2000 Toronto International Film Festival—Part 2

Without flinching

Bye Bye Africa, written and directed by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun

David Walsh
28 September 2000

Bye Bye Africa is an honest and moving film, an unusual one. An exiled African filmmaker (played by the director Mahamat-Saleh Haroun) and his French wife are woken up in the middle of the night by a telephone-call. His mother has died. He returns to Chad after a long absence, also taking with him a script he wants to film.

Back home, he tries to explain and justify his life as a filmmaker, with little success. Discussing cinema's psychological impact, he mentions Freud to his father. The older man asks, “Is he a pal of yours?” The general attitude is summed up: “Your films are not made for us.”

The filmmaker cites Jean-Luc Godard: “Cinema creates memory.” But cinema *and* memory, and more, are threatened in Chad. With a former projectionist he takes a tour on motorbike of the ruined movie theaters: the Normandie, the Étoile, the Rio. The film industry is crumbling in Africa, the victim of civil war, budget cuts, privatization and lack of funds for production and distribution. Several times the same question is posed: “Do you think cinema has a future here?”

A man in the street gets angry with the director for filming him, concerned that his image has been stolen. The projectionist tells the filmmaker that people distrust the camera and they make no distinction between image and reality. It seems that an actress who played an HIV victim has been shunned by everyone, including her family, because they thought she had the disease.

This unfortunate is Isabelle. He finds her, a former girl-friend. She tells him: “Your film killed me ... Everyone thinks I'm ill ... Cinema is stronger than reality.” He wants to sleep with her, she wants him to take her away. He leaves quickly.

He goes to meet a potential producer, who says: “I read your screenplay. It's not bad.” But “the costs are too high,” he's told, you must “moderate your ambitions.”

The filmmaker announces auditions anyway. A kid steals his camera and he cuffs him. He feels remorse and takes the boy to another director's film set where he can see how things are done. At the auditions the would-be actors explain their motives: “I want to show Chadians that cinema is important.” Or, “I want people to love me.”

He interviews the manager of a video room. The man explains that people are insecure and prefer to stay in their own neighborhoods. “Do you show African films?” he's asked. “Rarely.”

The projectionist has won the lottery. He and the filmmaker decide to celebrate and go to a club where they encounter Isabelle. She tells the filmmaker: “You hide behind your stupid dramas ... Reality scares you ... I'm not a fictional character, I exist.”

He talks with his grandmother, who has always meant a great deal to him. She asks, “Will you come back to work here?” The question causes him anguish.

He learns that Isabelle is dead, a suicide. She's left a video behind, for the filmmaker. On it, she says, “I'm alone ... No more life ... Bye bye.” He explains to his friend, callously, “It was just a casual affair.”

He hands his movie camera to the young boy, saying “Pay attention to what you film.” As he leaves, the boy films him. He's going back to his life in France as an exiled filmmaker. The projectionist is starting a fund to open a cinema in Chad's capital city, Ndjaména, a “crazy idea.”

The present situation of African cinema is disastrous.

Jean-Marie Teno, a filmmaker from Cameroon, wrote recently: “If there is anything that can be called ‘African Cinema,' it is certainly in a precarious state today. Over the last few years the production of African films (films made in Africa by Africans), already extremely limited, has declined noticeably. Each year fewer African films are presented at major world festivals and the one or two films that do make the selection are generally dismissed by the critics.”

Another commentator, Mbye Cham, wrote recently: “Hopes and projections of political and economic renewal and transformation under the aegis of World Bank-mandated adjustment programs, and other liberalization measures, and the positive fall-out that these were expected to have, especially on the cultural sector, actually turned out to be disastrous. African filmmakers began to experience the painful effects of budget cuts and the gradual loss of both external and internal funding for production. At the same time, the slow but orchestrated disappearance of movie houses, one of the sad occurrences of the 90s, began as privatization made purchase possible by local entrepreneurs who, in time, converted these into warehouses for sugar, rice, cement, and other commodities.”

The situation is terrible for African filmmakers because the situation in Africa is terrible. Dire poverty, political repression, epidemic, war.

When film production statisticians consider the “world,” they generally leave Africa out of the picture. The population of Africa and the Middle East *combined* accounted for 1.2 percent of “total world cinema spending” in 1998. How can hundreds of millions of people be virtually excluded from contact with the most powerful modern art form? Behind these figures lies the legacy of colonialism and present-day oppression and misery at the hands of the great powers and the national ruling elites. Does cinema have a future in Africa? One might as well ask if culture in Africa has a future, or if Africa has a future.

Bye Bye Africa, however, although it considers the question, is not a documentary about the state of African cinema. It's a drama about a man's response to an apparently impossible situation.

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun was born in Chad in 1961. He studied film at the Conservatoire Libre du Cinéma Français in Paris, and also journalism in Bordeaux, where he has lived since 1982. *Bye Bye Africa* is his first feature and also the first film to be produced in its entirety in Chad.

Haroun writes: “In the film, which is a reflection on my work as a

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Chadian filmmaker, there are interrogations—often without any answers and reflections upon my working conditions. So, there is a lot of myself in the film, a film that I shot in a hurry.

"It is the cinema that I aspire to do, a cinema of sincerity, a cinema that looks like us. A cinema of craftsmen, good craftsmen who are fond of their work." One is reminded at times of some of the Iranian films, including Makhmalbaf's *Salaam Cinema*.

The film says: look, here's the situation of this man, an intellectual, a filmmaker who comes from a country where life is very difficult. He wants to do what's best, but his choices are limited and he himself is imperfect, a little lazy and somewhat irresponsible. He wants to stay in Chad and he wants to return to France. He recognizes ignorance and backwardness when he sees it, doesn't condescend, realizes that his intellectual work has some value. But perhaps his return would be a futile gesture. People have known so much suffering. They're seriously damaged, both physically and psychologically.

The film, in its structure and look, has a certain hardness, an abruptness. It doesn't linger over every misery. There are too many, how could it? It would be wrong to mistake sentimentality for compassion. Of course the film doesn't idealize that coldness either. Or it points to the fact that there are two kinds of "coldness": on the one hand, the objectivity of the artist (or revolutionist), looking for new points of departure, elements in the situation which will help ignite criticism and opposition; and, on the other, simple indifference and selfishness. Both perhaps co-exist in the filmmaker.

In general, is it possible to struggle without illusions, with one's eyes open? The film, it seems to me, poses this modern way of proceeding, artistically and otherwise, as a real possibility. The film itself perhaps, in its directness and self-criticism, in its manner of looking at things without flinching, in its "sincerity," is an example of this way of struggling.

I spoke to Haroun in Toronto.

David Walsh: Could you describe the present dilemma of African cinema?

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun: The present dilemma is that a lot of African countries don't have the money to produce movies, so in the French-speaking countries every film is produced with money coming from France. And when somebody gives you money, you know, he or she is expecting something in return. He or she has an idea, perhaps a fantasy of Africa. African filmmakers want or need their own images of Africa.

The best way is to make our movies with our own means, and that's why with this movie, *Bye Bye Africa*, I tried to shoot it in video, and the budget is only about one hundred thousand American dollars. And also I got the money from Chad. If we can find small budgets, maybe we can make good movies, if we have something to say. It's not the same as having $10 million, you can't do the same things.

When I go back to my country, people consider me to be a spokesman, so I have to explain what the problem is, what the situation is. I have to make cinema about these problems, I can't make a comedy about this or that. You want first to gain respect. This is the situation of the African cinema now.

DW: Is this the situation in Chad in particular, or throughout the continent?

MSH: It's the same situation in Mali, there is no cinema now. It has been privatized. Previously the cinemas were public, and then the government said, 'We don't have the money,' so they privatized them and there is nobody to buy these cinemas. Every cinema is closed. The same situation in Angola, the two Congos, also in Cameroon, cinemas are turning into casinos. It's the same situation in Central Africa. It's the same situation in Kenya. So *Bye Bye Africa* is a kind of manifesto, you know. I thought that first I had to talk about this problem. Then I can go out and make another movie. It's the same situation throughout most of Africa, it's a tragedy.

DW: Is this film going to be seen in Chad?

MSH: Yes, we showed it in Chad, in February, but there is only one cinema. I didn't show it in the movie because it's a French cinema, in the French cultural center, and it's in a private area, it's like the Vatican in Rome, it's Chad, but it's not Chad.

DW: Like they used to have in Shanghai, the foreign enclaves.

MSH: Yes, yes. It's the same thing. The price of a ticket was very high for people of my neighborhood, so at the first screening all the guys from my neighborhood came and they were all dressed up, but they were just waiting at the door. The screening started, and I said, 'But what are you doing?' They said, 'We want to see the movie, but we don't have money.' I had to pay for them to see my movie, because I had a contract with the manager of the cinema, it was not possible to give them free tickets. So that's the situation.

Should we just shut up because we don't have money? I don't think so. We have stories to tell, we have to build our memory, we have to put all our problems on the table and we have to find solutions. Even if there is no money, making movies is very important. Because people need to see their own images and on TV in Africa you always have about 80 percent of the images from Hollywood or Europe, so it's a kind of domination, a kind of colonization through images. We need to make movies against these dominant movies.

DW: In the US oftentimes filmmakers have a lot of money, but they have nothing to say. This is another problem.

MSH: Yes, that's another problem. But when you are a filmmaker, you see that, that people have a lot of money in one part of the world and they don't have anything to say, and we have things to tell and we don't have money. Maybe we can work something out. (Laughs.) I don't want to be a kind of beggar. We have to do our job in a kind of dignity, that's very important. It's important to reflect your own reality, we have to show our own images to our own population to give dignity, that's very important. That's what I'm trying to do.

DW: You have the young boy who very much wants to make films, and the film obviously suggests that despite the difficulties, or perhaps because of them, art and film are very necessary. Aside from the question of one's own images, there must be other reasons why art is objectively important for every population, are there not?

MSH: We need art, because we need a kind of mirror to see ourselves, to see what's going on, to see what's wrong, what's right. I think art is a mirror that reflects our own reality. This is a mediatized world and if you are invisible, you are dead. If we have war in Africa, hunger, if we are poor and nobody sees us, we are dead, we don't have any existence. It's very important. Art is not only a mirror that reflects. You have to try to say, 'Oh, you are not well, there's a problem there, how can I heal myself?', something like that. It's always a kind of resistance, you know, to say something, it's memory. Every human being needs a memory. If we build up our memory we can make a choice, try to know where we can go, where we want to go. That's the role of art.

DW: Serious art always suggests that life could be different, that there are different possibilities. Life is very difficult. Film, even a film about very difficult conditions has a beauty, has a lyricism that, if you like, unconsciously suggests reality could be and should be different.

MSH: Yes, yes. That's the message. In the movie I say that I am trying to shoot reality, life, but my work is to make this different reality, to put in some poetic moments and struggle, victory too, that's important. That's the message—there's a problem, reality, life is very hard, but you have to struggle. That's my work. Everybody has to deal with life. I have to shoot life, but I always have a message to give to my people. This film is very curious, because everywhere when we've had screenings people are very touched, because I think maybe somewhere people recognize something. It's about memory and memory belongs to everybody.

We all create something. Everybody is an artist. We have children, we build houses, we live here and maybe one hundred years later people will

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discover that such and such a guy made this thing at this place and time. That's what we're trying to do.

DW: You mention Godard and Freud. Is that an accident?

MSH: No, it's not an accident. Godard, because I like his filmmaking very much, he's a great one in the history of cinema. And we didn't respect the rules of editing in the film either, that's why I spoke about Godard in the movie. Also the quote is very strong: “Cinema makes memory.”

Freud, because this story is an exploration of myself also. I don't have the best character, my character in the film, he's a kind of irresponsible guy, a bit of a bastard. So Freud is the way to see yourself and to try to know who you are. We are all trying to reflect on that, to know who we are. Am I a man from France, because I have lived there for twenty years and married a woman there? Who am I? We are all in a kind of desert. He worked a lot on these issues.

DW: Do some of the African filmmakers who live in France feel guilty about that?

MSH: I feel guilty.

DW: The situation is not your fault.

MSH: It's not my fault, but, you know ... It's not my fault, that's right, that's why I feel guilty, because it's not my fault and I am a kind of victim, but I don't want to say that I am a victim. We are victims of historical facts, but I feel guilty because I speak sometimes as a spokesman for Africa, but I am so far from Africa, so far from the reality. I would like to go back to Africa and speak about Africans, but that's not possible and that's why I'm guilty. I'm guilty of being a spokesman very far from his own reality. That's a big problem. That's why I'm going to return to Chad.

The struggle is to do something there. American films are made by Americans. I'm going back. The problem of emigration is another problem, I can understand it. But as an artist, I have this identity. I've met some artists in exile who don't have a problem with this. I prefer to be at home, and struggle, even if it's very dangerous, even if I die, it's very important that people die for an idea, for something. Twenty years is a very long time. I feel that it's a kind of life of emptiness. We become just consumers. So that's not my future. So I have to go back. I think my work will be stronger. Exile is also a good thing for certain people.

DW: Could you describe the conditions for ordinary people in Chad?

MSH: The situation is very hard, because you have a lot of problems. Unemployment, poverty. There's been a crisis, war. That's the life. People are trying to deal with these conditions in all sorts of ways. You have a lot of Mafia types. People don't want to pay taxes because they don't have money. It's very hard.

DW: Is it possible to imagine a rebirth of African cinema without profound economic and social change?

MSH: I don't think it's possible. But we are beginning to do things too. We have our own cinemas. People are very excited to see this movie. You have a lot of young people who are dreaming. Dreaming of another life. So I think it's a commercially viable way of doing films. But it's impossible to do it if the political and social situation is bad. That's why I think if I go back home, even if I die, it's important to struggle, because I think that my struggle is also a political struggle.

Being a filmmaker you're not living in a dream world, you're in reality, and the reality of Chad is bad politically, socially. You cannot say, ‘No, I am an artist, this is not my problem.' I have a duty to struggle in a political way, and that is dangerous, but the solution is to say to people, if I die, that it's for history, it's for something, you have to follow me. I'm dead, it's for history, but we have to continue. Our happiness is out there, to get it we have to struggle.

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