

CRISES OF LANGUAGE AND DIFFERENCE

LIZ KOTZ

"Special" sessions or programs devoted to third-world, multicultural, or minority programming at historically white-dominated conferences and institutions are difficult enterprises. All too often these occasions attempt to make up for past exclusions by presenting a vastly varied body of work all at once, with inadequate preparation or focus, in a context that was not designed or developed for such works. Overburdened by the often conflicting needs and expectations of producers of color, minority communities, and predominately white audiences, such programs risk contradiction and disappointment.

The thirty-fifth annual Robert Flaherty Seminar, held this August in upstate New York, proved a case in point. With this year's focus on work by "third world and minority film and video artists," programmed by Pearl Bowser of African Diaspora Images, excitement and expectations were high. Many people had hoped that the conference, bringing together scholars and makers from the United States, Africa, Great Britain, and elsewhere, would present a critical opportunity to reopen and expand the North American discussion of "third-world" film and video and the questions of race, cinema, and representation such work necessarily engages. Yet despite the many powerful works screened and the participation of numerous individuals deeply involved in the production, exhibition, and study of third-world and minority cinema, the week-long event proved surprisingly unproductive, as entrenched positions and divisions were restaged in a new setting without pushing the boundaries of dialogue or analysis.

I had gone to Flaherty expecting that the seminar would be a chance to test out some of the available theoretical models—"third cinema," "third-world cinema," "a black aesthetic," "minority discourse," "immigrant cinema," etc.—against the wide-ranging and very different films from Africa, Latin America, the U.S., Great Britain, and other sites of the vast African, Asian, and Latin American diasporas. Such a level of discussion, however, was not forthcoming at the conference. Plagued by a lack of time and structure, unwieldy programming, and the inability of the heterogeneous group of participants to find any common ground or language in which to discuss issues, the formal discussions were often an exercise in frustration. Like many other participants, I found myself obsessively and somewhat painfully trying to trace the multiple, intersecting, and ultimately overpowering barriers to discourse and dialogue at what had begun as a very hopeful and promising occasion.

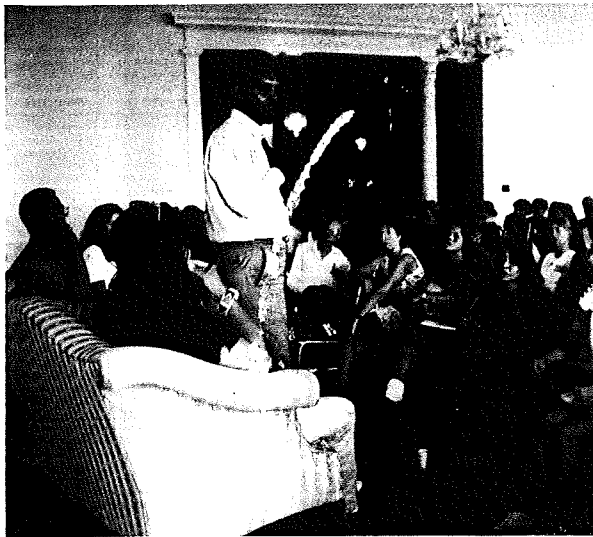
A large part of the problem had to do with the structure, traditions, and limitations of the Robert Flaherty seminar. Originally devoted to the study of the documentaries of its founding figure, the annual conference has grown into one of the few forums for independent producers, artists, and academics to get together and discuss political and formal issues in filmmaking. Cloistered in the campus of Wells College for a week, about 150 participants watch about 10 hours of films and videos each day, followed by formal large-group discussions and informal social activities. A majority of the participants are Flaherty "regulars," a predominately liberal, white, East Coast audience of documentary supporters. (While documentaries are the focus, experimental and narrative work is shown as well.) Film- and videomakers are invited to attend, accompany their works, and participate in discussions.

It is designed to be a cumulative experience, with all participants attending all screenings and discussions, so that critical issues, comparisons, and thematics will emerge and build throughout the week. Yet the most basic concepts for understanding critical questions of address, audience, context, or the political implications of formal strategies were completely underdeveloped. As a first-time Flaherty participant, I

tried to figure out what seemed to be the Flaherty buzzwords—"integrity" and "responsibility" ranked high on the list—and the liberal/progressive ideology underlying that discourse. Of course, the fact that no one would admit to anything as systematic as ideology or discourse was part of the problem. The seminar seemed deeply resistant to any critical or analytic framework, privileging the "honest," "emotional" responses of participants while refusing to theorize such positions at all. In such a context, the black and third-world participants tended to be the only ones to acknowledge that they had any ideological or political positioning—and got roundly criticized for "over-politicizing" the proceedings among some white participants.

With a tradition of unstructured discussions that often resemble group therapy more than intellectual debate, the Flaherty seminar is known for its free-for-all and emotional outbursts. With topics as emo-

tions, relating these to the storytelling forms and performatory models of print cultures and oral/folk cultures. Yet aside from *Zan Boko* (1988), a lyric and beautiful film on forced urbanization by Burkina Faso's Gaston Kabore, few films screened at the seminar fit this schema of "third-world cinema." Consequently, participants unfamiliar with Gabriel's more challenging work on time-space relationships and non-Western film languages had little to go on but vague and ultimately unproductive generalizations. Among the many works screened, the found-footage videotape *From Here From This Side* (1988) by Mexican videomaker Gloria Ribe, or the South African film *Mapantsula* (1988, by Oliver Schmitz), which mobilizes a conventional gangster film format to indict state racism and terrorism, posed very real challenges to models of third-world cinema, as do any number of recent Latin American films employing the filmic languages and capital-intensive indus-



Teshome Gabriel addressing participants at the Robert Flaherty Seminar.

tionally and politically charged as cultural difference and racism, the limitations of such a non-format became readily apparent, as the lack of structure allowed participants to align themselves along all too familiar lines. Given the inefficacy of the more structured formal discussions to promote real interchange and dialogue between different sectors, the informal socializing became quite polarized between black and white participants, leaving the other third-world and minority participants uncomfortably stranded.

The central question of what it meant to be addressing issues of third-world and minority filmmaking in a mixed-race and cross-cultural setting was rarely explicitly addressed—at least not in the official discussions; the informal discussions were, of course, a whole other story. Yet the extreme vulnerability and ambiguity of the situation proved to be the seminar's major stumbling block. While many if not most of the white participants were unprepared and inadequately informed to address the issues of race, ethnicity, and cinematic language the event set out to raise, the conference also failed to create a dialogue that would challenge entrenched positions and beliefs. In the face of white ignorance, many black participants opted for separatism. Since most of the black and third-world producers and critics present had not had opportunities to address controversial issues within their own communities, perhaps few felt that the atmosphere of a predominately white conference was a safe or productive place to initiate this process.

In an effort to give a critical framework for the conference, UCLA professor Teshome Gabriel—author of *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (1982)—presented a schematic outline of Western and non-Western filmic conven-

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programmer, most participants expected the focus would be with work from Africa and African diaspora communities. However, the tension between the announced scope of the program, potentially encompassing the entire third world and the range of ethnic minority communities, and its actual focus on African and African-American works was not adequately raised or resolved. Over the seven-day program, which included over 50 films and videos, five works by Latinos and three by Asian producers were screened, a paltry and poorly thought out offering that felt tokenistic. Of greater concern was the general lack of attention to the range and differences within and among "third-world" cultures and communities, both on the level of insensitivity to non-African experiences of diaspora and dispersal and in a consistent avoidance of issues of class, gender and sexuality—even more odd given that a majority of participants were women and probably one-quarter were gay.

The lack of a shared language for discussing political issues exploded after the screening of Bolivian filmmaker Jac Avila's *Kric? Krac! Tales of a Nightmare* (coproduced by Vanyoska Gey, 1988), a relentless quasi-documentary on life in present-day Haiti. Accusations of racism, sensationalism, and lack of political analysis flew around the room, colliding with criticisms of the "inauthenticity" of materials—the film incorporates extensive found footage from Cuban films such as *El Otro Francisco* (1975, by Sergio Giral)—and its violation of "the integrity of the filmmaking process." Avila's failure to adequately defend his use of images belied the film's lack of organizing strategy and further frustrated effective discussion of the interconnected political and filmmaking problems the film exhibits.

Rather than discussing the abstract "ethics" of image appropriation and exploitation, John Akomfrah of Britain's Black Audio Film Collective suggested that a more productive approach would be to evaluate the film in the context of research on contemporary postcolonial societies and the contradictory roles that representations play in cultures of terror. As shown by the fate of "Baby Doe" Duvalier, the inheritors of power based on terror are not always able to master its workings, for these mechanisms of fear and terror take on a life of their own. Using but not in control of overdetermined images of violence and destruction, *Kric? Krac!* fails to contain, mobilize, or reposition that force and inadvertently participates in the very spectacularization of terror it claims to reveal. Like many works using found footage and found images, Avila's film mistakes the power of shocking images for effectiveness, falling into an all too conventional oversaturation of violent imagery characteristic of Western filmmaking that carries no inherent political impact or meaning. Yet the discussion nearly degenerated into a shouting match, with participants attacking or defending the film without really discussing how or whether it worked.

The most challenging debates took place around the screenings of episodes from the landmark series on the U.S. civil rights movement, *Eyes on the Prize* (1986 and forthcoming, 1990), produced by Henry Hampton and Blackside Productions Inc. Featuring episodes of the initial series and fine cuts from the second series, which covers the twenty-year period from 1965 to 1985, the seminar generated a critically cogent and politically informed discussion of how documentary films construct history. Several black participants critiqued the newer programs for retelling familiar stories and events without any meaningful reevaluation or insight and for privileging a white viewer in such a way as to offer nothing new to black audiences. While the early civil rights years treated in the first series enjoy a relative consensus of interpretation, the second series tackles more recent events as well as controversial chapters, such as the formation of the Black Panther party, which are the objects of considerable contestation even within the black community.

Documentary strategies used relatively unproblematically in the first series met with criticism in the second. The episodes were challenged on formal grounds for their presumed neutrality, lack of perspective or viewpoint, and allegiance to a traditional PBS use of narrative, which left them flat

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and institutional. That the new programs were the product of biracial teams and had undergone extensive audience testing and multiple recuts suggested that underlying such formal and storytelling problems were unresolved structural and conceptual difficulties.

Participants discussed the political and historiographical implications of the film-making strategies adopted in the series, including the class-based and top-down "leadership" theory of power and political struggle it adopts, featuring extensive interviews with movement leaders but few perspectives from, for example, those who took part in the ill-fated poor people's march on Washington. Others probed the constraints on the series and the limitations of the traditional models of documentary filmmaking, with its focus on "newsworthy"

events and reliance on archival footage, for constructing a minority history. Such film-making issues unavoidably brought up questions about what constitutes meaningful historical or social change. Raising the problem of focusing on visible political events such as the election of Carl Stokes (the first black mayor of a major U.S. city), a black woman producer from Philadelphia commented, "we all know now that electing a black mayor doesn't necessarily mean anything."

The political problems of co-optation and the character of racism in the North suggested the difficult challenges to traditional documentary practices posed by modern forms of power that work by masking themselves: unlike the naked racism of the southern sheriffs, northern white racists are less likely to reveal themselves on camera, since these are people who know how to manipulate media, how to generate a public rhetoric that masks their actions. By focusing on the visible manifestations of

power—the billy club landing on the head, or the overtly racist actions of working-class white "rednecks"—documentary film risks participating in the representational conventions that allow most relations of power, based on consent, to go unmentioned and unanalyzed.

The profound difficulties historically disempowered people face in constructing a cultural memory and the problems posed by borrowing historical models and materials from the dominant culture were brought up throughout the week. Diverse works addressed the question of what materials are available to construct filmic counter-histories of African-American and minority experiences. The lack of archives of black images of American history, for instance, was raised after the rough-cut screening of veteran black producer William Greaves's *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1989). White experimental documentary filmmaker Lynne Sachs's *Sermons and Sacred Pictures* (1989) offered an example of the

recovery and representation of "amateur" documentation of black lives, in this case the 16mm "home movies" taken by the Memphis minister L.O. Taylor in the 1930s and '40s. Brazilian filmmaker Raquel Gerber's *Ori* (1988) brought together disparate footage shot over 11 years in Africa and Brazil, in a disjointed but powerful film aimed at reconstructing historical memory across the traumas of slavery and colonialism. Mixing travel film, conference documentation, history lesson, spectacle, spiritual journey, and personal storytelling, the film works to reposition African-ness at the heart of Brazilian culture.

The necessity of examining colonial discourse in white filmmaking arose after a late-night screening of the Robert Flaherty-directed feature *The Elephant Boy* (1937). The film reproduces a fascinatingly impure and interpenetrating set of colonial discourses on the Indian "other," from the original Kipling tale to the Flaherty "documentary" treatment and the final Michael Korda-

produced Hollywood release. Yet the official presentation problematized the film only in relation to its "impure" authorship. If it hadn't been for a group of Indian women producers present, who quickly dissected the film's painful orientalism, its implicit racism would have gone without comment—inexcusable in any context, but particularly odd in a year devoted to questions of race and cinema.

Much of the seminar seemed caught between irreconcilable rhetorics: in a revealing juxtaposition, while one side of the Flaherty brochure stated that "the seminar will examine some of the ways films and videotapes reveal cultures," the other side stated that "participants will study specific films and tapes that illuminate the human spirit." The complete inadequacy of traditional humanist rhetoric for addressing complex questions of racial and cultural difference was manifested throughout the week, as white seminar participants seemed to ignore differences entirely—"we're all human"—consider them irreconcilable—"these works are not for me"—or collapse completely disparate phenomena. Yet the question of difference was clearly not only a problem for white participants. Homogenizing and universalizing statements about black and third-world experiences voiced by some people of color went unchallenged; at times tense divisions between different generations and tendencies within the group of black and third-world participants and the growing contestation of cultural nationalist rhetorics and positions went largely unarticulated in public.

The absence of theoretical models for critically examining issues of audience and address particularly hampered discussion of works by people of color that deviated from conventions of mainstream filmmaking. White participants, finding their stance as the privileged interpreters of cultural products undermined, at times reacted with hostility, incomprehension, or pain at "feeling excluded" by works not explicitly addressed to them as white viewers. In a discussion of D. Elmina Davis's documentary *Omega Rising: Women of Rastafari* (1988), many participants reacted to her refusal to translate rasta culture and language for a white audience as a weakness; few seemed to appreciate the intense power relations inherent in requiring minority or marginal cultures to continually explain themselves to an outside or dominant audience. While the documentary, produced by London's Ceddo Film/Video Workshop, certainly has its weaknesses, Davis's underlying point—that genuine dialogue entails effort by both parties—got lost in a slew of criticism and confusion.

At the end of the week, conference discussions of "difficult" or "unconventional" works got increasingly polarized. A white college professor remarked, in reference to experimental works by British filmmaker Akomfrah and Indian-British videomaker Pratibha Parmar, that he found them "closed" and unable to appeal to a mass audience and accused the filmmakers of "coterie filmmaking." Parmar defended her work against charges of elitism, noting the

use of her video *Sari Red* (1988) in community-based antiracism campaigns and discussing her deliberate choice to use cultural symbols and icons that engage Indian and Asian audiences. She explained the importance for Indian women of reappropriating the image of the sari—often seen as a symbol of submissiveness in Western iconography and as a visible sign of difference that can target Indian women for racist attack.

Parmar also questioned the assumption that works by people of color that do not privilege a white viewer are therefore incomprehensible to everyone. Of course, varieties of such accusations—too "personal," too "specialized," too "narrow," too "political"—are routinely mobilized against any filmmakers, particularly people of color, women, and gays, whenever they choose to depart from the forms of culturally imposed homogeneity or the pursuit of "mass" audiences. That such a comment could be made in utter sincerity on the last full day of the seminar evidenced its utter failure to develop any productive terms for discussing the complex mechanisms by which racial and colonial relations are inscribed in filmic representation, and how film languages and representational conventions can be reworked to reveal cultural difference.

Many other provocative works were screened, from Olley Marouma's *After the Hunger and Drought* (1988), on Zimbabwean writers and their role in cultural decolonization in southern Africa, to Kwate Nee-Owuo and Kwesi Owusu's *Ouaga: African Cinema Now!* (1988), a documentary on

contemporary African filmmaking focused on the annual FESPACO Festival of Pan-African Cinema in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. With clips from numerous films and interviews with African and African diaspora filmmakers including Med Hondo, Haile Gerima, Idrissa Ouedraogo, Jo' n Al' komfrah, and Louis Massiah, the channel 4-funded documentary could have provided a valuable informational background to start the week. Among the power-ful short experimental works were U.S. filmmaker A.J. Rogbodyan's poetic *Pea-ee Family* (1982-83), an in-camera edited piece working with jazz-inspired rhythms and an improvisational process, Canadian-American filmmaker Veronica Souli's work in progress *Unknown Soldier*, using Chinese characters to explore the acquisition of language and the construction of identity, and Philip Mallory Jones's three-channel installations *Foolprints* (1988) and *Dreamkeeper* (1989), using African images and music to build an experimental narrative. That such rich and vastly different works could all be shown under the rubric of "third-world" or "minority" cinema says a lot about the explosion those categories are currently undergoing. Throughout the conference, the audience grappled with the inevitable tension produced by trying to simultaneously use and deconstruct available terms and categories. As discussions oscillated between platitudes and attack, mobilized proscription models, and generally went in circles, the works screened simply overran and exploded the languages used to discuss them.