

Seed 1. The Trouble With Cinema Circulation

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To sum up: our role on the planet is entirely political. Our role, with or without technology, is to make social structures, relationships between people, and between groups. This will enable us to survive as a species on our cosmic vessel. Immortality.

We shouldn't just be making movies we should be changing reality.

- Jean-Pierre Bekolo¹

A story can be a spear, Le Guin teaches us, or it can be a receptacle, if we use the point of a story to wound, or to draw the blood of attention, that is one way, but we can use a story to gather, to assemble to rouse and to soothe.

- Jemma Dessai²

When we think of the film distribution ecosystem, the geometric form that comes to mind is that of a circle. A circle can be a very soothing form. Without pointy edges, it's

¹ Jean-Pierre Bekolo. "Welcome to Applied Fiction." Accessed April 9, 2024. <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2016/welcome-to-applied-fiction/>

² Jemma Dessai. "Keynote at Getting Real 2024". Accessed April 25, 2024.

<https://watch.documentary.org/fr/gettingreal/play/65fa28a291cdbc005dfeba46/65fb7c5ce323bc0738ea98c7>

an infinite entity, offering security and immortality. If you are an outsider to the circle, however, there are very few ways you can get inside this form without breaking the system. From the perspective of the outsider, it's a highly exclusive entity.

In their artistic work, "Kgolokwe — Separated Intersections"³ the Gaborone-based art collective Botswana Pavillion questions what the future of art in a decentralized world may look like. "Kgolokwe" - the traffic roundabout is called in as a metaphor that organizes our life spatially and socially. The traffic roundabout is a circular shape that brings us together at intersections for a short time, before separating us again into different directions, creating a constant flow. Rather than a circle, a Kgolokwe with separated intersections, can be an inspiring stipulation to think of a periphery-to-periphery model, "upsetting the focus of power and instead creating infinite constellations" outside of the circle.

Traditional cinema circulation until today upholds a highly colonial infrastructure separating the center from the periphery - structural, institutional, and geographical. As systems of distribution hold the power of "authoring" the films they traffic, whoever owns the system, controls the trespass. Thinking through new geometries for cinema circulation feels paramount at a moment when cinema once again finds itself at a crossroads. Streaming platforms have greatly challenged the collectivity of cinematic experiences imposing a new 'universal' aesthetics and atomizing the audience. Algorithms and Artificial Intelligence based on abstract data manipulate our viewing culture, rapidly entering the film industry in ways we are still to discover. How did we get here and what is the "trouble" with the film distribution system we are currently operating in? And can we find new simple geometries for an organization based on existing experiences that allow filmmakers to be in immediate exchange with their audiences, to enter the circulation system without being rejected by its exclusivity?

³ The Botswana Pavilion." YouTube video, posted by TheBotswanaPavilion, June 30, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpzeKpzBQ2l&ab_channel=TheBotswanaPavilion.

Staying with the Trouble

Sonja Childress in her 2020 essay “The Reckoning”⁴ diagnoses the plague of the contemporary international film distribution system by summing up three points of contention: Authorship, Accountability, and Ownership.

The current system, she distills, centers the perspectives and perceptions of white/predominantly male filmmakers and audiences. The imaginaries produced and circulated reflect a single narrative that insufficiently reflects the pluriversal experiences of our diverse societies. Realities of womxn, communities of color, migrant identities, and Global South voices are still to a large degree underrepresented. For Childress “self-representation is an act of rebellion against fictional portrayals that diminish people of color to one-dimensional characters, peripheral to their own histories. ... Self-representation is about agency, power, healing, and a cultural corrective.”⁵

This lack of narrative sovereignty, she continues, is born out of an economic structure, which places gatekeepers (curators, festival programmers, distributors, funding bodies, and sales agents) between the filmmakers and their audiences. As intermediaries these gatekeepers too do not represent the spectrum of our societies (Black Filmmakers Collective / Programmers of Colour Collective statement). The setup of this infrastructure by instigating intermediaries that control the trespass favoring some narratives and stories over others, creating a lack of transparency and accountability within the funding, curation, and distribution system that we are currently operating in.⁶

Like many of the infrastructures that shape our life and society, the foundations of this system find their pillars in the colonial project. Each generation since the 1960s has been experimenting with the question of how to challenge, reclaim, and alter the injustice of the film circulation system.

Mauritanian Filmmaker Med Hondo back in 1979 wrote his famous manifesto “What is Cinema For Us?”⁷. In the text, he offered a poignant critique of the dominant Hollywood Cinema that flooded the screens of the newly independent African countries at the time: “This cinema has gradually imposed itself on a set of dominated peoples. With no means of protecting their own cultures, these peoples have been systematically

⁴ Childress, Sonja. “The Reckoning.” Medium, 2020. <https://medium.com/@sonya.childress/a-reckoning-526bb97ca60b>.

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Hondo, Med. “What is Cinema for Us.” *Jump Cut*, no. 31, 1979. Accessed April 20, 2024. <https://www.jumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC31folder/WhatisCinemaForus.html>.

invaded by diverse, cleverly articulated, cinematographic products. The ideologies of these products never "represent" their personality, their collective or private way of life, their cultural codes, and never reflect even minimally on their specific "art," way of thinking, or communicating — in a word, their own history and civilization. ... We must change the humiliating relationship between the dominating and the dominated, between the master and the slaves."⁸

Acknowledging the necessity to reclaim authorship, a new wave of fiction and nonfiction filmmakers from former European colonies in the 1960s and 70s wielded the camera as a sword to challenge authoritative regimes and colonial frameworks. For the radical Third Cinema Movement from Latin America, films were by no means commodities but important ideological tools of political education, to expose power, and show the dispossessed "just whose boot was on their necks and explore the best ways to knock it off".⁹ Cinema was in direct conversation with the movements for justice and independence. Grounded in the theory of change frameworks articulated by political philosophers like Franz Fanon – cinema, they found, could serve as more than a mouthpiece for imperialism; it could become a liberatory art form.

"... we must discuss, we must invent..."
- Frantz Fanon¹⁰

The ideas of the Third Cinema Movement spread like a virus across the newly independent countries, infecting the filmmakers on the African continent with similar ambitions. In a spirit of transnational solidarity and the need to organize and build coalitions as anti-imperial bulwarks, Third World filmmakers from across Africa and Latin America met in Algiers in 1973 in a historic congress to produce a series of resolutions defining the concept of Third World Cinema. The importance of ownership over distribution infrastructures was at the core of the endeavor. The necessity to divert from the Hollywood industry would mean building a new, home-grown dissemination system. This resulted in the proposition of creating a Third World Cinema Office. Genova argues that the founding figures of the FESPACI (African Federation of Cinephiles) – Paulin Vieyra, Med Hondo, Tahar Cheriaa, and Ousmane Sembène – realized that without the command of the material structures of cinema "any progress in the representational realm would be fleeting and reversible"¹¹.

⁸ Hondo, Med. "What is Cinema for Us." *Jump Cut*, no. 31, 1979. Accessed April 20, 2024. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC31folder/WhatisCinemaForus.html>.

⁹ Solanas, Fernando, and Octavio Getino. "Toward a Third Cinema." *Cinéaste* 4, no. 3 (Winter 1970-71): 1-10.

¹⁰ Quoted in "Towards a Third Cinema by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, 1969.

¹¹ Martin, Michael T., Gaston J. M. Kaboré, Allison J. Brown, Cole Nelson, and Joseph E. Roskos. *African Cinema: Manifesto and Practice for Cultural Decolonization: Volume 1: Colonial Antecedents, Constituents, Theory, and Articulations*. Studies in the Cinema of the Black Diaspora. Indiana University Press, 2023.

To control the narrative meant to control the screens. To control the screens meant to reinvent the spatial structures for screenings anew. While cinema houses offered high-profile projection for polished Hollywood films, an 'imperfect' circulation practices that would be closer to the people was much more grounded in the situated reality.

As a consequence, local forms of subversion to the dominant system started to sprout – cineclub cultures blossomed for instance in Tunisia. The first Cine Club 'Louis Lumière' opened in Sfax to later expand into the Tunisian Federation of Cine Clubs (FTCC), a network of self-organised cinephile spaces, which have undoubtedly shaped the uniqueness of Tunisian film culture of the past decades. In tandem with the FTCA, the Tunisian Federation of Amateur Filmmakers, the endeavors and challenges taken on between the 1960s and 1980s actively sought to forge new, strategic, collectives that were bound by multidimensional visions of decolonization – of reclaiming economic, political, and cultural power over the image.¹² Similarly in Cameroon, India, and other parts of the South, film society movements and video clubs cultivated "sacred places" (Jean-Marie Teno), transforming the public sphere for cinephilia. Community-led forms of performativity and sublime dissemination have marked the creative way of activating the community around the love for film.



Still from Chief! by Jean-Marie Teno

¹² Tunisian Federation of Amateur Filmmakers (FTCA). "60 Years of Dynamism and Creativity: 1st Part." Accessed April 20, 2024. <https://screenarabia.com/tunisian-federation-of-amateur-filmmakers-ftca-60-years-of-dynamism-and-creativity-1st-part/>.

A real revolution in the decentralization of the cinema screen was introduced with video. In Nigeria, Ghana, India, and elsewhere in the 1990s this new cinematic form unleashed new possibilities for home-grown industries. Screened on television and almost never at the cinema, it was a film industry that used no film. Video completely upset established boundaries and, like all transgressive objects, calls the nature of those boundaries into question. Cheaper to produce, copy, and disseminate, it not only enhanced local production but also enabled local audiences to experience indigenous stories. Nigerian Nollywood and Indian Bollywood masterfully crafted the tools of appropriating new and clandestine dissemination practices to build local commercial industries that are today highly commercialized and among the largest in the world. Copying the films and disseminating them in clandestine structures later taken over by DVD black markets proved a highly effective strategy (see more in the chapter on 'pirate networks'). Adhering to a static definition will always keep cinema in a reactionary space.

From Moving Images to Moving Thinking

Going back to Childress, for her the solution to the question of distribution lies in the proposal for new protocols, ethics, and accountability across the industry to ensure filmmakers and film institutions do not harm the communities and artists. While this is no doubt eminently necessary, with United Screens and our partners, we are aiming to go a step further. Rather than challenging or reforming the current system, we believe that it is time for alternative systems to emerge that can co-exist and plurify the existing infrastructure.

When engaging with contemporary screening and distribution practices that forge new ways of organization, the spirit of the Third Cinema Movement experiences a timely revival. Not only for their transnational connectivity but also because of their radical way of embracing the imperfection of screening practices, focusing on reclaiming ownership of the means of circulation closer to the people and with performative activation and discussion culture around film screenings.

Looking at initiatives and models that embrace this spirit today, the culture of Kibandas in Uganda and Tanzania is a very inspiring model for this form of appropriation of cinema and screening culture from a community perspective. Kibandas are physical spaces where Video Jockeys as physical narrators use sharp commentary to mediate between the screen and its audiences.

One of our long-term collaborators Dijay Black in Tanzania has a library of 2000 films which he has deejayed for his community in his local language. His practice draws from the local oral storytelling culture, live translating cinemas from other parts of the world creating a transgressive space for engagement by community members taking the two-dimensional into the space of the screening room, what Jean-Pierre Bekolo calls, "applied fiction". This form of subversion fills cinema rooms, creating a collective spectacle around the film, which in turn offers high accessibility through live translation practices. The VJ brings a human component back into the screening practices in stark opposition to the atomization that digitality and streaming culture have overtaken our cinema experiences.



A still from *Apostles of Cinema*.

Collectivity and the necessity to organize translocally is embodied by another initiative that we have taken great inspiration from “NAAS - the Network of Arab Alternative Screens”¹³ also standing for “Networks as Technologies of Solidarity”. Made up of 23 cinema community initiatives and spaces across the Arab-speaking world, the necessity to collectivize founded a new infrastructure for interaction. The independent spaces started by pooling their resources to collectively license films for collective programming, building a network for distributing Arab films, and subtitling. To overcome the isolation that each screen faced, they banded together to create NAAS: a structure to share knowledge and expertise as well as tools for development and fundraising. The network of solidarity later allowed for regranting systems (Cinapses) between the members but also a collective voice in favor of fair labor laws in times of pandemic. NAAS too, highlights the necessity for “space” to exist. Each community space is managed locally, and the overarching body of NAAS is a tool for organization.

¹³ Naas Network. Accessed April 9, 2024. <https://naasnetwork.org/>.



Circling back to the idea of the Kgolokwes - the roundabouts with separated intersections - NAAS offers us an intriguing model to think with by connecting independent and self-organized screening spaces. The 23 spaces represent nodes in a network that act autonomously. Yet, the structure of NAAS is a centralized body that acts autonomously in the interest of the members. If we were to circumvent the gatekeeping idea and experiment with a fully decentralised network between screening spaces across the Global South which can interact “periphery-to-periphery” how can this structure be implemented? And how could this structure still facilitate a direct connection between the filmmaker and the audiences, i.e. keep the ownership over the film and the dissemination networks - one of Childress's key points - in the hands of the filmmakers?

Cinema has faced many crucial crossroads in the past decades and every generation has been plagued with the question of how to make the system more just and equitable. We are inspired to learn from their ideas and pair them with new forms of technology - shaped by the heterogeneous experience of the cinephilic communities that are part of the network. Rather than providing cookie-cutter solutions to circulation, let's expand and plurify our understanding of its possibilities.

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In the next Seed, we will welcome the offer of our friends and co-conspirators Valentina Medina and Jonathan Hurtado: an account of their lived experience as organizers of alternative cinema in Colombia.

The following maps a list of cinephile initiatives and spaces that have found alternative forms of moving the image:

Tentative Collective, Pakistan Ektara Collective, India NAAS - Network of Arab Alternative Screens Wekalet Behna, Egypt Sentiers, Tunisia Film Lab Palestine, Palestine No Evil Eye Cinema, USA Hakka Distribution / Cinefils, Tunisia Think Tangier, Morocco Estación Terrena, Bogota Ajabu Ajabu Collective, Tansania East African Screen Collective Geração 80, Angola Forum Lenteng, Indonesia KWAGO, Philippines Cinerif, Tunisia Sudan Film Factory, Sudan2 Cimateque, Egypt Medrar, Egypt Asian Film Archive, Singapore Palestine Film Institute Distribution Advocates, USA Pasir Putih, Indonesia Fanny Huc Fehras Publishing Practices Steps, South Africa Blaxtarlines, Ghana Yetu, Senegal Cinelogue, Germany Salym Fayyad, Colombia Tercer Cine, Colombia Botswana Pavillion, Botswana Anthropology Bel Araby, Egypt Nour Elsafoury Sinema Transtopia, Germany SAVVY Contemporary, Germany Aflam, France Pathshala, Bangladesh Mawred, Lebanon Thai Collective.

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- [13] Naas Network. Accessed April 9, 2024. <https://naasnetwork.org/>.