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Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Césars, Creation, Independence, and Radicality

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/17v5q8sn>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 43(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/F743156320

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Césars, Creation, Independence, and Radicality¹

Amandine Gay

Translated by Samuel Lamontagne

For the past few days, debates have been raging about the Césars: Should we or should we not be pleased when an institution whose systemic racism and sexism are no longer to be demonstrated (need I remind you that Polanski came close to being master of ceremonies?) chooses to nominate and reward films directed by racialized women?²

And I realize that this question erases many of the essential and complex debates/issues that constitute it:

1) Which narratives are acceptable (meaning who can receive institutional funding and for what types of narratives)?

As I have been explaining for many years now, in France, no matter the quality and probity of the final work, for racialized people there's no escape from the banlieue [lower-class peripheries], migration, bi/polygamy, forced marriage, prison, and FGM.³ What keeps giving Euzhan Palcy's film *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983) an exceptional status is its historical timeline character, which goes beyond the banlieue/immigration dichotomy, even if it is still about "Black issues."⁴ It is then true that we will only be able to speak of revolution and structural transformation when:

- a) We will have access to real money. Personally, I don't want "diversity" support; I don't make "diversity films"; I make films, and I want real money. But beyond the material conditions of production, there is another issue at stake: our access to universality.
- b) WHEN WILL WE BE ABLE TO RECEIVE FUNDING FOR FILMS THAT ARE NEITHER COMEDIES NOR THE UMPTEENTH EXPLORATION OF OUR OTHERNESS? WHEN WILL WE BE ABLE TO SIMPLY TELL STORIES SIMILAR TO *PARIAH* (2011), *MOONLIGHT* (2016), *MO' BETTER BLUES* (1990) WITHOUT GOING BROKE? Namely, how long will it take for institutions of the countries in which we pay

taxes to give us the means to make dramas, films about life, that just happen to be the lives of racialized people. Indeed, I am sure that these scripts have already reached the CNC and have been there for a long time. But if it is not directed by Claire Denis, a family drama about a Black family will end up in the trash because it is not universal enough.⁵ On the other hand, a film about girls from banlieue, which, if possible, ends in disaster, will at least pass the first selection phase. This tropism of the tolerable representation of racialized people must be addressed and challenged. It is not racialized artists who are the source of it—it is the political power. The institutions and the leeway and compliance with these standards by those who do not have the means to make “guerilla films” must be taken into account when critiquing them.⁶ I have noticed that the attacks directed at racialized people are much more consensual than those directed at the CNC and production companies, yet it is where decisions are made.

2) This brings us to the issue of the critique of racialized people’s works.

Indeed, in the name of community unity, should we not critique films made by people who look like us, or should we remain faithful to our political line and deconstruct everything? Once again, in order to not point at anyone, I will take my case as an example to remind that nothing is simple when trying to reconcile political ideals and actions. It is also as a woman filmmaker with a certain media exposure that I speak. When I was only an unknown activist, my positioning was different, because it did not have the same consequences. Given my current situation and the state of our presence in the audiovisual world, to publicly critique each other’s work, even constructively, seems to be counterproductive. As I was already explaining in 2015, I am in favor of collective stimulation, not competition. When there are more than ten Black women directors in France and we have an equivalent to the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, I will gladly produce critiques of our films without any compromise.⁷ Belonging, from afar, to this world that does racialized people no favors, especially when they are women, I don’t want to be in a competitive logic because there are too few of us.

Unless it's about actions that should be condemned (e.g., Bill Cosby's sexual assaults) or really over-the-top films (e.g., *The Untouchables*), I don't publicly critique racialized artists, their works, or appearances (especially because when you're not Omar Sy, you still have to eat—when I was an actress, I did stuff I'm really not proud of). It's my present choice, but knowing myself, I will certainly change my mind. Nevertheless, I sometimes have reservations, like when I explained I didn't identify with the nationalist dimension of films like *Too Black to be French?* (2015) or when I pointed out the umpteenth adaptation of a true story about a benevolent/resilient North African man whose role is given to a Black man, as in *The Climb* (2017). Notice that these critiques have less to do with individuals than with the need to reveal the mechanisms of what is considered acceptable by the authorities/institutions that allocate funding.

With regard to racialized artists, my positioning can be summed up as follows: I do not comment on films that I do not endorse, and/or I focus on individuals rather than on their work in order to emphasize, for example, that I support racialized women filmmakers, even if I do not agree with all of them, whether in terms of their aesthetic and/or political choices. I also undertake a differentiated treatment, less critical of independent filmmakers (who are not funded by the CNC) than of others, which brings me to the third point.

3) Independence and non-compliance with the narratives accepted by the State and its institutions have a cost.

During a debate about my film *Speak Up: Make Your Way* (2017) at the Maison d'Haïti in Montreal, I explained that I was exhausted, on the verge of bankruptcy, and that making a “guerilla film” had a moral and financial cost that I was not aware of at the beginning of the project. Today, in all honesty, I cannot say I would have still made this film if someone had told me what state I would be in three years later. The Haitian author and poet Stéphane Martelly, who was leading the debate, then playfully asked me: “Are you telling us that you are paying your debt of independence?” We laughed a lot, not because it's funny “haha!” but because it's so sad and true to see how history repeats itself that it's better to laugh about it.

Indeed, if this text constantly mentions money, it is because money is at the heart of the problem: Today in France, if you are a racialized person and you want to receive money from

institutions to make a film, YOU MUST COMPLY WITH WHAT IS ACCEPTED. Namely: the banlieue and immigration. Make a list of award-winning and/or funded films, the heart of the narrative is systematically one of these two poles. And I reiterate, even if the film is good, the similarity between the backdrops of films depicting racialized people is appalling. I'm not naive and I well know that some racialized people have no qualms about reinforcing stereotypes about Blacks and North Africans, as long as it helps them join an elite inner circle. But I also know that for most of these people, it is less about wanting to "please the Whites" than about being able to make and distribute films, have they had to make concessions and rewrite their films until they become stereotypical/acceptable/fundable.

It's because I refuse to have my stories butchered that I haven't been able to bring any of the projects preceding *Speak Up* to the screen. And it is because I am privileged by association (i.e., being in a relationship with a person who finances my independence, an oxymoron like no other; if I am "supported" by my partner, can one really speak of independence?) that I was able to make a "guerilla film." Let's be clear; independence, especially if it comes with the ambition of theater release, costs tens of thousands of euros: what French racialized person can afford it today? Answer: 4 or 5. Rachid Djaidani took 9 years to make *Hold Back* (2012); Djinn Carrénard and Salomé Blechmans made *Donoma* (2010) with "150 euros" —if we don't count the wages of all the individuals, from technicians to actors and actresses who worked for free on this film, which raises another question, that of the de-professionalization of the cinema made by racialized people, which I consider to be another institutional tool of our marginalization (we are compelled to make films with our own money and by calling on volunteers; consequently, when we ask the CNC for production approval, our films were not made according to the professional standards and cannot be supported, even after production)—*Ils l'ont fait* (2015) by Said Bahij, Khalid Balfoul, Rachid Akiyahu, and Majid Eddaikhane cost 30,000 euros, most of which came out of their pockets:

On the crowdfunding platform Ulule, they raised 5,414 euros to buy and rent equipment. Cameras, lenses, microphones – among other things. In their presentation, they write: 'A

robbery of several hundred thousand euros without weapons or hostages.’ They took the rest out of their pockets, including promotion, by founding a production company. The premiere in Marseille thus cost 1,000 euros.⁸

I haven’t done the exact math for *Speak Up* yet, but we’re at least 20,000 euros out of pocket (“we” is me and my partner who have just set up a production and distribution company in order to distribute the film). And that is before the theatrical release, which will cost us at least 10,000 euros (press agent, posters, DCP copies, DCP mailings, theater rentals for press screenings, etc.). The “debt of independence” without any guarantee of a return on investment. Activism/radicality does not pay; it ruins.

4) That is why I empathize with racialized people in the industry.

Not everyone has the means to make films with their own funds, and “radicality” in the arts is the monopoly of the privileged and/or of daredevils who have the patience and endurance to create in the margins, prioritizing their independence over their subsistence. I’ll tell you right away, I did it once and won’t do it again: I’m 32 years old, I don’t get a penny in advance and everything that comes in is swallowed up by the film. I’m tired of being precarious; I’m tired of sacrificing myself for the community; I’m tired of paying twice because the VAT and ticket sales of French people finance the CNC, and I still have to finance my film with my own money.

If there is one thing we can learn from African-Americans, it is that the existence of a true Black art cinema comes from a history of slow conformation/integration from Hollywood institutions. Many people forget that before inventing “guerilla filmmaking,” Melvin Van Peebles was a naughty U.S. soldier, an Air Force pilot, and that he first worked “for The Man” in Hollywood as the director of the hyper-problematic *Watermelon Man* (1970), precursor of the damned *Agathe Clery* (2008) and of all the other lame role reversal comedies. It is the year following *Watermelon Man* that he directed *Sweet Sweetback’s Badasssss Song* (1971). It is because he had money saved up thanks to his time in the Army and in Hollywood (where he also acquired a network) that he could make a guerilla movie. THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION ARE AT THE HEART OF

THE POSSIBILITIES OF REVOLUTION (IN THE SENSE OF A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY).

It's all well and good to love "El Che" and to dream of being a revolutionary, but we must not forget that before the Cuban revolution, El Che belonged to the White Cuban upper-middle class... Freedom is priceless, but it has a cost that not everyone can afford. Without Danny Glover's career as the "nice Black man of Hollywood" (the greatest patron of African-American artists); without the money of the man who is now known to have been a serial rapist (aka Bill Cosby) there's no *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (to which he contributed a lot of money); without Oprah Winfrey and so many others, there's no filmmakers like Ava Duvernay or Dee Rees, because their current independence is the fruit of the work begun nearly four decades ago by those who have laid the groundwork (often in a consensual and laudatory validation of capitalism) so that one day, Black filmmakers could just tell good stories. And even make political films distributed by Netflix.

5) I often say that it is also an assessment of failure of my militant path that made me want to make a film.

Since the upload of *Speak Up* extras, I have received many messages from teachers, educators, chaplaincy animators, etc., who use my videos in class, in children's homes or chaplaincies. And I feel that I have finally found a way to not only preach to the choir, but also to reach young people, who were my target audience for the film. I continue to believe that radicals and activism are essential to draw the general public towards an ever-growing understanding of the ravages of white supremacist patriarchy, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, etc. But having spoken in middle schools, I also know that these words don't mean much to seventh graders, just as they made no sense to my father. We need to build bridges with the general public, especially since we must not fool ourselves: Not all racialized/minority/precarious people are hyper-critical of the government and/or of the film world. For those in need of "Black excellence" and who believe strongly in the "politics of respectability," seeing Black women recognized by the institution and making political speeches opens a possibility of breaking out of the dichotomy "bad Black woman activist" vs. "good integrated Black woman."

"One does not make the Revolution by being right all alone" is a quote whose source I do not know, but to which I adhere

completely. I have suffered too much from belonging to militant circles in which you are despised as soon as you don't check all the boxes of radicality: "Vegan. Check. Never drinks Coke. Check. Knows the difference between genderqueer and gender fluid. Check. Depending on political affiliations, loves or abhors Beyoncé. Check. Underdog because if you get out of precarity you become an agent of the devil, oops, of capitalism. Check. Etc. Etc. Etc." For the record: I like meat, especially red and rare; I drink Coke when I'm hungover; I'm completely lost in all the queer subcategories; before *Lemonade*, I didn't see any musical interest in Beyoncé, but I'm very interested in the evolution of her public character; finally, by the time I'm 40, I not only want to earn a living, but if possible to live comfortably. So I'm a sellout and not at all "radicool."

More seriously, I do not/no longer wish to reproduce the violence linked to a cultural capital shared by a minority, which in many cases, instead of explaining in a benevolent way what is problematic in such and such remark or behavior, just creates new norms (those of the "real radicools") and judges you because you shave your legs, so you are not deconstructed/radical enough. By choosing creation and independence to complement my career path, which until this point had only been about analysis and deconstruction, I find myself aggravating my case of exclusion from "radicoolitude": I am now a BOSS!

Yes, you can't distribute a film commercially if you don't have a production/distribution company, so who has just set up a production company of which she is the President and her partner is the Managing Director? Yours truly!!! I want my film to be seen, and, secondly, I must obtain a screen certificate, and guess who is issuing it... the CNC! The institution that refused to fund my film. Ironically, if it is successful in theaters, the CNC will receive a good portion of the profits, but I'm not going to boycott the CNC because without a screen certificate, there's no national release. So I'm going to apply for a screen certificate and abide by the rules, because the balance of power is currently not in my favor. IN THIS PARTICULAR CASE, MY CRITIQUE OF THE INSTITUTION COMES AFTER MY DESIRE TO SHOW MY FILM TO AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE. I didn't work for free and lose three years for nothing!

So where do compromises end? Where does a compromising behavior begin? How to articulate an anti-capitalist position

to an artistic career that makes no concessions on the content or the form of the work within a racist system that forces me to create my own economy and thus to embark on entrepreneurship? What legitimacy do I have in attacking those who work with institutions when I well know that I would not have been able to carry out my “guerilla filmmaking” project if my partner had not been a photographer who, in addition of being able to support me morally, could support me technically and economically in the making of my film?

In conclusion, I’ll say this:

Did last night’s Césars ceremony put an end to the multiple systemic issues (racism, classism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, etc.) in French cinema? Of course not.

Have artists who have been struggling at least three times as much as everyone else for years finally reaped the fruits of their labor? A little—even if there’s still a long way to go, and I’ll wait for our full-length non-stereotyped fiction films to be funded to celebrate. Did little Black and North African girls who were watching TV last night feel super proud, and are vocations going to be born? Definitely yes.

Is it possible to summarize the stakes relating to the possibility of being a racialized independent and radical artist in France to the Césars ceremony? I don’t think so.

Notes

¹ Originally published in 2017 on Amandine Gay’s blog *Badassafrofem*, under the title “Césars, Création, Indépendance et Radicalité.”

² The Césars are the equivalent of the Oscars ceremony in France.

³ Female Genital Mutilation

⁴ Amandine Gay, “Les minorités doivent exiger plus que la représentation sur scène,” *Slate*, (2015). <http://www.slate.fr/story/100241/minorites-representation-scene-theatre-colline>

⁵ The CNC is the National Center for Cinema and the Moving Image. It is a French public institution under the authority of the Minister of Culture. It is the main institution responsible for funding cinema in France.

⁶ This point on “guerilla” films is dealt with in Part 3.

⁷ *Cahiers du Cinéma* is the reference Cinema magazine in France.

⁸ Ramses Kefi, “Un noir de cite maire de la ville? ‘Ils l’ont fait,’” *L’Obs* (2015). <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-nos-vies-connectees/20150404.RUE8539/un-noir-de-cite-maire-de-la-ville-ils-l-ont-fait.html>