

## The Township's Soundtrack

### Cinematic Culture and Sonic Urbanity in Kinshasa and Johannesburg, 1930s-1950s

Charlotte Grabli

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### Abstract

This article studies the cinematic cultures of Kinshasa and Johannesburg townships from the 1930s-1950s, with a focus on spectatorship and the reception of films' soundtracks - two aspects often overlooked by film studies. Although Hollywood had a similar impact in the areas of Sophiatown, in Johannesburg, and the "*cité indigène*" ("native quarters") of Leopoldville (current day Kinshasa), the audiences of these cities considered films' music and dialogue in radically different ways. Examining these two modes of sound-based reception, this article unpacks the complex relationship between sound, space and the politics of fiction in the colonial and apartheid era, from the first screenings designed for African audiences to the production of early popular films featuring African actors in the late 1950s, until the destruction of Sophiatown and 1960 Congo's independence.

**Keywords:** Johannesburg; Léopoldville/Kinshasa; cinematic culture; soundtrack; films' reception; acoustic; urbanity; colonial history; censorship; segregation



In the 1940s and 1950s, Johannesburg and Leopoldville's (current day Kinshasa) townships were "cinematic cities"<sup>1</sup> *par excellence*. In the areas of Sophiatown - known as the leading centre of black South African cultural and political life during the 1940s and 1950s -, Hollywood offered both a reprieve from the apartheid's suffocating prohibitions and "entry into a land of celluloid gangsters".<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the youth movement, called "the Bills" after their hero Buffalo Bill, meandered through the "*cité indigène*" ("native quarters") of Leopoldville in neighbourhoods renamed Kansas City, Texas, Mexico, or Far West.<sup>3</sup> Both cities produced a meaning of style that demonstrated how codes were there "to be used and abused".<sup>4</sup> However, if a quick overview of these cinematic cultures demonstrates a common ability to appropriate American bioscopic lexicon, it also reveals how Congolese and South African viewers used film soundtracks in radically different ways. While South African audiences paid close attention to the aural and oral components of the film, imitating dialogues and singing when musicals were screened, Congolese viewers drowned out the film's dialogues with a torrent of loud comments. By historicizing those different modes of sound-based reception, this article interrogates the ways Leopoldville and Johannesburg's city dwellers used sound and a politics of fiction to make the township their own.

In Leopoldville and Johannesburg, two metropolises that emerged as the most influential musical poles on the continent in the 1940s and 1950s, one cannot fully understand township cinematic culture without addressing it in relation to a broader acoustic urbanity that developed with early media worlds and changing musical technologies.<sup>5</sup> In South African cities, it dates back to the advent of sound films - or *talkies* - in the late 1920s. Like in Leopoldville, new interlocking medias forms around cinema and music emerged after World War II in Johannesburg with the further dissemination of radio sets, cameras, records, gramophones and magazine featuring local and African American stars.

Although this chronological difference does not allow us to make a straight comparison between these urban cinematic cultures, South African and Congolese musical and cinematic capitals can fruitfully be explored from the listener's perspective. To do so, I will focus on the uses of the sonic dimensions of films in the *cité* of Léopoldville and the areas of Sophiatown. What did the reception of the sonic apparatus, film soundtracks and dialogue projections reveal about how and why Congolese and South African city dwellers' relationship to fiction changed over time? To what extent should one consider the appropriation or rejection of the

<sup>1</sup> Here "cinematic city" does not only refer to filmic representations of the townships, but also to the influence of cinema on urban culture's visual and sonic realms. For a study of the inter-connection between cityscape and screenscape, see Clarke David B. (ed.) (1997), *The Cinematic City*, London, New York, Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Nixon Rob (1994), *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood*, London, New York, Routledge, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, I shall use "township" as a generic term to refer to urban areas where Africans were authorised to live, although it does not properly apply to freehold locations like Sophiatown and the "native quarters" ("*cité indigène*") of Leopoldville. I shall also use "*cité*", the diminutive usually used to refer to the "*cité indigène*" of Leopoldville. On the Bills and street names, see Sesep N'Sial Bal-Nsien (1990), *Langage, normes et répertoire en milieu urbain africain: l'indoubill*, Quebec, Laval University, pp. 30-31; see also Gondola Charles-Didier (2016), *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Hebdige Dick (2008), *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, New York, Routledge, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Grabli Charlotte (2019), "La ville des auditeurs : radio, rumba congolaise et droit à la ville dans la cité indigène de Léopoldville (1949-1960)", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 233(1), pp. 9-45. A short, translated version of this article is published in (2019) "The Listeners' City: Radio, Congolese Rumba and the Appropriation of Urban Space in the Belgian Congo in the 1950s", in K. Balogun, L. Gilman, M. Graboyes, H. Iddrisu (eds.), *African Everyday: Fun, Leisure, and Expressive Culture on the Continent*, Athens, Ohio University Press, pp. 275-286.

aural and oral dimensions of films as viewer tactics developed in response to censorship and the regulation of film space? In responding to these questions, I shall pay particular attention to how the cinematic event increasingly intertwined with the growing sense of cultural sovereignty in the *cité* of Leopoldville, in the eve of Independence (30<sup>th</sup> of June 1960), and in Sophiatown, before and during its removal. The destruction of this cosmopolitan area, announced in 1953, took place from 1955 to 1962. It represents an event that epitomised the nature of the apartheid and remains one of the darkest chapters in South Africa's modern history.<sup>6</sup>

This research builds on a long tradition of urban and social history that has shown how early musical and cinematic worlds allow to emphasise the creativity of city dwellers and how they imbued space with music, fantasy, aesthetic and pleasure to defy racial geographies in the colonial and apartheid era.<sup>7</sup> Recent studies on commercial cinema and urban audiences in West Africa and Tanzania, while showing how city dwellers became avid movie-going fans early in the twentieth century, well illustrate the immense variations in cinematic cultures between African countries, cities and smaller towns.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Leopoldville, Charles-Didier Gondola has well shown how Western movies "gave way to a culture of liminality, whereby young people occupied and coped with the blind spots and interstices created by colonial neglect".<sup>9</sup> Unlike in South Africa, however, Hollywood had little influence on the dominant urban music known as "Congolese rumba" and inspired by Afro-Cuban music since the 1930s.

To deepen our understanding of how fiction and imagination turned into key political issues in the colonial era, this article also draws on media and film reception studies that shift away from an ocular focus to analyse the sounds of the cities.<sup>10</sup> As I have shown elsewhere about radio in the 1950s *cité* of Leopoldville, studying how listeners hijacked media, initially thought as instruments of colonial propaganda, opens up new potentialities to tease out the social and political links between sound and space in townships.<sup>11</sup> In the field of film studies, sound represents a fascinating research topic as its ability to diffuse the cinematic event throughout the culture is "matched by sound's equal capacity to infuse cinema with elements of the culture's soundscape".<sup>12</sup> I thus draw on the various quality of sound to trace the historical construction of the cinematic event - a live event, made of various performances, happening both on screen and in the theatre - from its origins in Belgian Congo and the Union of South

<sup>6</sup> Coplan David B. (2007), *In Township Tonight!: Three Centuries of South African Black City Music and Theatre*, 2nd éd., Auckland Park, Jacana Media, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> See for example *Ibid* and Ansell Gwen (2004), *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music, and Politics in South Africa*, New York, Continuum.

<sup>8</sup> See Fair Laura (2018), *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Urban Tanzania*, Athens, Ohio University Press; Goerg Odile (2015), *Fantômas sous les tropiques : aller au cinéma en Afrique coloniale*, Paris, Vendémiaire. See also the pioneer study of Haffner Pierre (1978), *Essai sur les fondements du cinéma africain*, Abidjan, Nouvelles Éditions Africaines; and Forest Claude (2021), "Les films à l'affiche dans les salles africaines Secma-Comacico (1960-1961)", *Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 1, online. URL: <https://oap.unige.ch/journals/rhca/article/view/01.forest> (last accessed 04.08.21).

<sup>9</sup> Gondola C-D, *Tropical Cowboys...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3; On the musical context, see also his essay (2014), "Popular Music, Urban Society, and Changing Gender Relations in Kinshasa, Zaire (1950-1990)", in M. Grosz-Ngate and O. Kokole (eds.), *Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*, New York, Routledge, pp. 65-84.

<sup>10</sup> See Larkin Brian (2008), *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Durham, Duke University Press; Chion Michel (1999), *The Voice in Cinema*, New York, Columbia University Press; Dovey Lindiwe and Impey Angela (2010), "African Jim: Sound, Politics, and Pleasure in Early 'Black' South African Cinema", *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 22(1), pp. 57-73; Majumdar Neepa (2001), "The Embodied Voice: Song Sequences and Stardom in Popular Hindi Cinema", in P. Wojcik and A. Knight (eds.), *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, Durham; London, Duke University Press, pp. 161-182.

<sup>11</sup> Grabli C., « La ville des auditeurs... », art. cited.

<sup>12</sup> Altman Rick (1992), *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, London; New York, Psychology Press, p. 14.

Africa to the 1950s. The period, that encompasses the production of the first movies featuring African actors offers us ways of tracking the sounds of films back and forth between the theatre and the streets.

This article draws on two popular movies featuring African actors - *Matamata and Pilipili* and *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* - as well as on newspapers, journalist memoirs, interviews of South African viewers and a few colonial archives on cinema. In the late 1950s, colonial and "évolués" press - the nascent Congolese bourgeoisie - regularly published articles on the *cités*' cinematic culture. Many South African authors, especially former journalists at *Drum* magazine, a major platform for a new generation of urban black writers and photographers created in 1951, commented on spectatorship in their memoirs, offering a depiction of blending film noir imagery and more profound reflections on the sensual, aesthetic, and emotional bonds between Sophiatown and the township-dwellers.

## In Leopoldville: Who Control the Soundtrack?

### *"We Will Banish Dreams": The Live Commentator System in Colonial Congo*

The government's attempt to standardize film exhibition across the Belgian Congo and the ways the live commentator system became integral to this process, are key to understand the reception of films in Leopoldville. Since the mid-1940s, the Congolese cinematic experience was simultaneously shaped by Charlie Chaplin silent shows, Tarzan movies, Westerns that inspired movements like the young Bills, as well as homemade and racist educational films.<sup>13</sup> Both exhibited in urban centers and rural areas, these films were produced since the post-war era by the government and a handful of Catholic missionaries who owned professional equipment (35mm film). In 1950, 27 films conceived "in the Congolese decorum and with a Congolese cast",<sup>14</sup> supplemented the government's movie collection which already consisted of 1 600 films, including 1 000 *talkies* and about 100 films in colour purchased in Europe, Canada, the United States and the Rhodesias (now Zambia and Zimbabwe).<sup>15</sup>

Just as this production, the projection apparatus was intended for audiences seen as vulnerable on a cognitive and cultural level.<sup>16</sup> Missionaries who toured Belgian Congo observed that screenings had to be very short and abundantly commented in local language. "Otherwise, the Blacks confused the scenes they had seen scrolling and kept perfectly incapable to learn the lesson from it".<sup>17</sup> Under the missionaries' influence, the live commentator system became

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of films introduced to African audiences in the Belgian Congo, see Ramirez Francis and Rolot Christian (1985), *Histoire du cinéma colonial au Zaïre, au Rwanda et au Burundi*, Bruxelles, Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale; Van Schuylenbergh Patricia (2021), "Le Congo belge sur pellicule: Ordre et désordres autour d'une décolonisation (ca. 1940- ca. 1960)", *Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 1, <https://oap.unige.ch/journals/rhca/article/view/01.vanschuylenbergh> (last accessed 04.08.21); Gondola C.D., *Tropical Cowboys...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Capelle Emmanuel (1947), *La cité indigène de Léopoldville*, Élisabethville, CEPSE, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., "Le rôle didactique de la cinéscopie », *Congopresse*, 1st June 1951.

<sup>16</sup> On this eminently political discourse first produced by the British Empire at the end of the 1920s, see Burns James (2002), *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe*, Athens, Ohio University Press, pp. 37-59.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Coppois, "Le cinéma pour indigènes au Congo belge", *Congopresse*, 15 November 1947.

essential in the colony, an apparatus already in use in the British empire where it was deemed convenient to shape and control the reception of polyglot audiences.<sup>18</sup>

When they began to organise screenings in rural areas, Belgian projectionists used the microphone integrated to the 15 cinema vans commissioned to the British.<sup>19</sup> After 1945, the Information Service sent movies, programmes and notes to the local person in charge of the projection in different regions - 105 programmes circulated throughout the colony in 1950.<sup>20</sup> It also had at its disposal its own mobile projection group, consisting of a pick-up truck, a generator, a projector, a mobile screen and a sound amplifier suitable for transport. The Congolese driver, electrician and projectionist were accompanied by a European, "indispensable presence", who provided "appropriate comments" in local vernaculars.<sup>21</sup> Of rudimentary character, these comments had probably been translated with either the help of the team's members, or a local, when they did not know the language.

From 1944 onwards, the live commentator system also prevailed in Leopoldville where the commentator could be heard every week on the cité's squares where public screenings took place. He spoke in Lingala, both known as the language of Congolese rumba and Leopoldville's *lingua franca*.

Using a microphone connected to an amplifier, a European replaced the film commentary with explanations in Lingala. As he knew black mentality well, he could also grasp their reactions - unexpected, varying from one day to another and from one native quarter to another - and immediately correct mistakes or draw attention to an important detail.<sup>22</sup>

By the mid-1950s, the commentator had become a pivotal presence in the cinematic event in Leopoldville. Religious film directors such as Abbé Cornil started to entrust African "narrators" with the commentary, imitating the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) in the British empire where local commentators were hired to improve the pronunciation of the script and its impact on the audience.<sup>23</sup> But while the CFU often let them organise the film shows without any direct European supervision, Abbé Cornil provided his Congolese employees with subtitles, instructions on the specific scenes to be commented, and then observed audience reactions during film viewing. Where moments of hesitation had been noticed, the commentary would be adjusted to reach the ideal of a "projection of religious film in an absolute silence"<sup>24</sup>.

Such a regulation implied a control of the temporality of the film's exhibition, regularly interrupted by intermissions during which "the European reminds and summarises what has been shown and what will follow".<sup>25</sup> The film conception echoed this supervision. Most directors

<sup>18</sup> Burns J., *Flickering Shadows...*, *op. cit.*, p. 109; Bouchard Vincent (2010), "Commentary and Orality in African Film Reception", in M. Saul and R. Austen (eds.), *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, Athens, Ohio University Press, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Coppois, "Le cinéma pour indigènes au Congo belge", *Congopresse*, 15 November 1947.

<sup>20</sup> Anon., "Le rôle didactique de la cinéscopie", *Congopresse*, 1st June 1951.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Paul Coppois, "Le cinéma pour indigènes au Congo belge", *Congopresse*, 15 November 1947.

<sup>23</sup> Burns J., *Flickering Shadows...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-112; Rice Tom (2016), "'Are You Proud to Be British?': Mobile Film Shows, Local Voices and the Demise of the British Empire in Africa", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 36(3), pp. 331-351. On Cornil, see also Van Schuylenbergh, "Le Congo belge sur pellicule...", art. cited.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Bouchard V., "Commentary and Orality in African Film Reception...", art. cited, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Coppois, "Le cinéma pour indigènes au Congo belge", *Congopresse*, 15 November 1947.

considered African viewers to be unable to understand techniques of fade-out or the ellipse - they needed a simple narration with "slow sequences" and "suggestive focuses".<sup>26</sup> Another influential filmmaker, Father Alexandre Van den Heuvel, sought to standardise this film production by insisting on the importance of a linear, chronological structure. The scenes had to follow each other, with no flashbacks or flash-forwards – "*We will banish dreams*, he proclaimed. The ideal is a film in which the action takes place in one day".<sup>27</sup>

By denying the viewer's ability to know that they were seeing a movie, that is, absent from the screen and "entirely on the side of the perceiving instance", this paternalistic view denied the subject's knowledge "without which no film would be possible".<sup>28</sup> Besides discarding techniques made for filmic pleasure, the commentary happened to be central in this dismantling of fiction potentialities - to ensure the message gets through, prescribed Van den Heuvel, "one should not be afraid to spoil the interest".<sup>29</sup>

### *Restoring Fiction: Stone Throwing and the Westernian Exhilaration*

In a metropolis such as Leopoldville, where the youth had a fondness for western movies, these colonial films and the regulation of film space seemed at odds with the evolution of cinema-going. In the 1940s, the large crowds that usually attended outdoor screenings encouraged the building of private theatres. As early as 1944, Jean Hourdebise, an entrepreneur attuned to Congolese urban culture, requested permission from the authorities to open the first theatre catering to a Congolese audience.<sup>30</sup> Hourdebise would open several theatres, including the notable Albertum cinema, known as the Palladium after 1968.<sup>31</sup> Most of these theaters (two existed in 1950, six in 1954<sup>32</sup>) were uncomfortable places. In 1958, *Présence congolaise* lamented that projections often took place in "houses under construction, often with neither windows nor doors", or in "open-air bars where one shivers with cold during the dry season".<sup>33</sup>

When the first large movie theatre admitting Congolese people opened in 1950 - an outdoor cinema hosting 1500 spectators - it became an essential space of Congolese urbanity, as the cité's soundscape reveals: "In the evening, the crowd's acclamations rose from the stadium, audience laughter burst out in the theatre, phonographs sung at the back of the bars and trumpets screamed in the clubs."<sup>34</sup> As the future director of "Radio Congo belge pour Africains" (1955-1957) André Scohy suggests sonic worlds fueled with the practices of viewers, musicians, barmen, and listeners were the first vehicle and symbol of urbanity.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Van den Heuvel Alexandre (1958), *International symposium/conference on « Cinema and Africa South of the Sahara »*, organised at the Brussels World Fair. My emphasis. See also Burns, J. (2002), *Flickering Shadows...*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Metz Christian (1977), *Le signifiant imaginaire : psychanalyse et cinéma*, Paris, Union générale d'éditions, pp. 68-69.

<sup>29</sup> Van den Heuvel A., *International symposium...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Hourdebise was known in the *cité* as the founder of Radio Congolia, the first station to feature Congolese urban music and news in four African languages. Archives africaines du ministère des Affaires étrangères de Belgique (hereafter AAMAEB), Gouverneur général, 16739 Léopoldville – Instructions divers, 1943-49, Arrêté 531 du 3 août 1944 réglémentant la consommation d'alcool.

<sup>31</sup> Otten Rik and Bachy Victor (1984), *Le cinéma dans les pays des grands lacs : Zaïre, Rwanda, Burundi*, Paris, OCIC, L'Harmattan, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> Gondola C-D., *Tropical Cowboys...*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Présence congolaise*, 13 September 1958.

<sup>34</sup> André Scohy, "Amusements congolais à Léopoldville", *Congopresse*, 1 December 1950.



In contrast to the taste for Congolese rumba that all social categories in the township shared, cinema was bent to logics of cultural distinction. Under the patronage of missionaries and colonial officials, film clubs such as the Ciné-Forum-Baudouin provided alternative selections to the programmes of commercial theatres, deemed mediocre. Although they were allowed in European cinemas, the Congolese elite preferred these clubs because of the Belgian spectators and owners' hostility that caused them "deep wounds", as the future leader of the independence Patrice Lumumba worried in 1955.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, film clubs showed more recent film selections while it usually took a whole year for a commercial production to cycle through the colonial circuit, from Europeans watching it to Congolese private film screenings, and then to the less lucrative movie venues.<sup>36</sup>

Both commercial and more elitist film clubs formed spaces for restoring the subversive potentialities of fiction within the colonial context. In the city, these acclaimed film exhibitions established themselves in contrast to the mobile film projections controlled by the live commentary system. When screenings took place in the "Interior" of the Belgian Congo, the screen set up at the edge of the forest would be stoned by the audience.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in 1957 Léopoldville, Abbé Cornil stated he would no longer organise projections in the neighbourhood Kitambo because of some incidents: "Unpleasant welcome, discontented spectators, stone throwing and so on."<sup>38</sup> Just like European cars, frequently stoned when they drove through the native quarters,<sup>39</sup> projections using colonial apparatus like the live commentary system were seen as the symbol of European domination in the eve of independence.

In commercial theatres also, the screening of colonial short films before Hollywood westerns used to create unease among Leopoldville's audiences. Known for being offended by films imitating African life in the bush and films on "African exploration", viewers had trouble understanding these one minute shorts - "those films even make them nervous".<sup>40</sup> In the late 1950s, French filmmaker Jean Rouch sought to explain such hostility within the West African context: "The African absolutely believes what he sees on screen. Regarding films made in Africa, his reaction is often very violent. Most of the time, Africans blame us on representing them, not as they are, but as we wish they were."<sup>41</sup> Although such "absolute" relationship to moving pictures did not derive from a belief - in Congolese youth slang "cinema" and "reel" were indeed synonymous with lies and trickery,<sup>42</sup> it is worth noting that, in the 1950s, rural and

<sup>35</sup> Patrice Lumumba, "À propos de l'accès des Congolais dans les établissements publics pour Européens", *La voix du Congolais*, October 1955.

<sup>36</sup> Gondola C-D., *Tropical Cowboys...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 60 and 214.

<sup>37</sup> Scohy André (1958), "L'action du gouvernement général du Congo belge dans l'éducation des masses par le cinéma", in *International symposium/conference on « Cinema and Africa South of the Sahara »*, organised at the Brussels World Fair, pp. 76-78.

<sup>38</sup> Anon., "À propos des séances de cinéma de l'abbé Cornil", *Présence congolaise*, 5 July 1958. Religious propaganda could be one of the reasons for this rejection. A year earlier, the young journalist Joseph-Désiré Mobutu echoed the complaints of Congolese people about the screening of educational films that were "only good for catechumens and elementary school children", in *Actualités africaines*, 16 May 1957.

<sup>39</sup> Anon., *Présence congolaise*, 7 February 1959.

<sup>40</sup> Capelle E., *La cité indigène...*, *op. cit.*, p. 80; Convents Guido (2006), *Images & démocratie: les Congolais face au cinéma et à l'audiovisuel: une histoire politico-culturelle du Congo des belges jusqu'à la République démocratique du Congo (1896-2006)*, Kessel-Lo, Afrika Film Festival, p. 185.

<sup>41</sup> Rouch Jean (1958), "L'Africain devant le film ethnographique", in *International symposium/conference on "Cinema and Africa South of the Sahara"*, organised at the Brussels World Fair, pp. 92-94.

<sup>42</sup> Sesepe N. (1990), *Langage, normes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

urban audiences resented colonial filmic representations on a large part of the continent. These films conveyed incredible caricatures, forcing viewers to recognize themselves in characters that grossly mimic them, while representing them in films emptied of their fictional potential.

The examination of Western screenings shows how urban audiences broke with colonial cinematic logics. In his memoirs, the journalist Molei Kolonga described the outburst set in motion when the movie began:

At the first appearance of a cowboy, a storm of applause, an explosion of voices and whistling rise in the theatre. The sound of film dialogue is drowned by the screams of the overexcited viewers. They either stand, demanding more violent actions, or climbing onto seats with their fists in the air, rush towards invisible opponents. The westernian exhilaration, thus, devours up this youth who now only lives in the shoes of Pecos Bill, Buffalo Bill and so many other cowboys. As soon as they leave the theatre, those groups scatter every which way, carrying off into the distance the western's message – the *Racketeers of the range*.<sup>43</sup>

Just as Georges Balandier observed in 1955 Brazzaville, the capital of the neighbouring Middle-Congo, this reception of films shows the intensity with which “the ‘play’ is experienced, both as a play and as a lesson”.<sup>44</sup> Such experience was fostered by the erasure of film dialogue by viewers who turned the screen into a mirror, so that mimesis only took place in the visual field. This was particularly convenient in the case of western that is a highly codified type of cinema and allowed spectators to follow the script without listening to film dialogue.

Contrary to what Gondola suggests, however, the movie-goers' brouhaha seemed not to reflect their deep understanding of the western genre - their rejection of film dialogue was not a reference to the cowboy's non-verbal language that conveys “the physicality of masculine control over emotion”.<sup>45</sup> Rather, the enhancement of the sound of the trigger, gun firing and horse galloping, shows the centrality of the cowboy's “sound panoply” in Congolese youth's cinematic experience and mimetic pleasure. In fact, urban audiences turned western movies into silent films, which, from the earliest period, was accompanied by music, sound effects and the voice of a lecturer.<sup>46</sup> Although similar phenomena have been observed in the early days of European cinema<sup>47</sup> and that the novelty of cinema in the African cities may explain this mode of film reception, it should also be understood regarding the spectators' desire to comment on the colonial world. Indeed, besides Western movies' action and actors kissing, the appearances of the young Belgian king Baudouin and the picture of a Black among Whites also filled spectators with exhilaration.<sup>48</sup> Like in the case of Westerns, pictures were decontextualized and appropriated by the public who turned the film exhibition into a forum, as in 1950s North Rhodesia, Gold Coast (Ghana), and Protectorate of Tunisia.<sup>49</sup> According to Karin Barber's

<sup>43</sup> Molei Kolonga (1979), *Kinshasa, ce village d'hier*, Kinshasa, Sodomca, p. 214.

<sup>44</sup> Balandier Georges (1985 [1955]), *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires*, Paris, Armand Colin, p. 257.

<sup>45</sup> Gondola C-D., *Tropical Cowboys...*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>46</sup> It was the case before the synchronisation of sound with the film image, and the first *talkies* in the late 1920s. See Bottomore Stephen (2001), “The Story of Percy Peashaker: Debates about Sound Effects in the Early Cinema”, in R. Abel and R. Altman (eds.), *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 129.

<sup>47</sup> See Metz's analysis in *Le Signifiant imaginaire...*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>48</sup> Convents G., *Images & démocratie...*, *op.cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>49</sup> See respectively: Ambler Charles (2001), “Popular Films and Colonial Audiences: The Movies in Northern Rhodesia”, *The American Historical Review*, 106(1), p. 96; Wright Richard (2008 [1954]), *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, New York,



analysis of popular arts, such a forum in which situations and interpretations are offered and tried out should be seen as critical as expressions of open protest against colonial order - this is through this everyday cinematic culture that "popular consciousness stubbornly maintains and renews".<sup>50</sup>

This mode of reception should be understood as another aftermath of *boniment* in the era of talking cinema in 1950s Africa.<sup>51</sup> As audiences were heard over the actors' voices, they set themselves up as the only producers of discourse. The fact that the spectators who came back to see the same film several times declared themselves "commentators" indeed suggests another dimension of the audience's control of the soundtrack.<sup>52</sup> Their improvisations and commentaries produced multiple interpretations that conveyed a polyphonic narrative substituting itself for the voices of the missionaries and the Information Service of Belgian Congo. The urban slang echoed this phenomenon through a metaphor: the author of an endless speech, or the speech itself, was usually called "soundtrack".<sup>53</sup>

## In Sophiatown: Singing Along with the Performers on Screen

### *From Screens to Walls: The trajectories of Fiction in the Township*

The pervasive influence of Hollywood on South African urban culture has been largely documented and has become an essential feature of the history of Johannesburg's townships. The cinematic experience of black viewers (Africans, Indians and so-called Coloureds) had been shaped by the long evolution of the structure of cinema and segregation.<sup>54</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black South Africans were sometimes allowed to sit on the balcony or at the back of movie theatres, which were already well established in urban areas. By 1936, 4 houses were licensed to screen films for black audiences.<sup>55</sup> With the burgeoning of theaters in the apartheid era, movie-going became an essential feature of the townships' black experience, despite the unpredictable and arbitrary application of censorship. Johannesburg dwellers saved money during the week to pay for their ticket on Saturday at "non-white" houses such as The Lyric, The Majestic, The Ritz, The Harlem, The Rio, and, in Sophiatown, at The Odin and Balansky's.

In Sophiatown, the intertwining of the politics of sound and fiction was remarkable. The cinema The Odin, where logics of musical and filmic pleasure overlapped with political resistance,<sup>56</sup> represented the main symbolic anchoring in this cinematic township. While movies screened at The Odin integrated the everyday *mise-en-scène* of Sophiatowners' cinematic

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Harper & Brothers, pp. 213-214; Corriou Morgan (2010), "Hourras, 'hou hou' et tohu-bohu dans les cinémas de Tunisie à l'époque du protectorat", in O. Carlier (ed.), *Images du Maghreb, Images au Maghreb (XIXe - XXe siècles). Une révolution du visuel ?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, pp. 203-236.

<sup>50</sup> Barber Karin (1987), "Popular Arts in Africa", *African Studies Review*, 30(3), pp. 58 and 69.

<sup>51</sup> Bouchard Vincent, Lacasse Germain and Scheppeler Gwenn (2009), "Présentation. L'interrègne: l'héritage des bonimenteurs", *Cinémas: revue d'études cinématographiques / Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies*, 20(1), pp. 7-21.

<sup>52</sup> Gondola C-D., *Tropical Cowboys...*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Sesep N., *Langage, normes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>54</sup> See Masilela Ntongela (1991), "'Come Back Africa' and South African film history", *Jump Cut: a Review of Contemporary Media*, 36, pp. 61-65.

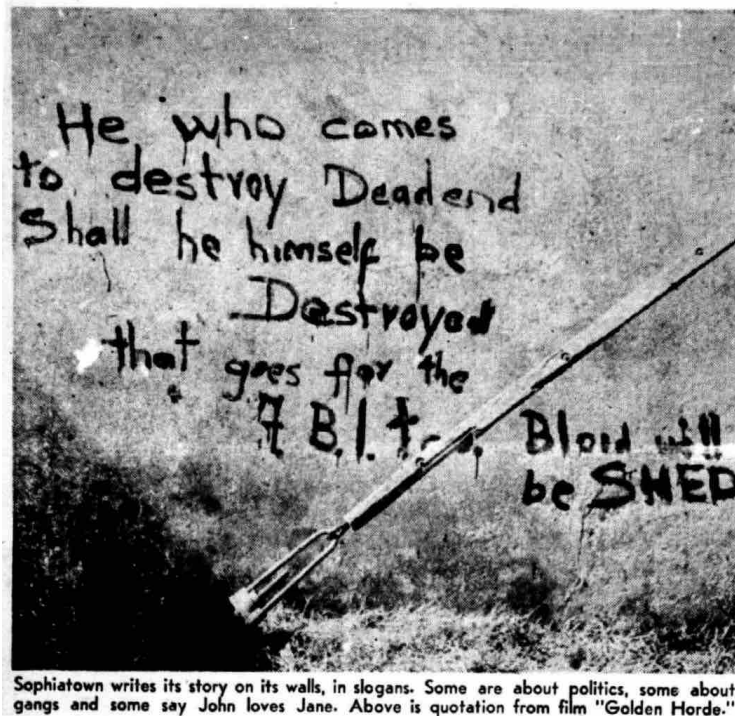
<sup>55</sup> Maingard Jacqueline (2007), *South African National Cinema*, London, Routledge, p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> Coplan D., *In Township Tonight!...*, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

urbanity, the theatre, in return, was imbued with Johannesburg's imaginary. The poet and former gang leader Don Mattera recalled how this place, which held 1 050 people, was divided into sections named after neighbourhoods: "We used to have sections like 'Fietas' and 'Kliptown' in the bioscope. Where the good seats were, there would be 'Parktown'."<sup>57</sup> These spatial references differed from those invented by audiences in West African cities where they usually referred to Western movies imaginary to differentiate social spaces in the movie house. In Bamako, the cheapest seats were part of the "*indiennat*" ("The Indians' places") while, in Conakry, audiences distinguished the cowboy's seat from the Indian's seat.<sup>58</sup> As for Dakarians, they called the front of the theatre "the goat pen", as opposed to the seats provided for the Europeans and African elite.

All these expressions reveal a perception of the film theater, common in African cities, as a place for symbolic exchanges between fiction and the city. What seems particular in Sophiatown is how cinematic culture became openly political and the way viewers turned the film's orality into a resource to fight apartheid. This conception was shared by black audiences in the United-States as author James Baldwin recalled: "My first conscious calculation as to how to go about defeating the world's intentions for me and mine began on that Saturday afternoon in what we called *the movies*."<sup>59</sup>

Figure 1: "Sophiatown wrote its history on its walls", *Drum*, 6 June 1957



<sup>57</sup> Stein Pippa and Jacobson Ruth (eds.) (1986), *Sophiatown Speaks*, Johannesburg, Junction Avenue Press, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Goerg O., *Fantômas sous les tropiques...*, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>59</sup> Baldwin James (1998 [1976]), "The Devil Finds Work", in T. Morrison (eds.), *Collected Essays*, New York, Literary Classics of the United States, p. 483. Original emphasis.

Thus, as the removal of Sophiatown was getting close, fictional exchanges not only occurred between movie houses and the city, but also directly from screens to walls: "We used to write with paint on the wall: 'Here Who Comes to Destroy Sophiatown Shall Himself Be Destroyed' because we see in a movie, *Summarkand* [*The Golden Horde* (1951)]: 'Here Who Come to Destroy Samarkand Shall Himself Be Destroyed'."<sup>60</sup> Thus, the actors' lines, turned into political slogans, could, as Pierre Sansot put it, serve to bind "consciousness to the walls".<sup>61</sup>

### *Mastering jazz and English language: Cinema as Cosmopolitan and Political Resources*

The viewer's urban experience and their political use of cinema explained, to a large extent, their unquenchable thirst for film music and dialogues. One can trace the combined elaboration of film reception and musical culture back to the 1930s, in the days of silent westerns featuring Hoot Gibson, Tom Tyler and Frankie Darro, and comedies starring Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton. In his autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, Ezekiel Mphahlele describes these long projections, that could include up to 4 films and a musical performance:

A piano played a medley of noisy tunes which, however, made superb background music. The other boys relied on me to read dialogue and titles on the screen aloud so that they might all follow the story... I managed to be heard above all the din from the audience accompanied by the *klonk-onk* from the piano, which was constantly playing during the performance.<sup>62</sup>

Evoking the sonorous evolution of the cinematic event, the author recalled when "talking pictures" arrived in Pretoria with *The Singing Fool*, starring Al Jolson: "Excited crowds flocked to the cinema to see the new wonder in the history of the film [...]. Al Jolson was bringing the magic of the age - the sound film."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, South African screenings were based on the European model in which the live music accompanying silent films varied from a full orchestra to a honky-tonk piano, depending on the luxury of the theatre. In South African cities, however, as "TALKING, SINGING, DANCING became familiar labels on cinema hoardings",<sup>64</sup> the popular marabi scene flourished and the "Concert and Dance" developed into an institution – "characteristically vaudeville entertainment from 8 p.m. to midnight followed immediately by dance which ended at 4 a.m."<sup>65</sup> For most of jazz and vaudeville artists who performed at these events, where films were sometimes screened, cinema was a major source of emulation regarding music, dance steps and ways of dressing.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Stein P. and Jacobson R. (eds.), *Sophiatown Speaks...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> Sansot Pierre (2004), *Poétique de la ville*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, p. 384. On the way Sophiatown "wrote its history on its walls". See *Drum*, 6 June 1957.

<sup>62</sup> Mphahlele Ezekiel (1978), *Down Second Avenue*, Gloucester, Peter Smith, p. 40.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>65</sup> Ballantine Christopher J. (1991), "Concert and Dance: The Foundations of Black Jazz in South Africa between the Twenties and the Early Forties", *Popular Music*, 10(2), p. 122. See also Denis-Constant Martin (2008), "Our Kind of Jazz : musique et identité en Afrique du Sud", *Critique internationale*, 38(1), p. 100.

<sup>66</sup> Ballantine C., "Concert and Dance...", art. cited, p. 131.

Regarding the musical evolution of these different types of cinematic event, it is significant that viewers did not lose interest in the film's dialogue and plot. A close attention to dialogues lived on at the time of talking pictures. While *Background to Danger* (1943) inspired the local "criminal chic",<sup>67</sup> other gangster films such as *The Raging Tide* (1951) and *Beginning of the End* (1957) became important sources for learning the English language. "We sat and we heard it: that is how we were taught. That is where our education came from, from the movies", Mattera recalled.<sup>68</sup> Along with the influence of English mission school education on South African journalists and black middle class, "the American culture available to Sophiatowners enjoyed a more scattered, cross-class appeal".<sup>69</sup> In this context, Mphahlele's eagerness to improve his reading skills is significant: "I felt really big and important and useful because I could read fast – as fast as the slow tempo of life in those years made it necessary [...] I read, and read, till it hurt. But I also got a good deal of pleasure out of it."<sup>70</sup>

The aural perception of cinema seemed inseparable from a learning process based on mimetic pleasure. In the 1950s, this phenomenon equally concerned the Johannesburg music scene that took its inspiration from musicals and films revolving around nightclubs, casinos and female singers.<sup>71</sup> At the time, they represented a major part of cinema programming and the performances of Lena Horne, Cab Calloway, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Ethel Walters and Bill Robinson were well known among South African viewers.<sup>72</sup> Let us note that this musical reception of films had appeared at the time of early western films. In contrast to Congolese cinematic culture, indeed, it seems that the figure known as the "singing cowboy", who appeared in *the movies after Hollywood converted to synchronized sound in the 1920s*,<sup>73</sup> had an important impact on South African youth, especially in rural Natal. According to anthropologist Absolom Vilakazi, in the 1920s, many youths of this region copied the dress and manners of the group called "umqhafi" (plural "abaqhafi") who wore "a cowboy hat and had a guitar or a concertina or a mouth organ which he carried with him everywhere and with which he supplied free music to all".<sup>74</sup> As the jazz singer David Serame remembered, musicals similarly made a strong impression on Sophiatowners. While they joined in and sang with the performers on screen at the theater, young viewers would gather at shop corners to sing the film's theme tunes after screenings.<sup>75</sup>

The fact that Hollywood associated the African American musician's status with the valorisation of the black race does not explain this mode of filmic reception by itself. The identification with black performers - which much of the recent scholarship emphasises<sup>76</sup> - was not, indeed, an unequivocal phenomenon. For instance, one of the most important composers of South African jazz, the trumpeter Hugh Masekela, famously picked up his instrument after seeing the white jazzman Kirk Douglas playing Bix' Beiderbecke in *Young Man with a Horn*

<sup>67</sup> Nixon R., *Homelands...*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>68</sup> Stein P. and Jacobson R., *Sophiatown Speaks...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> Nixon R., *Homelands...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Mphahlele E., *Down Second Avenue...*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>71</sup> Davis Peter (1996), *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa*, Athens, Ohio University Press, p. 23.

<sup>72</sup> Coplan D., *In Township Tonight!...*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>73</sup> Stanfield Peter (2002), *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press.

<sup>74</sup> Vilakazi Absolom (1965), *Zulu Transformations: A Study of the Dynamics of Social Change*, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, p. 76. See also Coplan D., *In Township Tonight!...*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>75</sup> Dovey L. and Impey A., "African Jim...", art. cited, p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> For example, see Maingard J., *South African...*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

(1950). In this film, the essential influence of black musicians on Beiderbecke's stylistic development consist of "a long apprenticeship with a single African American character, the trumpeter Art Hazard (Juano Hernandez) [...] [who] eventually delivers the obligatory speech in which the white student is congratulated for outclassing the mentor".<sup>77</sup> Far from identifying with a black star from the United States, it is interesting to note that Masekela either appreciated or overlooked the way this movie handles the question of the black musician's influence on the playing of white jazzmen.

### **The Cinematic Township on Screen: *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* and *Matamata and Pilipili***

The success of the film *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* (also known as *African Jim*) in the late 1940s, and of *Matamata and Pilipili*, silent comedies made for Congolese audiences, in the 1950s, well illustrates the audience's complex relation to cinema featuring local black actors. In South Africa, like in the Belgian Congo, an African cast was indeed never enough to win the viewers' support. *Nongogo*, for instance, a play presented at the Bantu Men's Social center in 1959, was criticised because "non-Europeans felt the township life had been distorted".<sup>78</sup> Given how viewers usually resented filmic representations of Africa, one can question the huge success of these domestically made films in Congo and South Africa. In fact, with this type of film, a new relationship emerged between the cinematic township and African actors such as Sophiatown's glamorous star and female jazz singer Dolly Rathebe?<sup>79</sup> This last section aims to answer this question by comparing the reception of *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* and *Matamata and Pilipili*.

The first paradox of the success of *Jim Comes to Jo'burg*, a film made by two British immigrants to South Africa, Donald Swanson and Erica Rutherford, lies in its obvious support of apartheid ideology. Although aimed at appealing to black viewers, the notice scrolling at the beginning of the film suggested the filmmakers were also concerned with their white audience: "It is a simple film and its quaint mixture of the naive and the sophisticated is a true reflection of the African Native in a modern city."<sup>80</sup> As the first full-length feature film with a South African black cast, *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* prefigured the codes of the "Bantu Cinema" that, according to apartheid ideology, stressed the dichotomy between idyllic, rural "Native" ways of life and the corrupt, modern city.

<sup>77</sup> Gabbard Krin (1996), *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, pp. 71-82.

<sup>78</sup> The University of Witwatersrand Historical Papers, Johannesburg, AD1912 Press Cut "Films entertainment", 1947-63, "Shebeens Are Never Like This", 1959.

<sup>79</sup> Fleming Tyler (2012), "Stars of Song and Cinema: The Impact of Film on 1950s Johannesburg's Black Music Scene", in T. Falola and T. Fleming (eds.), *Music, Performance and African Identities*, New York, Routledge, pp. 169-190; Coplan D., *In Township Tonight!...*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>80</sup> Bickford-Smith Vivian (2006), « How Urban South Africa Life Was Represented in Film and Films Consumed in South African Cities in the 1950s », *Journal of Interdisciplinary Crossroads*, 2(3), pp. 431-442.



Figure 2: Movie poster of *African Jim* (1949)<sup>81</sup>



While depicting black Johannesburg as dangerous, it appeared as a cosmopolitan and musical territory. The film was indeed part of a series marketed as “All-African” (1950-1959) which drew on the popularity of local jazz bands and the influence of vaudeville to appeal to black audiences.<sup>82</sup> The ambiguity created by this type of film clearly appeared in *Jim's* main musical performance. Playing Judy, the resident singer of the Ngoma club, where Jim (played by Daniel Adnewmah) is employed as a domestic worker, Dolly Rathebe sings: “Oh I went to Jo’burg, the Golden City; Oh What did I go there for? I’m a long way from home in Jo’burg city.” While embodying the dichotomy conveyed by “Bantu Cinema”, this song was an adaptation of “*I Lost my Sugar in Salt Lake City*”,<sup>83</sup> a tune from *Stormy Weather* (1943), and was thus also related to a movie that had “electrified” Sophiatown and permanently influenced the local sonic urbanity, in particular speech, dress, and stage shows.<sup>84</sup>

According to *Drum* writer Can Themba, one of the most acerbic critics at the time, the appearance of this musical icon on-screen was the only element worthy of mention:

Even people who normally thought that the bioscope was not quite the place where decent people went for entertainment, they went in their thousands to see Dolly Rathebe in *Jim Comes to Jo’burg* [...] It sounded as if Africa was being transported into the fascinating world of Hollywood.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Adnewmah (Jim) et Dolly Rathebe (Judy). The original caption was « *Jim's world changes when he leaves his tribe to seek his fortune in Johannesburg* ».

<sup>82</sup> Maingard J., *South African...*, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>83</sup> Composed by Leon Rene and Johnny Lange in 1942, the original lyrics are: “I lost my sugar in Salt Lake City; Oh, why did I go there?; I should have stayed down in New Orleans; And never gone nowhere”. See Dovey L. and Impey A., “African Jim...”, art. cited, p. 71.

<sup>84</sup> Coplan D., *In Township Tonight!...*, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>85</sup> Dovey L. and Impey A., “African Jim...”, art. cited, p. 61.



As her voice and charisma exceeded the ideological aspects of the lyrics song, Dolly Rathebe captivated the spectator Themba, just like she captivates the actor playing Jim in the film. Significantly, such enthusiastic comments hardly find a place in South African studies on cinema. For instance, Ntongela Masilela ignores this point of view when he speaks of a "silent rejection" of this type of film by African intellectuals, noting, however, that, "curiously, however, Todd Matshikiza wrote enthusiastically of *Song of Africa*", a film that followed the path that *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* had beaten.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Matshikiza, who was a composer, pianist, and musical critic, particularly enjoyed the fact that the film showed "the influence of African tribal music on modern American jazz".<sup>87</sup>

The second paradox surrounding the popularity of "All-African" films lies in the fact that they stand in sharp contrast to the sophisticated Hollywood narratives and aesthetics enjoyed by South African audiences. Besides the "hidden transcripts" located in the film's soundscapes,<sup>88</sup> part of the explanation lies in the power of local performers' appearance on-screen emphasised by Themba. One can indeed speculate that the viewer's perception of these splitting pictures and performances pushed the ideological content into the background as Dolly Rathebe's scene obliterated *Jim Comes to Jo'burg's* unsophisticated aesthetic and simplistic plot. Here, cinematic pleasure resides less in visual aesthetics than in access to fiction. Far from the imperial ideology which denied Africans the ability to be authentic viewers, and unlike the colonial movies emptied of their fictional potential, *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* was spectacular. It was obviously fabricated, and put the black musical scenes' voices and personae into motion. In singing an adaptation of "*I Lost My Sugar in Salt Lake City*", echoing Mae E. Johnson's performance in *Stormy Weather*, Dolly Rathebe allowed viewers to see a performance of the trans-Atlantic links between the US and South African black scenes.

Moreover, the screening of *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* amplified one of the essential features of the cinematic township, namely its ability to trouble the symbolic frontiers between cinema and urban experience. In his memoirs, Modisane recalls how, as the apartheid was extending its grip upon his existence, "the line between fantasy and reality [became] less and less distinct".<sup>89</sup> Integral to this process was the evocation of American-inspired local jazz bands such as The Jazz Maniacs and The African Inkspots, represented in the film by the marabi-jazz musicians performing at the Ngoma club. As Davis suggests it, this performance might be understood as a celebration of the township's musicality:

If you listen to the music, I think it would be virtually impossible to say that these musicians came from South Africa. Their very attitudes in performance, down to the cigarette dangling from the lips of Sam Maile as he tickles the piano keys, speak of an influence so seductive that they have given themselves to it body and soul.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Masilela Ntongela (2003), "The New African Movement and the Beginnings of Film Culture in South Africa", in I. Balseiro and N. Masilela (eds.), *To Change Reels: Film and Culture in South Africa*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, p. 26. See also Ansell, G., *Soweto Blues...*, op.cit., p. 75.

<sup>87</sup> Masilela N., "The New African Movement ...", art. cited, p. 26.

<sup>88</sup> Dovey L. and Impey A., "African Jim...", art. cited, p. 63.

<sup>89</sup> Modisane Bloke (1965), *Blame Me On History*, London, Panther Books, p. 175.

<sup>90</sup> Davis P., *In Darkest Hollywood...*, op. cit., p. 24.

Dolly Rathebe's character particularly blurred the line between reality and fantasy. According to Don Mattera, Dolly's choice to change her name to "Rathebe" – because "they were rich people and Dolly was a beauty" – was revealing of "a world of make-believe, a world which wanted to aspire to greatness".<sup>91</sup> In the film itself, actors call her either "Dolly" or "Judy", making her "'real' persona [slipping] into the film occasionally".<sup>92</sup>

From the viewer's point of view, as South African actor John Kani said, "when *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* was shown, it was like a miracle, we saw black people in the movie, we saw black people *talking*".<sup>93</sup> Spectators derived delight from both visual and aural/oral dimension of the film, the latter reflecting one of the most recognisable feature of black Johannesburg. This was suggested by the first impression of *Come Back, Africa* filmmaker Lionel Rogosin in 1958: Africans "looked and dressed so much like American Negroes that I was startled when they started to speak Zulu. It seems completely wrong to my sensory perceptions, it was as if I had come to a dubbed movie, and everybody was speaking the wrong language".<sup>94</sup> In addition to local orality, the soundtrack mostly consisted of ready-composed songs, probably for budgetary reasons. As a result, *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* aroused the curiosity of both South Africans who normally thought that the bioscope "was not quite the place where decent people went for entertainment",<sup>95</sup> and spectators who had never seen a movie – Dozens had "to be turned away", as the filmmaker Erica Rutherford remembered.<sup>96</sup>

Regarding the strong support *Matamata and Pilipili* enjoyed within Congolese communities, Leopoldville's spectators made similar comments. Directed by Belgian missionary Albert van Haelst in Luluabourg (now Kananga) in the 1950s, these silent comedies about the misadventures of two friends achieved a great success throughout the colony. As Burns noted, Van Haelst produced genuinely popular films "by transgressing several of the basic rules of colonial cinema".<sup>97</sup> Besides using technical "tricks", such as the simplistic stop-action removal of actors to make it look like they have disappeared, the movies were in black and white, thus "unrealistic". Although *Matamata* (played by Kasongo-Biembe) and *Pilipili* (his real name is unknown) never appeared in the credits of the films, the series was the first to develop two endearing black characters from film to film.

<sup>91</sup> Stein P. and Jacobson R. (eds.), *Sophiatown Speaks...*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>92</sup> Dovey L. and Impey A., "African Jim...", art. cited, p. 70.

<sup>93</sup> Davis P., *In Darkest Hollywood...*, *op. cit.*, p. 26. Emphasis added.

<sup>94</sup> Rogosin Lionel (2004), *Come back, Africa: a Man Possessed*, Johannesburg, STE publishers, p. 20.

<sup>95</sup> Dovey L. and Impey A., "African Jim...", art. cited, p. 61.

<sup>96</sup> Fleming T., "Stars of Song and Cinema...", art. cited, p. 196.

<sup>97</sup> Burns J., *Flickering Shadows...*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

**Figure 3: Biembe Kasongo (Matamata) working at Luluafilms<sup>98</sup>**

Despite their paternalistic views, these movies gave an idea of what Congolese fiction could have been. In a documentary showing twelve of these short fiction films, anonymous viewers recalled how excited crowds flocked to the screening place when, in the evening, a truck drove through Leopoldville's native quarters to announce *Matama and Pilipili*:

This was cinema, it was something moving. And, besides, what was wonderful, was that it showed people we rubbed shoulders with in the streets every day. They were not actors like Alain Delon! We can see it. I tell myself, somehow, they are not acting: they are living.<sup>99</sup>

According to South African writer Arthur Maimane, the switchover of everyday life to screen brought a similar wonder in South African minds: "A film shot with people you recognized, on streets that you knew - people could shout, 'Hey, that's my street! I live down that street! [...]'. So they became like home movies."<sup>100</sup> As, until then, entertaining movies had been only inhabited with mythical actors and far-off, mythologised places, seeing the cinematic township in a medium usually reserved for dreams filled viewers with wonder.

The *Matamata* soundtrack also corresponded to local cinematic culture. No commentators oriented the Congolese reception of these silent comedies, and only short titles, translated into five vernacular languages, preceded each scene. Moreover, sound effects resembled those appreciated by Western aficionados – the filmmaker used "foley", sound effects matching action, such as a spanking given to a child, *Matamata's* fall, or the whistle of

<sup>98</sup> From T. Bourlard, *Matamata et Pilipili*, Belgia, Videocam, Cobra films, Centre de l'audiovisuel à Bruxelles.

<sup>99</sup> Bourlard Tristan (1996), *Matamata et Pilipili*, Belgia, Videocam, Cobra films, Centre de l'audiovisuel à Bruxelles. For a critic of the lack of identification of the interview subjects in Bourlard's documentary and its lack of critic regarding the racist views expressed by missionaries in the film, see Petty Sheila (1999)'s review, "Matamata and Pilipili", *H-AfrLitCine/H-Net*, online, URL: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/15766/reviews/16715/petty-matamata-and-pilipili> (last accessed 03.08.21).

<sup>100</sup> Davis P., *In Darkest Hollywood...*, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

a policeman running after *Pilipili*. The filmmaker only used diegetic sound (the source of sound was always visible on-screen) to “describe” action, so music was the only non-diegetic sound.

**Figure 4 - Van Haelst before the recording of a choir in Luluafilms studios<sup>101</sup>**



Although *Matamata* did not show musicians, viewers could catch a glimpse of the urban musical life. For example, one film includes a scene in which a group of dancers gathered around a gramophone.<sup>102</sup> After two films including classical music, the series soundtrack mainly consisted of African music - mostly traditional drums, while Congolese guitar and brass compositions were occasionally used to emphasise particular actions such as a chase. In this sense, *Matamata and Pilipili* music fitted in with the view of Beninese film director and historian Paulin Soumanou Vieyra. According to him, African musicians had to revolutionise their expression to create music adapted to cinema – instrumental compositions, that do not represent a “whole expression”, but can actually participate in the “cinematic reality”.<sup>103</sup> For lack of sources on *Matamata* soundtrack, one can only speculate that Van Haelst decided to use urban music and record local artists upon Congolese viewer demand.

<sup>101</sup> From T. Bourlard, *Matamata et Pilipili*, *op. cit.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Vieyra Paul (1975), *Le cinéma africain : des origines à 1973*, Paris, Présence africaine.

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The study of apparently opposed modes of sound-based reception demonstrates the common Congolese and South African aspiration to control the cinematic event and its diffusion throughout urban culture. What is particularly clear, in this regard, is the hijack and appropriation of the live commentary system by Leopoldville's audiences and their ability to produce polyphonic narratives that draw out the linear voices of the Information Service and missionary institution. In contrast to religious filmmakers' attempt to "banish dreams", they rejected western film dialogues while amplifying sound effects, before taking the cowboy's sound panoply to the streets. As the urban slang echoes through the metaphor of the "soundtrack" designating the author of an endless speech,<sup>104</sup> what I have called "acoustic urbanity" existed far beyond the world of music, resulting from the multiple bonds between everyday listening and a politics of fiction.

In Sophiatown, the close link between the city's soundscapes and the Hollywood oral components threw the blurred lines between cinematic fiction and urban reality into sharp relief. More than elsewhere in Africa, Sophiatowners expressed imbued urban life with fantasy in turning the entire township into a place where people could learn how "to go about defeating the world's intentions against [them]".<sup>105</sup> These modes of sound-based reception of films, in particular the use of film dialogue, show how sounds mediated by cinema and other technologies, discourses, and local epistemologies, transformed urban spaces and struggles.

In both South Africa and the Belgian Congo, segregation and censorship aimed to prevent African audiences from engaging in cinema's subversive potentialities, and by doing so, generated a sensorial experience of media marked by interferences, fragments of colonial and missionary discourses and traces of censored cuts.<sup>106</sup> In this context, the possibility to watch local urbanity and townships in the first movies featuring popular African actors represented a turning point in the late 1940s and 1950s. With *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* and *Matamata and Pilipili*, new possibilities emerged for the viewers and the cinematic township became more complex and multi-layered. Sophiatowners could for instance enjoy the art of the singer Dolly Rathebe that subverted distortions of primitivism when appearing in this prestigious medium.

A close attention to the historical role played by the cinematic event is, therefore, helpful in understanding African experiences of segregation, especially how pleasure and strategy overlaps in the development of political cultures. The cinematic events and cities' similarities and differences examined in this article might be enriched by analysing other modes of film reception in the late colonial era. Further research on cities where dancing seemed to dominate performative reception of film like Dar es Salaam and Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi), might enhance our understanding of the politics of sound and fiction in African townships.

Charlotte Grabli

CIRESC-CNRS (France) / Faculty of History UCLA (USA)

<sup>104</sup> Sesepe N., *Langage, normes...*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>105</sup> Baldwin J., "The Devil Finds Work...", art. cited, p. 483.

<sup>106</sup> For another example, see Larkin's analysis of the aesthetics and distorted sounds of pirated video in Nigeria, in *Signal and Noise...*, op. cit., pp. 217-242.



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