Haroun has said that the film "constantly goes back and forth between fiction and reality" (Barlet 2002, p. 22), and an uneasy relationship between film and reality is not just one of the film's characteristics, but one of its major themes.

*Bye Bye Africa* begins with Haroun, asleep in his bed in France, waking up to the ringing of a telephone call that will announce his mother's death. He will leave France for N'Djamena, Chad, spend time with his father, grandmother, and nephew, reunite with an old friend, and start the preparations for a film to be entitled "Bye Bye Africa." Just over 15 minutes into the film, Haroun's character describes the film he is planning to make as "a multi-layered task [*exercice à tiroirs*]. It's about cinema, exile, family, love, life. How to film life, that's the question I ask." Haroun is the director of "Bye Bye Africa" as well as *Bye Bye Africa*, then, and this film-within-the-film theme creates a *mise-en-abîme* typical of reflexive art. The majority of *Bye Bye Africa* consists of scenes in color in which the spectator sees Haroun on screen as a character who often films the world and people around him. Other scenes, in black and white, consist of images ostensibly filmed by his character's video camera. The reflexive trope of the man in a movie with a movie camera, of filming within a film, goes back to Dziga Vertov, and Yifen Beus notes that Haroun's manner of filming N'Djamena evokes *Man with a Movie Camera* (Beus 2011, p. 142), identified by Alter as the first essay film.

The life Haroun is filming, in "Bye Bye Africa," and has filmed, in *Bye Bye Africa*, is in part and in many senses his own. Years of exile have distanced his character from his family and his compatriots, few of whom understand or approve of his chosen career. In the first of many voice-overs, Haroun announces, "And so, I will never see my mother again. She died yesterday, over there. Very far away. And suddenly I feel alone. Very alone." His parents have never met his children, who were born in France, and Haroun suggests that this is because his French ex-wife does not want them to travel to Chad. After he arrives in N'Djamena, Haroun shows how out of touch he is with the reality of his homeland by asking his taxi driver, "So, how is this country doing?" One of the goals of the film is to answer this question, and Haroun and the driver commiserate about the heat and the price of gas. Haroun also shows us, without explicit commentary, the presence of

the military in the city as a result of Chad's longstanding civil war; a soldier stops the taxi and refuses to accept a bribe to let them pass. Over the course of both *Bye Bye Africa* and "Bye Bye Africa," Haroun shows us the varied landscapes of N'Djamena as well as glimpses of its inhabitants, but without describing what we are seeing nor explaining who these people are or what they are doing and why. His commentary, in a strong first-person voice-over, instead provides information about both his character's thoughts and feelings and the state of the cinema in Africa, combining, to return to Renov's words, "self-examination" and "a deeply engaged outward gaze."

Haroun's father watches him pick up his video camera to film boys playing soccer in the streets and complains, speaking in Chadian Arabic, "Cinema! Cinema! We don't understand what you do. You sent a tape. We didn't understand. Just blabla. It was about a European." Haroun explains that the film was about Freud, and his father asks if this is one of his friends. Haroun's father then continues, "Your films are not made for us. They are for the Whites... If only you had become a doctor, you could have helped your mother. Being a doctor is useful. But what's the use of cinema?" Haroun offers the beginnings of a response to this question when, back at home, he and his father watch home movie footage of his mother. Over the clicking of the 16mm projector, Haroun's father exclaims, "Good God! It's your mother! I remember this." Haroun switches to French to answer that "You see, it's for memory that I make films. A great man named Jean-Luc Godard said 'Cinema makes memories'." After this second invocation of a canonical European, Haroun's father again asks if this is one of his friends. This time, although a friendship would not be chronologically impossible, Haroun's smile and shake of the head is evidence of the chasm not just between son and father, but also between two residents of France, the eminent and reclusive co-founder of the French New Wave and the African filmmaker just beginning his career. Despite his father's distaste for his chosen profession, Haroun's voice-over, inspired by Godard, then creates a link between cinema and his family, stating that, "to kill my sorrow, I will make a film in memory of she who gave me life."

Haroun visits an old friend of his, Garba, who is connected to African filmmaking at both a private and a public level. Haroun informs us that Garba, who shot the footage of Haroun's mother at a wedding years earlier, used to work as a projectionist at the Normandy movie theatre. The two go out for what will be one of many joint motorbike rides around the city, Garba steering and Haroun filming the streets around them. Garba reminds Haroun that his films, and African films in general, are not shown in Africa, and Haroun, instead of responding to Garba, addresses the spectator in a voice-over; "Yes, I know. Nobody sees my films here. I ask myself, then, for whom I make them. It's one of the reasons Garba doesn't want to work in the cinema anymore." Engaging the question of how and why to make films in Africa first by examining the current state of film exhibition, Haroun and Garba ride to the Normandy, which has been transformed from the lively social center of Haroun's childhood to a scarred, dilapidated symbol of neglect.

Haroun then takes us on a tour of other crumbling movie theatres in N'Djamena, the Shéhérazade, the Rio, the Vog, and the Étoile, all destroyed by decades of war and emptied of their audiences. Haroun wonders if a Godardian association of cinema and memory can remain valid in this context; "How can one believe in the cinema in a country where war has become a culture? The war has caused so much damage that N'Djamena seems to elude all memory." Yet the owner of the Étoile, whose father opened the theatre in 1946, is working to obtain the funds to undertake a renovation, to "bring the cinema back to life in my country," and she encourages Haroun to continue making films in order to participate in this endeavor.

*Bye Bye Africa*, then, is not only the story of the return of an individual exile, but also a political commentary about the present and future of Africa and of African cinema. Because of struggles for funding and a lack of exhibition within Africa, Haroun has argued elsewhere, "the African cinema becomes foreign on its own continent" (Haroun 2004, p. 146). And we watch Haroun's character as he listens to a speech on the radio about Africa's need to counter imperialism by refusing to rely not only on imported food, but also imported cultural products. The announcer reveals that the speaker, ten years prior, was anti-neo-colonial hero Thomas Sankara. Haroun thus links his exile from Chad, both temporally and thematically, to the death of Sankara, the leader of a popular revolution in Burkina Faso who became President in 1983, then was assassinated in a 1987 coup after which his deputy Blaise Compaoré took power for a reign of 27 years. The urgent need for self-reliance, for a cinema produced by Africans, is echoed later in the film in a letter that Haroun receives from friend and fellow African filmmaker David-Pierre Fila, sent from Brazzaville, another African city damaged by war. Fila speaks in a voice-over, adding his voice to Haroun's commentary on the cinema in Africa and concluding with a quote from another pan-African hero, Aimé Césaire; "The culture that is strongest on the material and technological levels threatens to crush all weaker cultures. Especially in a world in which distance is no longer an obstacle."

Haroun argues that the link between technological and cultural imperialism extends to the kinds of films we expect African filmmakers to create. The Chadian producer to whom he pitches "Bye Bye Africa" likes the story and wants to fund the film but tells Haroun he will need to shoot on video instead of celluloid to cut costs. Outraged at this suggestion, Haroun refuses, insisting that he wants to make "real cinema." *Bye Bye Africa*, however, was shot on video (Beta SP) and then transferred to 35mm film. Haroun has described it as an "emergency movie... we shot it on video in fifteen days, because I really had this urgency to say something and show that this is my place in Chad – my territory" (Scott 2003, p. 90). This accomplished, Haroun went on to shoot all of his subsequent features in Africa and on 35mm, including his feature-length documentary about Hissein Habré's reign of terror. He argues against the widespread idea that the future of African filmmaking lies with video, stating that this "African exception" is the result of a condescending attitude and that "on no other continent has it been said that digital video would be synonymous with quality" (Haroun 2011, p. 74). Visiting

the Shéhérazade theatre, Haroun is told that, if movie theatres had new projectors and new film prints, they would also have an audience. Haroun's interrogation of the state of the cinema in Chad leads him to exhort African filmmakers to reject the politically, economically, culturally, and cinematically marginalized position to which the rest of the world wants to relegate them, to make films that Africans could watch at the Normandy, the Shéhérazade, and the Étoile.

While Haroun is standing in front of the Shéhérazade theatre, a man attacks him and grabs his video camera, yelling "He's stealing our image! Thief! Why film us? He's a foreigner." Garba attempts to explain the man's reaction, one he believes Haroun has been abroad for too long to understand; "Here people don't trust the camera. We have a huge problem with images. We can't distinguish between fiction and reality." The proof, Garba says, is the case of Isabelle, an actress who played the role of a woman with AIDS in one of Haroun's earlier films and is now a pariah because everyone believes she, like her character, is sick. When Haroun sees Isabelle again for the first time in ten years, he immediately begins to film her, but she covers the lens with her hand. Isabelle then, like the man in front of the Shéhérazade, takes the camera from Haroun. Unlike the man who called Haroun a thief, however, she takes his camera to turn it on him, and for the first time in *Bye Bye Africa* we see Haroun in black and white. Haroun and Isabelle rekindle a love affair, but he does not want to take her back to France with him. Abandoned, she again takes his camera, this time to record her suicide note.

According to Garba, Isabelle's life has been destroyed by an African confusion of fictional images and reality, but Haroun has carefully led his spectators toward the same confusion. *Bye Bye Africa's* imitation of a documentary style, and particularly the use of black-and-white footage to represent what has been filmed by Haroun's camera, achieves what Olivier Barlet calls the "impression of spontaneity" characteristic of a genre he designates "documentary-fiction" (Barlet 2000, p. 114). Thanks to Haroun's unifying voice-over and physical presence within the film, acting the part of himself, we are drawn into his story with Isabelle so much that we risk forgetting that Haroun has never made a fictional film about a woman with AIDS. Yet Haroun, by means of the various reflexive strategies deployed throughout *Bye Bye Africa*, never quite lets us believe in what Rascaroli calls a "strong auteur" persona, reminding us, like Corrigan, that his essayistic subjectivity is as much created by as represented in his film. When Haroun discovers Isabelle's dead body, we see behind him a large poster for Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985), a film in which the director plays the role of a clearly fictional protagonist. The invented character of Isabelle (played by Aïcha Yelena) is on the fictional side of this docu-fiction. Her story, one that thematically gestures toward the idea that the cinema, as Isabelle tells Haroun, "is stronger than reality," is not real, and Haroun's audience is forced to reflect upon how the conventions of filmic representation create what Barthes called the "referential illusion" and Nichols the "impression of reality." We remember, for example, the other cameraman, the one we do not see, but who is filming Haroun in color as he acts out his autobiographical role.

Haroun, more explicitly than had Safi Faye, forces his audience to wonder whether, and where, there is *mise en scène* or not. The only major characters playing themselves in *Bye Bye Africa* are African filmmakers: Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, David-Pierre Fila, and Issa Serge Coelo, who is younger than Haroun and was at the time his only Chadian colleague. The character of Garba, like that of Isabelle, has been invented for the film. Actor Garba Issa is not a former projectionist and played very different roles in Haroun's later films *Abouna* and *Daratt*. The role of Haroun's father is played not by Haroun's father, but by Khayar Oumar Defallah, who also played the role of Atim's grandfather in *Daratt*. In the home movie footage that Haroun watches with the character of his father, the character of Haroun's mother is played by actress Hadje Fatima N'Goua, who went on to act in *Daratt* and *A Screaming Man*. The status of the various interviews that Haroun conducts in N'Djamena, such as that with the owner of the Étoile theatre, is impossible to determine from the evidence we have in the film. Haroun's citation of Godard after watching the footage of the actress playing the role of his mother is therefore particularly appropriate, since his cinema has as much made memories as recorded them.

Speaking more than ten years after *Bye Bye Africa* about his decision to cite Aimé Césaire in the title of *A Screaming Man*, Haroun explained, as had Paulin Vieyra in the 1960s, that "We must not forget that the original sin comes from the fact that Africa was first filmed by others. This representation is so distorted that our cinema works to counteract this vision" (Barlet, 2010). Although Haroun has lived outside of Chad for his entire adult life, he sets and shoots his film in his native land "through solidarity and because I feel a responsibility not to leave this country invisible" (Topping, 2013). Yet this desire to film Africa, and specifically Chad, differently from how it was filmed by colonial others, is not anthropological, and Haroun's "deeply engaged outward gaze," as we have seen in *Bye Bye Africa*, is not an ethnographic one. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Haroun was associated with the African Guild of Directors and Producers, a group of young African filmmakers based in France that included Jean-Marie Teno and Abderrahmane Sissako. Their manifesto declared that "Far from an ethnographic cinema that records habits and customs, the new cinema must quite simply bring us closer to the great family of cinema" ("Gilde" 2005, p. 269). This family is a global one, composed of a variety of styles and genres including the essay film, of which *Bye Bye Africa* is an important member.

Reaching for "the great family of cinema," Haroun is very conscious of both his African and non-African cinematic influences. In one interview, he remembers the close-up of a woman's face in an Indian film that he saw as a child in Chad and then mentions his admiration for François Truffaut's Antoine Doinel films (Higuinen 2003, p. 85). In another, he starts with the Charlie Chaplin films that he saw as a child, continues with his adolescent discovery of Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* and the films of Wim Wenders, and concludes with his admiration of the work of Yasujiro Ozu, Akira Kurosawa, Robert Bresson, and Ousmane Sembene

(Malausa 2010, p. 45). Other auteurs in Haroun's canon include John Ford, Abbas Kiarostami, Takeshi Kitano, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Idrissa Ouedraogo. It is not surprising, then, that *Bye Bye Africa* would participate in a global tradition of reflexive, experimental documentary. But instead of influence, art historian Robert Nelson has reminded us, we can speak about appropriation (Nelson 2010, p. 172). Haroun brings from Africa to the essay film a particular regional filmic and political history, a particular complex exilic subjectivity, and a particular interweaving of aesthetic and narrative traditions. The penultimate scene of *Bye Bye Africa* consists of a fixed long shot in black and white of Haroun's grandmother walking across the courtyard of the compound, across the frame, accompanied by Haroun's voice-over, which says "This is the woman who raised me. This is the woman who taught me how to tell stories. I often think about her when I'm far away from here. Then it's enough to lie down and close my eyes and I hear her soft voice." And despite his character's uneasy position as a returned exile with a movie camera, despite the history of documentary film in Africa, Haroun describes *Bye Bye Africa* as drawing from an African narrative tradition: "there is a structure in the screenplay, but I wanted a story told in the oral tradition...counting the seconds and then moving in another direction" (Scott 2003, p. 90). The essay, like reflexivity itself, is not only European.

Reviewers outside of Africa, however, have not always been willing to acknowledge this. The world continues to expect ethnography from films set in Africa, documentary information rather than essayistic commentary. Although the reception of *Bye Bye Africa* both in Africa and abroad was for the most part positive, *Variety* warned that "viewers not already schooled in the region's history and cultures won't gain much enlightenment here" (Harvey, 2000). Even more telling, the *Chicago Reader* praised Haroun's "feel for life and customs in the alleys around his family home," but claimed that Haroun "veers into precious intellectuality, and the talk turns to cultural crisis and cinema being 'stronger than reality' – it's as if Godard had suddenly injected himself into a documentary about a former French colony" (Shen). The use of the word "injected" implies not only that Haroun has no right to Godard's words, but that Godard and Haroun exist in different worlds, that only ethnographic film, and not the auteurist essay, can thrive in a former French colony. Yet *JLG/JLG: Self-Portrait in December*, Godard's fragmented autobiographical documentary about filmmaking, appeared in 1995, while Haroun was living in France, and could be understood as an important precursor of Haroun's 1998 film.

Chadian film history, in its scarcity, provides the perfect mirror for the condensed history of documentary film in West and Central Africa that I have traced here. I stated that *Bye Bye Africa* was the first feature-length film from Chad, but if we go back 20 years we do find African predecessors to Haroun's short films from the early 1990s. Chadian cameraman Edouard Saily, who trained in Paris with the *Actualités françaises*, made a series of short films in the 1960s and early 1970s, all between 5 and 35 minutes long and for the most part ethnographic. In *The*

*Fishermen of Chari* (1964) funded soon after independence by the Chadian Ministry of Information, a French-language voice-over praises the beauty and power of the Chari river and then describes the fishing customs and economy of the men, women, and children of the region. Saily continued with *Lake Chad* (1966), *The Slaughterhouses of Forcha* (1966), *Child of Chad* (1969), and *To Discover Chad* (1972), among others. Saily's *The Third Day* (1967), a wordless film, with no voice-over at all, about a young fisherman whose mother has died, has been restored and was included in the 2010 "Where is Africa?" program at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (Dovey 2015, p. 70). And before Saily, what is now Chad was filmed in a number of early French newsreels, including Gaumont's *Through French Equatorial Africa* (1920) and the SCA's *Toward Chad* (1922). Several decades later, the voice-over of Pierre Ichac's post-World War II, pre-independence ethnography *Watching Chad Pass By* (1958), which identifies Lake Chad as a "blue stain in the center of the black continent," provides its French audience with information about the animals and peoples of this "vast" region, from the camels in the north to the elephants in the south, from the Arab Muslims in the north to the black "animists" in the south. Garba's assertion that in Chad "people don't trust the camera" may have more to do with film history than with an inability to distinguish fiction and reality.

In *Bye Bye Africa*, Haroun's young nephew Ali becomes so enamored of the idea of filmmaking that he asks Haroun to give him his camera. When Haroun refuses, Ali makes himself a toy camera out of cardboard and cans (Figure 16.3). Haroun eventually decides to take Ali to his friend Serge Coelo's film shoot so he can watch and learn and, just before leaving to return to France, he gives Ali his camera, cautioning him to "pay close attention to what you will film." As Haroun gets into the taxi that will take him to the airport, Ali lifts the camera to his shoulder and begins to film. We see his first images in black and white, the camera bouncing up and



**Figure 16.3** *Bye Bye Africa*, Mahamat Saleh Haroun, 1998, Pili Pili Films.

down with his steps, and hear Haroun's last voice-over, "In a few hours, I will be in France, I will return to my little life of an exiled filmmaker." Ali catches up with the taxi, and we for the second time see Haroun in black and white, filmed by his own camera, while Haroun's voice concludes, "Leaving, I am calm. I know I will come back soon, very soon, to shoot 'Bye Bye Africa.'" Ali follows Haroun with his camera, in a nod to the conclusion of Ousmane Sembene's *Black Girl* (1966), when Diouana's younger brother, African mask over his face, pursues her former French employer as he leaves the neighborhood. Yet while Sembene's boy is chasing away the neo-colonial, Haroun's boy-filmmaker is both a protégé and a call to return.

### Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are mine. It is ironic that Griaule's racism led him to a conclusion contrary to that of Michel Heroin, whose later but equally racist opinion was that Africans were "born actors" (Heroin 1953, p. 53).
- 2 Peter Bloom, in *French Colonial Documentary*, and Alison Murray Levine, in *Framing the Nation*, examine at length the history of the strategic use of film to convince French citizens of the value and importance of the colonial enterprise.

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