

Kurzinterview mit dem äthiopischen Regisseur Haile Gerima vor dem deutschen Kinostart seines Films *Teza/Morgentau* (Kino 46 Bremen, 5. Mai 2011)

Sebastian Weier: In an interview with John L. Jackson Jr.¹ you mentioned “cinema’s devastating capacity to colonize” and spoke of “counter –utilizing” this capacity “in a way that projects one’s own human story – without apologies.” You also pointed out, that it is “cultural rather than political racism that is at the center of the black communities twenty-first century struggle”. Could this be summarized as an appeal to decolonize cinema, and if so, could you briefly sketch out your vision of this project?

Haile Gerima: Well, you know ... you are doing academics so ... decolonizing ... you have to get the subtext from what I’m saying. I wouldn’t straight go for ‘decolonizing’. Colonialism for me is a mindset and a virus. And cinema is a small part in a very ... the instrument itself is very destabilizing in the struggle to ... for example a camera’s capacity to struggle depends on many elements, for example to really liberate cinema’s capacity to not only resist but cleanse the virus of colonialism, the mindset of colonialism, you have to have a national policy on cinema, you have to have a state that comes about in a very holistic way, that is interested in this issue through poetry, play, drama and other mediums of expression to reclaim one’s identity. Cinema is just one single end, an instrument that depends on so many variables, including finance, technology, science, etc. It would be very, I think, shallow to look at it only from a film-point of view because I’m a filmmaker. I could have helped filmmakers in Africa if there had been a holistic cultural evolution or revolution where decolonization is not only the task of one single medium. Basically for me you can make the movie, but if you don’t control the theatres, the distribution and so on, the movie passively sits in a can on a shelf, and so it’s a very precarious position to advocate ... to allocate a single medium a task of such a cumbersome problem. And so that’s one. And the other one, whether it’s in anything, it could be in claiming one’s name, it could be in claiming one’s public space, it could be in claiming in literature, to me, if Africans do not use every means, every instrument of expression to reclaim their history, their identity, then colonialism in its all different appearance will continue to triumph over our daily lives and we will be people who never lived to be us, but preprogrammed, fabricated and colonized existences. And this is the dilemma that I personally face. It takes you years to make a film and then, suddenly, the issue of distribution becomes critical. Trying to get an audience, the kind of struggle you want to wage ... Everybody seems to tell people: ‘Well, if you make it the commercial way’, meaning if you do not experiment with your language, your own sense of aesthetics, your own storytelling – but what’s the use of truth without it being shot out of your identity? So for me, truth is

absolutely elusive, I mean not absolutely, but truth is elusive by nature. But the idea of heading towards the truth as you search for your identity contributes to a great deal of cultural expression or cultural nuances that can exorcise the daemon of colonialism and make you apprehend your own destiny, your own history, etc. But it has to be looked at in a holistic way, integrated with all the other activities. The struggle to recuperate our identity has become more complicated. The 21st century is a very complicated century. You can have all the ideas you want, but if you don't have the funds, the facilities, the technology, the means of exhibition, then it's nothing.

Sebastian Weier: You mentioned the infrastructural problems of funding, or financing in general. In the interview I quoted from before, you also described as one of the aspects of film that turns it into a possible decolonial weapon the fact, that "it gives [you] the possibility to control [your] own story". Now this possibility is, of course, being undermined by this funding problem and this can be particularly well observed in the case of African Cinema. Francophone African Cinema is a notorious example, with the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*, the *Fonds Sud Cinema* and the *Fonds Images Afrique* having a history of using their financial power in order to gain creative control over the films they financed. You cooperated, among others, with the latter two of these agencies in the production of your film *TEZA*. How did your experience this cooperation?

Haile Gerima: Well, you know, in fact it took me almost fourteen years to find the money to make *TEZA* because personally I do not accept colonial dictates. No one writes my script, I write my script. No one edits my films, I edit my films. So all the mistakes and the efforts of my films are my own endeavor with all the collaborative people who helped me to do the film. The other one is, I do very low budget and that enables me to continue to control my film. I don't pay myself, I teach to live. And so it's a different reality. I can't generalize my own sense of freedom, my capacity to dictate the making of my film to be a common concern of African filmmakers. However, the realist position of this Africanism goes back to the historical circumstances that we have elites in Africa that are fabricated by colonialism. They think, they walk, they dress within the predesigned colonial plan. And their cultural appetite is conditioned. I do not see the elite that are in power, after the war of independence and the early stages of the continental revolution – even with South Africa in the picture – I do not see Africans looking to liberate themselves. I don't think any of our films threaten the west or Europe, and Europe and America could not be threatened. They continue to monopolize our continent and the African filmmaker is betrayed by history and the colonized, neo-colonized - whatever you call it! - elites. Africans go all over the world nomadically begging for money to make a film. Now for most Africans, I'm sure, the most difficult part is to go beg Europeans to do your film against colonialism. And how can one succeed!?! And so maybe when we write the script we compromise to make it palatable to Europeans to finance us. And so the judges of our cultural

expression, the 'Green-Lighters', those who say 'This film should be made', their arbitration completely distorts Africa, it distorts the expressions ... and to me this is why there are no films nowadays being made about colonialism at all. I don't know any film! It's all just now themes such as 'persecution' and 'the problem is us'. It's devoid of historical perspective. And so we are in a dilemma. But it's not because of Europe or America, it's because of the local elite! It is bankrupt culturally, it doesn't create the conditions to create cultural vibration, cultural dynamism ... We are victims of our own historical circumstances. Our elite is a deformed elite. Its cultural taste is alien and submissive and neocolonial. It doesn't hunger for its grandmother's stories! Or its grandmother's or grandfather's stories will be connected to the French all the way to Dien Bien Phu maybe. Its grandmother, its 'grand-story' could be connected implicitly with the German colonialism in Namibia or Tanzania. Its grandfather in evoking his past will bring it a direct confrontation with the Italian, with the British. And therefore the crops of these new generations of filmmakers do not really deal with the issue of the very foundation of colonialism. Even as we target the new colonial elite in Africa we have to understand how to dismantle its mental incarceration through cultural exorcism or cultural discourse. And so this is a privilege, it's not a possibility throughout the continent. For me, we are reenacting what we were preprogrammed to do by Europeans. Whenever we strike to be free, they have always been twenty, thirty years ahead of us planning and creating and by default giving us new elites. At one point we were blind nationalists in spite of Frantz Fanon's theory about the pitfalls of Black Nationalism. We were for black leaders; they gave us black leaders thinking in the mindset of the colonial powers. So you have complete disaster! And in this context what I personally have decided is to make films I believe in, no matter how long it takes me. And I don't consider myself a threat because still locally or internationally I do not have the distribution power to perpetuate my idea of cinema. So I just continue to inch along, doing my imperfect expressions.

ⁱ John L. Jackson Jr.: 'Decolonizing the filmic mind: an interview with Haile Gerima', in : *Callaloo*, Vol.33, Nr.1, Winter 2010, pp. 25 – 36.