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Okaka Opio Dokotum, *Hollywood and Africa. Recycling the “Dark Continent” Myth, 1908-2020*. Makhanda South Africa, NISC (Pty) Ltd. Year: 2020. 332 pp. ISBN 9781920033668.

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Over the years, the African continent and people have occupied a central space in both Euro-American knowledge production and in the construction and imagination of the Western subject. This knowledge and representation of Africa/ns in Euro-American archives has produced counter-discourses that contest hegemony and the network of institutions and values that perpetuate and legitimize its coercive power, while offering alternative visions of understanding the world. Okaka Opio Dokotum’s book, *Hollywood and Africa: Recycling the “Dark Continent” Myth, 1908-2020*, can be seen as a necessary part of a tradition whose praxis is defined by attempts to problematize the flattening and homogenization of Africa, as well as deconstruct hegemonic ways of knowing and being. The book can thus be read as a counter-discourse which questions the manifestations and mutations of the colonial library and narratives as part of a larger investment in emancipatory epistemes and futures.

Dokotum takes Hollywood as an entry point into this North-South epistemic production and engagement. Even though the title conjures a study of African representations in Hollywood (read America), the study widens its scope to Britain in ways that provide an enriching transcontinental critique of Africa’s imaging and representations in Euro-American popular imagination. This figuration usefully presents Hollywood not just as a physical space, but also as “a cultural space that includes many producers, directors, actors and audiences within and beyond America” (25). It is this spatiotemporal and cultural Hollywood that the text frames as a primary site where “warped image production, dissemination and consolidation” about Africa by Euro-America happens (1). The scholar deploys the trope of the “Dark Continent” – which is pervasive in Euro-American popular, literary and cinematic representations of Africa – to read specific films and their representation of the iconography of blackness, Africans and Africa in essentializing images of savagery, wilderness, fatalism and stasis. Dokotum traces this trope to “British colonialism, racism and the ideology of empire,” while also showing its specters and reincarnations in contemporary times (1).

The book studies 112 years of negative imaging of Africa. This expansive scope is deftly handled in a manner that does not overwhelm or compromise the analysis. The book has eleven chapters which are divided into three sections. Dokotum orders the chapters chronologically, an exercise that enhances the overall coherence of the text. In the first section of the text – chapters one and two – the author traces the origins and the utility of the “Dark Continent” trope. The examination of the traditions that bring the mythos of the Dark Continent into being in western cultural productions is skillfully done, with the author drawing from an array of colonial sources/literature: travelogues, missionaries, cultural figures/celebrities, cartographers, editors, publishers, illustrators etc. (20). By tracing the origins and the ideological underpinnings of the mythologies and fabrications about Africa, Dokotum shows how these are deliberate and beneficial for the colonial/imperial culture. In fact, Dokotum sees the film industry as having played a major

role in reinforcing and reifying the mythology of the Dark Continent as part of the larger imperial project. In addition, chapter two presents an analysis of several films that provides a template through which we can understand the evolving imaging of Africa in Hollywood productions.

In section two, titled “Adaptation Models” (chapters three through seven), Dokotum directs the focus of his inquiry to five films – *King Solomon’s Mines* (1950), *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Tears of the Sun* (2003), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *Invictus* (2009) – that demonstrate what he considers to be “the major adaptation strands and modes of the century-long Hollywood representation of Africa” (3). These models include the colonial template, colonial nostalgia (neocolonialist representations), militainment and historical distortion, the “this is a true story” model and heroic self-transcendence. In the discussion, the author’s analytical depth is brought to life as he discusses the various templates deployed in the western entertainment industry’s depiction of Africa. Beginning the discussion with *King Solomon’s Mines* (1950), which is adapted from the first colonial novel ever set in Africa by Rider Haggard (1885), Dokotum argues that it set the tone for future racist representations of Africa. In this way, the author finds echoes of *King Solomon’s Mines* in latter-day Hollywood representations of Africa, even in the seemingly benign movies about Africa.

The book’s last section (chapters eight to eleven) presents what Dokotum refers to as new approaches in Hollywood-Africa productions. These chapters offer a magisterial reconfiguration of Hollywood depictions of Africa as they gesture at more liberating African representations and iconography. As such, the section provides a counterpoint to the previous chapters in its analysis of films that problematize the habituated representational regimes of Africa in Hollywood. To begin with, chapter eight uses metatextuality and trumping to show how the 2005 film adaptation of Giles Folden’s novel, *The Last King of Scotland*, “critiques its progenitor text and reinterprets the story of Idi Amin through a transcultural context” in a manner that re-imagines Uganda in relatively positive terms (199). Chapter nine reads Ridley Scott’s film, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), using the framework of cyberactivism to show the interruptive potential of social media activism, which led to the boycotting of the film because of its “whitewashing of African history and obsession with celebrating whiteness at the expense of blackness” (226). However, this chapter reads as a truncated afterthought especially when compared to the other fully fledged and eloquent chapters. Further, the book’s tenth chapter deploys afro-optimism as a critical lens for analyzing Mira Nair’s *Queen of Katwe* (2016). Dokotum sees it as an important movie that presents an uplifting narrative of African agency, hope and success within the backdrop of Hollywood’s normative representations of Africa which figure it in terms of alterity, lack, stasis and fatalism. The last chapter analyses Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018) through the lens of Afrofuturism. The chapter makes a case for the film’s investment in crafting African (and African diasporas) counterfutures. Dokotum argues that “the film creates counterfutures of Africa devoid of the classical evocations of the Dark Continent template of ignorance, poverty, war, diseases, cannibalism ... which are those products of the colonial imaginary reinforced by the brutality of transatlantic slavery, colonial alienation, dislocation and loss” (247-8).

Even though the book appears to traverse familiar territory on the warped and racist representations of Africa in Hollywood, it builds and extends on a wide array of scholarship to force us to confront the political and ideological work that narratives perform in the construction of social reality. Dokotum makes a case for analytical focus on this imaging of Africa in Hollywood because it ultimately influences “political, economic and military policy interventions in Africa” (22). In this way, Dokotum paints an intimate relationship between Hollywood’s racializing depiction of Africa, its consolidation of whiteness, its capitalist and profit-making goals

and the political and economic implications for Africa/Africans. The text stands out in the way it often interweaves elegant analysis of the movies alongside their progenitor texts, which makes for a rewarding reading, especially as the author uses adaptation theories as the overarching theoretical framework of reading the films. This reading of the film alongside the novel performs a majestic and astute balancing, showing a mastering of the theoretical, ideological, cultural and economic investment in the mythology of the Dark Continent.

Even though the author is quite attentive to the binary oppositions that are central in the logic of empire, these (perhaps inadvertently) appear in the book. For instance, the author refers to Wakanda as “the highly civilised African nation” (9) while Europe is also referred to as “the actual Dark Continent” (12). The use of these terms ultimately seem to be reify the same binarist thinking which merely inverts and negates hegemonic assertions. If counter-discursive projects of representation are committed to imagining alternative visions and worlds, these need to go beyond familiar templates that merely reinscribe hierarchies and dominance. Further, Dokotum mentions the use of Africans as slaves because of their “strength,” a figuration that echoes the dehumanizing colonial fixation with the physicality of Black people (12). Lastly, the author also uses the word “modern” in reference to present day Uganda in a way that does not properly account for the contestations surrounding modernity/modernities and globalization (216). This use of loaded terminologies, whose genealogy was central in the advancement and conceptualisation of racialisation, imperialism and colonisation, needs to be carefully unpacked.

All in all, Dokotum’s focus on Hollywood gives access to the continuities and mutations of racialized schemas representing Africa. Although these schemas are shown as having undergone some changes, they have also nevertheless left the systems of political, economic and cultural domination intact. His synthesis of literary texts and films makes the book an invaluable resource to students and scholars of literature and film, historians and even storytellers who are interested in what Chinua Achebe refers to as the balance of stories.

Works Cited

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