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African Cinema Animation

translated from Italian by Emilia Ippolito with Paula Burnett

If the topic is “African Cinema Animation,” a question will most certainly be asked: what do we really know about it? Does anybody know anything about it? Amongst the forms of expression of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cinema animation is unanimously considered to be the most underestimated, the least explored and the most misunderstood of all. Within this dispiriting framework, African cinema animation suffers the worst-case scenario. Let us have a look at the written sources: apart from some monographs on the film and theatre director William Kentridge (Republic of South Africa), the precious but thin collection of works by the Swiss, Bruno Edera,¹ and the equally thin chapter on this topic in my world history of cinema animation,² what we—non-African people—know about this issue comes from a forty-eight-page booklet, *Hommage au cinéma d’animation d’Afrique noire*.³

Here is a significant quotation from Jean-Claude Matumweni Mwakala’s essay “*Aspects sociologiques du cinéma d’animation africain* [Sociological Aspects of African Cinema Animation]” included in the above-mentioned collection:

As we all know, you need large investments to produce a film. The countries which have a prosperous and high quality film industry have invested large amounts of money in this sector. Africa has no cinema industry, and the existing investments are based on co-productions. The norm is therefore a lack of financial means; however, there are a couple of observations to make: for example, the waste of funds carried out by public authorities. The Ndaya International Foundation had obtained funds to finance the series *Kimboo*—which cost around twelve million French francs—together with France. It is known that film directors in Arab countries can count on policies of public financial support for their productions: it is the case in Tunisia, whose film productions have been made possible by the Ministry of Culture.

Matumweni Mwakala says that a lack of infrastructure, investment and entrepreneurship are at the root of the troubles in African cinema animation. Is he right? If the animation films he takes as models are the approximately fifty episodes of the Franco-Ivory Coast series *Kimboo*, I would say yes, he is right.

Here is one more translated quotation, from Benjamin Benimana's essay:

“*L'esthétique du cinéma d'animation africain* [The Aesthetics of African Cinema Animation]:”

The question we should ask ourselves is probably as follows: what kind of cartoons does the African audience watch? As you can guess, most African television channels broadcast cheap cartoons made in the Western countries, in India and especially in Japan.

Is he right? He probably is. However, why does he mention the “audience”? Does the “audience” exist only in relation to cartoons?

Here is one more quotation from Ngwarsungu Chiwengo's essay, “*Le film d'animation africain vu de l'Amérique: le cas de Muana Mboka de Kibushi Ndjate Wooto* [African Film Animation Seen From America: *Muana Mboka* by Kibushi Ndjate Wooto]:”

Muana Mboka (a short film by Jean-Michel Kibushi Ndjate Wooto, Democratic Republic of Congo) is, in many respects, an important product. Since children in Africa and in other “third-world” countries are exposed to Western films which marginalise and erase black people from their environment, African cartoons play an important role in young people's education.

Is he right? He probably is. However, why does he mention “children” and “young people’s education” without considering that cartoons can be regarded as for an audience which is not composed only of children?

I could add for the benefit of the viewer who is not up-to-date on the subject, that some productions existed in the past in Egypt (for example, films featuring the character Mish-Mish Effendi by the Frenkel Brothers—see Figure 1), and that a consistent production still exists these days; that the Maghreb region has also contributed to it extensively; and that other works have been produced in the past fifteen years, thanks to the method of co-production, to which Jean-Claude Matumweni Mwakala refers in his essay.

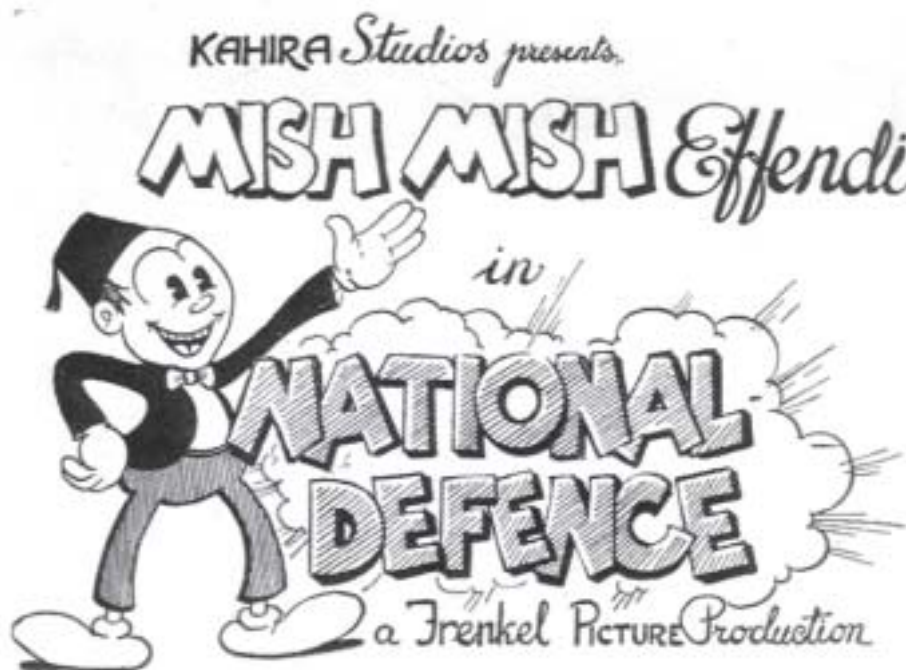


Figure 1: Propaganda film made in the 1940s by the Frenkel Brothers.
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At this stage, however, I have to say that I will not express my opinion on this topic until we have eliminated some prejudices.

First prejudice: cinema animation is *not* a cinema for children. It can be and often is, but not in a different way from live-action films for children, pop-music for children, and

children's literature. Cinema animation is a cinema, twin brother to live-action, with a specific history, a specific aesthetics, a specific market, etc.

Second: the problem of viewers and television programmes affects not just African cinema animation but the whole world market (more precisely, the globalised market) of mass media. Separating them and analysing such problems as "African" or as typical of cinema animation means making a terrible mistake in the diagnosis.

Third: cinema animation does not necessarily need big investments, big infrastructures or businesses. The example of Moustapha Alassane, pioneer of African animation and citizen of one of the poorest countries in the world, Niger, is meaningful in this respect. In 1962 the New York intellectual Dwight MacDonald published a book titled *Against the American Grain* (Random House), which included the essay "Masscult and Midcult." MacDonald was a contradictory and moody man, but he was ingenious. In this essay, which became a classic, he claimed that communication could be divided into three different kinds: mass culture (Masscult), middle-class culture (Midcult) and an élite culture (Highcult). For example, in literature, Masscult are Barbara Cartland's novels and in animation, Japanese television series; in literature, Midcult are Stephen King's novels and in animation, Walt Disney films; in literature, Highcult is the Nobel Prize-winner Czesław Miłosz's poetry, and in animation, the Russian Juri Norstein's short films, which are highly regarded and rewarded (at animation festivals).⁴

Sociologists and economists will not agree, since the state of the play is certainly more complex than this. However, forty years on, the division into three categories still serves for the examination of our topic, and those categories are even more exclusive.

First of all, if we question African cinema animation we need to know what animation we are talking about. The limited production of African animation will help us analyse it in detail. I will start with the Highcult and its pioneer, Moustapha Alassane. His films have been

viewed and awarded prizes at various festivals all over the world; he himself has travelled a lot and has been a member of the jury at prestigious festivals (to my knowledge, at least at Annecy and Clermont-Ferrand). In spite of these facts, he can be considered as a *naïf* auteur. In the short 2001 film *Kokoa 2* (a remake of a film from 1985, about a chameleon fighter which changes its colour to red whenever it gets angry with its adversary—see Figure 2), he makes the same mistakes as to timing, script, and filming he had made in *Bon Voyage, Sim*, in 1966—the first film of his I saw.



Figure 2: *Kokoa 2* (Moustapha Alassane, Niger, 2001)
Copyright Moustapha Alassane.

The fact is, Alassane has never studied animation. He has invented it. He has not adopted the conventions of timing, filming, script-writing and editing established by Californian or Parisian professionals. He sticks to his own rules, which makes him an original animation director. Multi-cinema viewers, addicted to fast food, might not appreciate him. However, his compatriots appreciate his films (by his own account). A *naïf* is not a

particularly gifted troglodyte, it is a creator who does not want or is not able to accept academic codes, copies of reality, and colour theories. As for style, if the communicator has something interesting to say, we will certainly pay attention to him, even though he does not apply our rules. Moustapha Alassane presents us with his vision of Africa, expressed through very simple and cheap technical means, such as animated puppets, direct drawing on the film, and a few others; they are scarcely less simple or more expensive than sculpture and painting, traditional and popular arts which have existed for millennia. Everyday animals are represented exactly the way they are (not in caricature): I'm thinking of the funny chameleon in *Kokoa*, or of the inflatable frogs which look like pompous and useless human heads of state in *Bon Voyage, Sim*.

Muna Mboka, by the already mentioned Jean-Michel Kibushi Ndjate Wootto, presents a similar case. The plot is almost negligible: a street-boy, like many others in African cities, who lives by misdemeanors and theft, saves a minister's life (ironically, the Minister of Public Works), and is rewarded by him and envied by other people. A realistic (or, better, neo-realistic) film, a tough one, it denounces the African urban reality. Its colours are vivid and violent, its soundtrack noisy and "live," its characters paper-cut; this film is certainly not expensive. Kibushi Ndjate Wootto, unlike Alassane, is not a self-made director. He has studied cinema in Europe and knows the rules of cinema professionals; however, he often ignores them and uses a very personal timing, clumsy frames and movements, aware that the topic is more important than the time he would need in order to mould the form.

Alassane and Kibushi express themselves through direct means (I repeat this word); they do not use filters. What are "filters"? Filters are big investments which may potentially generate even bigger profits, the large studios which have to pay big salaries and be provided with good equipment and software, marketing and dumping strategies which enable distributors to export television series cheaply: in a word, the industry. Moreover, the idea of

entertainment meant only for children, or else political, ethnic, or educational propaganda—these are non-material filters, but no less influential.

People who accept these filters also accept all their consequences. They will make films or television series which will be filtered, harmless, pre-digested, all the same, reassuring: films which will be based on universal stereotypes of movement, mimesis, narrative, characterisation, special effects (like the “Disney Dust,” the sparkling stars which accompany any metamorphosis, noticeably in the series *Samba et Leuk* directed in 1996 by France’s Jean-Louis Bonpoint). At this stage, it is meaningless to complain against discrimination, conflicts between the world’s North and South, whites versus blacks, colonisers versus colonised.

I do not agree with Benjamin Banimana when he comments on the aesthetics of African cinema animation (I am still translating from the booklet mentioned above):

We need to remember three factors. The first is the “cultural virus”—the infiltration of Western cultural products into Africa. This situation does not help the development of local products. What is worse: mass culture, independently of its origins and its producers’ identity, is an industry of standardisation of expression and the emotional modes which carry its products along. Generally lacking specific moral values, this situation subtly destroys very ancient traditions, some of which have existed for millennia, filling them with superficial emotional clichés. The second factor is the major Disneyan aesthetic which has invaded schools and production in Europe and, at a later stage, in Africa. Uniformity has attacked originality and now it is essential to get rid of this artistic monolith. The third factor is that modern cinema animation has developed, and fortunately still is developing, a multiplicity of expressions linked to different artistic traditions, some of which show similar characteristics to the national schools. We think that a study of African cinema animation [...] should be based not on a search for aesthetic similarities with other products, but rather on meaningful differences, which can be used as evaluation criteria.

I disagree, since a few lines earlier he had consented to speak exclusively of “television viewers.”

There are numerous examples of this production. *Kimboo* is a series of forty-eight five-minute episodes in French, directed by Gilles Gay. The already mentioned *Samba et Leuk*

(1996) is a series of twenty-six twenty-six-minute episodes in French, directed by Jean-Louis Bonpoint. In February 1998 Pierre Sauvalle, originally from Senegal, who studied at the Gobelins school in Paris, founded together with Aida N'Diaye a company called Pictoons. They acquired high technology, trained a lot of young professionals, and started producing television advertisements and soundtracks. Pictoons is the most important example of African animation meant for a global market, in open competition with European, American and Asian productions. The first series, *Kabongo le Griot* (*griot* means story-teller; it is a typical persona of African culture, which is based on story-telling), came out in 2000-2002. Its characters are a mix of international standard animation and, in the graphics, *fang* or *dogon* masks, typical of local cultural tradition (see Figure 3). There is also the mixed-techniques series (3D computer animation plus live action) *Grands Masques et les Junglos*, directed by Didier M. Aufort. This series is also in French. I do not know whether these series have been successful, but I must admit that they did not particularly impress me, as a viewer, with their aesthetic outcome.



Figure 3: image from *Kabongo le Griot* series. Copyright Pictoos Sarl.

Norman McLaren, great artist and friend of oppressed peoples, dreamed of animation as the language of developing countries. McLaren spent several years in China and India, teaching the basics of animation techniques to people who had only the most basic means at their disposal. We, the younger ones, also shared this dream with him.

Animation can in fact be quite cheap and technologically simple. In order to safeguard their personal inspiration and national cultural traditions, people from Angola, Liberia, Paraguay, Haiti, Bali or Nepal, can paint or draw their sketches on film and pay for it with their own savings, the same way they would create an oil or watercolour painting. If well done, their film will stay in the viewers' memory and cinema history books along with *Titanic* or *The Lord of the Rings*. It was a dream and it has not come true. However, never say never.

Since we are speaking about colonisers and colonised, please forgive this digression. In different contingent circumstances, I have witnessed two examples of colonisation during my life: Western colonisation of the West (the Franco-American, then only American, colonisation of Italy during the fifties and sixties) and Western—English—colonisation of Australia.

The colonisation of my homeland has these days become homology. Italian cinema made by Italians for Italians (I mean “live” cinema, because of the inconsistency of animation products) has been limited to a few television comedians acting for the big screen.

The situation of the Aborigines was and still is different. They have been dispossessed of everything for centuries, and now the authorities offer them a sort of cultural compensation. I have witnessed a project of cultural re-enactment based on animation in Bourke, New South Wales. The aboriginal community, always tending towards visual means of expression, rapidly appropriated simple technological tools and started producing films. These films—this is the most important factor—refused to be “folk,” and to propose traditional stereotypes. These films spoke of the Aborigines, their life, and their desires. A

few years earlier, an institution called Aboriginal Nations had produced short films in which they tried to “set in motion” traditional aboriginal paintings and tell in this way some legends of the dreamtime. Easy exotics. It was a failure.

Going back to Africa, let me mention a great white African animation director, Michel Ocelot, born in France and now living in Paris. He has avoided folk and exotic elements in his film animation *Kirikou et la sorcière* [Kirikou and the Witch].

In particular two big francophone countries, France and Canada, have invested time and money on animation co-productions, which are the best documented. Probably it is precisely these co-productions I am least interested in: they are not mulatto, they are half black, half white, indecisive as to whether they should be north or south of the Mediterranean, east or west of the Atlantic. *La femme mariée à trois homes* [The Wife of Three Men] by Cilia Sawadogo, for example, is based on beautiful paper drawing and sombre colours. The story is derived from popular tradition in the Congo. However, in terms of style, you can find forty years of the National Film Board of Canada in it—it is a compromise. One more example could be *Succession* by Vincent Glès, also produced by the National Film Board of Canada: wonderful puppets, beautiful lights, great set design, and an African popular story. However, the author has accurately studied and applied the lesson of Jirí Trnka and the Czech School. One more compromise on the aesthetic level.

We should also discuss works produced by schools and universities, such as exercise or diploma films. I have extensive experience of this sort of production: in the past five years I have supervised so many such works. Everywhere, whether the authors were European, North American, Australian, Asian or Third World students, I have found the same faults: blind trust in software, ignoring the fact that software is only a tool and not a thinking brain; blind and absolute trust in beautiful images, ignoring the fact that in a film, images should be moving; lack of interest in the diagesis (narrative evolution: the evolving plot, which should

keep the viewer's attention high); non-comprehension of the film as an audio-visual product, with a strong tendency to ask a friend composer for a couple of notes of soundtrack as a comment, or to fill in the gaps.

I would say that the student-made films I have dealt with all had these faults, to different degrees. I had heard nothing but good about Carlos Spivey, who is in California at the UCLA and Loyola Marymount University, but his works disappointed me. *Mama Seed Tree*, which means to communicate the idea of the continuation of life in the mother's womb as in mother earth's womb, has weak images and the soundtrack is inadequate. *Whisper* (fixed images opened up by software) or else *The World Is a Drum* are equally confusing.

So far we have spoken about black Africa. William Kentridge, an anti-racist white South African auteur of about twenty film animations, who refuses to identify his own work with the cartoon as such, is certainly the most important artistic and intellectual figure on the African continent. It is impossible to separate him from the context in which he has operated and is still working at present. Born in Johannesburg in 1955, he has always been politically and socially active, and won international acknowledgment in the mid-nineties when apartheid finally came to an end (1994). It would be wrong to look for overtly political messages in his film and graphic works (based on charcoal and very few colours). Kentridge is a complex and at times cryptic creator, who makes painful reference to the facts of his homeland, often interiorising them like a poet, in other words leaving them to be expressed by his protagonist, who will then become "everyman" on earth. It is not by chance that his latest work is taken from a highly interiorised novel, foreign to him, *La Coscienza di Zeno* [Zeno's Conscience], by Italo Svevo (2002).

The first animated feature film from the continent produced in 2003 in Zimbabwe, *The Legend of the Sky Kingdom*, is made by white Africans, the designer and producer Phil Cunningham and the director Roger Hawkins, both directing a multi-ethnic group of artists.

The film is about three children who escape from an underground city where they are slaves, and go on to reach the Sky Kingdom after a perilous and difficult journey. The technique, a variation on animated puppets, has been named “junkmation” since every character and scene was made by recycling old objects, in fact, junk (see Figure 4). This was a respectful and affectionate tribute to this artistic craft typical of southern Africa, which at times reaches high levels of creativity and which was shown in an international exhibition in Bern, Switzerland, in the year 2000.



Figure 4: *The Legend of the Sky Kingdom* (Roger Hawkins, Zimbabwe, 2003)
Copyright Sunrise Media/Sunrise Productions

Then we have the Afro-Mediterranean cinema animation. Egypt, as we have already highlighted, had gained an international reputation in animation already by the thirties, when the Herschel brothers, Salomon and David Frenkel, directed *Nothing To Do*, with Mish-Mish Effendi as a protagonist; the film was followed by other sequels about the same protagonist. The films were not very well drawn, very badly animated and with an even worse script

design. Their model was not Walt Disney, rather the Fleischers or else Felix the Cat. As for the name, Mish-Mish, it means “tomorrow with apricots,” and we will translate it as “jam tomorrow:” this was the answer given to the Frenkels whenever they asked for funding for their work. However, Mish-Mish and the Frenkels became so popular that they were able to start a successful advertising agency before the tensions between Egypt and Israel pushed them to emigrate to France in the fifties.

Film animation in Egypt saw a renaissance thanks to Ali Muhib and his brother Husam, who gave birth to the Film Animation Department within the national television channel which was inaugurated in 1960. In 1962 Ali Muhib directed *The White Line*, a film animation plus twenty-five-minute live action, which was a cross between a short musical and a documentary film. It was a lively and excellent film, which made fine use of the split-screen technique (unusual at that time), in a style reminiscent of Piet Mondrian. After eight years of work at the Department, during which he trained many young colleagues, Ali Muhib successfully switched to advertising. In 1979 he directed the first Arab animation film series, *Mishgias Sawah*, composed of thirty episodes.

Mohammed Hassib (1937-2001) was one of Muhib’s pupils; he separated from him in 1964 to devote himself to advertising, educational films and live-action feature films. One more important person was Noshi Iskandar (Cairo, 1938), a well-known caricaturist. His first film was *One and Five* (1969), followed by the trilogy *Is it True*, *Abd and Al*, *Question* (1969), inspired by the war between Israel and Palestine. In 1974 he directed *Where?* and *Room number...*, a satire on bureaucracy; in 1975 he directed *Excellent*, a denunciation of corruption, and in 1980 *Narcissus*. One of his most faithful adherents was Radhà Djubran (1945-1997), who authored the short animation films *Story of a Brat* (1985) and *The Lazy Sparrow* (1991).

Abdellaim Zaki (1939) wrote television soundtracks, live-action feature-film titles, and animation commercials for several Arab countries such as Sudan, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (over one thousand), as well as didactic films. Ihab Shaker (Cairo, 1933), painter, caricaturist, illustrator, puppet-master, was the most famous animation film director beyond the borders of his homeland. In 1968 he directed *The Flower and the Bottle* in Egypt, then moved to France, where he met Paul Grimault. With his help he directed *One, Two, Three* (1973), a surrealist film with a taste for anecdote, whose characters resemble amoebas. In 1993 he directed *Love Dance*.

Amongst the many Egyptian animation directors are two women. Mona Abou El Nasr has a very personal graphic style. Her *Survival* (1988), made during her stay at the Cal Art school in California, was very successful, along with the television series *Once Upon a Time* (1992). The second woman is Zeinab Zamzam, artist, musicologist and psychologist, who directed *A Terra-cotta Dream* (1997), a combination of real images and plasticine animation sequences, and the excellent *Open Your Eyes* (2000), also based on plasticine technique. Both are very refined pieces of work and make Zeinab Zamzam one of the most interesting artists of film animation in Mediterranean Africa.

In conclusion we can say that Egypt is the leading country in film animation in the Maghreb and Arab region at the beginning of the third millennium, and that its artists, technicians and tools—both financial and technical—promise a great future. However, this country still remains, at present, prisoner of a self-imposed limitation: its products are destined only for Arab countries, and Egyptian directors at international festivals, the place where inspirational experiences are exchanged, are very rare.

I particularly appreciate the work of the Tunisian puppet animator Zouhaier Mahjoub, whose *The Guerbagies* was presented at the Annecy Festival a few decades ago. The

government still supports its animation cinema—hopefully he and his colleagues will be able to preserve a national culture in the right way.

The first Algerian animation film, *La fête de l'arbre* [The Tree Party], (1963), was produced by Mohamed Aram (Hussein Dey, 1934), only one year after the country became independent. Aram learnt animation techniques on his own; he trained his team and directed films in his spare time—he was mainly a scriptwriter. His first works were educational productions in black and white. *The Tree Party* was an invitation to re-grow the vegetation destroyed by napalm. *Ah, s'il savait lire* [Ah, If Only He Could Read] (1963), was intended to fight illiteracy, and *Microbes des poubelles* [Litter Bugs] (1964), deals with health problems caused by urban life. The large number of productions, over twenty between 1963 and 1999, did not help him solve his problems—a consequence of the lack of support from the cinema authorities in his country. Two of his helpers were Mohamed “Mad” Mazari and Menouar “Slim” Merabtene, directors and comic-strip designers. Mazari directed *Mariage* [Wedding] (1966), and Merabtene *Le Magicien* [The Magician], (1965). One more Algerian worth mentioning is Mohamed Toufik Lebcir, author of *Branches* (1991), based on the *Thousand and One Nights*, and *Atakor* (1993), the pilot episode of an eponymous series.

Now let us try and change our point of view. Let us completely abandon the notion of quality and consider the financial aspect only. Only rarely does history follow the rules of predictability, therefore I cannot see why African animation history should be any different. Here is a good example. South Korea was, until fifteen years ago, only a cheap-labour country. People who wanted to do film animation organised the creative phase and then left it to be made by the disciplined and cheap Koreans. These days, South Korea has become the third country in the world for producing television series, and short and long films, after the United States and Japan, and above France.

What will happen in fifteen years' time to the powerful Senegal, Egypt and Republic of South Africa, where production companies aimed at television series are developing these days, or to the Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe? Will they have developed, as Jean-Claude Matumweni Mwakala says, "a prosperous and high quality cinematography, investing in this sector?" Will they have a well-structured, aggressive and competitive cinema animation industry on the globalised scene, like the South Korean one at present? And if the answer is positive, how will they behave towards the Masscult and Midcult (in MacDonalidian terms)? My answer, though with limited interest—I must admit that I believe more in auteurs than in series—is that only then will we be able to answer the frequent and indispensable question: "What is typically African in African cinema animation?"

A cowboy in the nineteenth or twentieth century, or else these days, was as exotic in Boston or Manhattan as in Berlin or Manila; however, the Western genre is "typically" American. A giant robot can be found only in toyshops in Tokyo; however, the space-work animation of Goldrake is "typically" Japanese. The mentality and behaviour of the district of Trastevere in Rome is not comprehensible to Italians from Udine and Cagliari; however, Alberto Sordi's or Nino Manfredi's comedy is "typically" Italian.

I mean that cinema and television naturally depend neither on folklore, nor on old or new national or local traditions; for example, nobody in Italy has ever been able to make a good film on the very Italian character of Pinocchio. Cinema and television create their own mythologies (they are autotrophic, in this respect). These mythologies become national brands.

We can therefore say that Highcult auteurs' film animation represents the African soul, but as it has been re-written by those auteurs. It in fact represents only those auteurs. The only "typically" African feature in their films is the soundtrack, taken from an eternal music, everlasting languages, French and English accents which never had to be invented.

On the contrary, a commercial product which is supposed to challenge, on the global market, other homologous commercial products, that will be the benchmark of the entire continent or at least of the producing country—in order to achieve this goal, it will have to invent an unprecedented style, an unprecedented narrative, an unprecedented life vision and stronger tools than its competitors, to be appreciated by the viewers. That is what the Japanese have been doing since the sixties with their series. Such a benchmark will become one more common place, one of many, waiting for history to follow one of the many rules of unpredictability.

Notes

¹ Bruno Edera, *A la découverte d'un cinéma méconnu: Le cinéma d'animation africain* (Annecy: Festival International du Cinéma d'Animation, 1993).

² Gianalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (London and Bloomington: John Libbey / Indiana University Press, 1994, 1995, 1999).

³ *Homage to Black African Cinema Animation*, edited by Lomomba Emongo (Strasbourg: Studio Malembe Maa ASBL, a co-production with the Ciné-Club de Wissembourg, 2001).

⁴ Please note that all this is about production and consumption of cultural products, not their *aesthetic value*. There are numerous horrible films made by the élite for the élite, and numerous pleasant television series made by American, Japanese or Korean chain productions.