

Shifting Narratives and Mutable Meanings

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In and Out of Africa. 1993. 59 minutes, color. A film by *Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor*. For information contact University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center Street, Fourth Floor, Berkeley, CA 94704, 510-642-0460.

Ghanaian writer Kwame Anthony Appiah says, "Modernity has turned every element of the real into a sign, and the sign reads 'for sale.'" The commodification of culture poses some serious challenges to ethnographic filmmaking, indeed to any filmmaking that takes culture seriously. Among other things, it blurs boundaries and makes seemingly rooted types like Papua New Guinean farmers (the subjects of *Black Harvest*) and North American indigenous dancers—seen in a segment of *Grandma's Way Out Party*, featuring cartoonist Lynda Barry savoring American road culture—part of a sprawling, mostly invisible community that nonetheless is intensely real.

Perhaps the independent film *Twenty Bucks*, which traces the hands through which a 20-dollar bill falls in exchange, is one solution: follow the object. Another solution is that taken by Ross McElwee, in *Sherman's March* and *Time Indefinite*, and many other American video and filmmakers who have found in themselves the exemplar of post-modern culture. Their solution: embrace narcissism.

The makers of *In and Out of Africa* have chosen another route. What they do is to follow a process by which a single kind of product comes to take on different meanings and to explore the human investments in creating those different meanings. The product is a wood artifact, which can be a religious object, art, or a simple commodity, depending on the person (Figure 3). The issue is African art and the constructed nature of the notion of art itself.

Lucien Taylor, a photographer and anthropologist, and Ilisa Barbash, an independent filmmaker, found someone who exemplifies, in his profession and person, the ambiguities of the categories he depends on. They have followed him throughout his selling cycle with the tenacity of good reporters and ethnographers, sifting for us the detritus of daily life and selecting the emblematic for their own concerns. They are curious about the forces that erode familiar pursuits of national, cultural, ethnic, or other essential identity and that plunge people into constant negotiation of meaning.

Gabai Baaré (he's from Niger, but that isn't clear here and doesn't need to be; in fact it's important that he's peripatetic and transnational) is a trader in "wood" (African wooden art carvings). A Muslim with a cultivated horror of idols, he buys largely from animists who may create the works as genuine fetish objects but who also cheerfully learn how to antique and replicate them for current Western art fashion. He sells to a broad, mostly Western clientele, and he has a booming business in the United States among gallery owners. It turns out that there's a hotel in New York catering to wood dealers, which is where Taylor and Barbash filmed some of their sequences.

He's the cultural and commercial broker between the creators' and the purchasers' view of a package of meaning, and he's an incarnation of the commodification-of-the-world process. Gabai Baaré ought to make gallery buyers, critics, and anthropologists

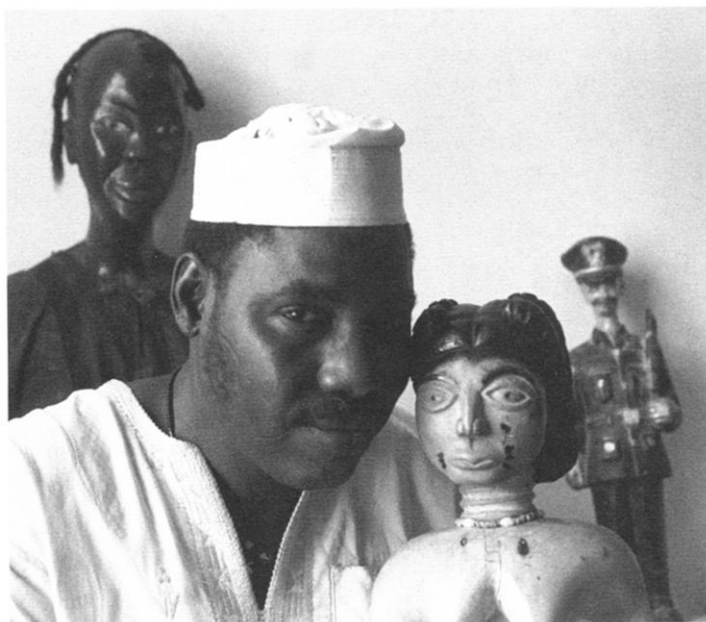


Figure 3

Still from *In and Out of Africa*. Directed and produced by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor. Featuring Gabai Barré. Based on original research by Christopher Steiner.

deeply nervous. He forces us to ask what we mean by the concepts—art, authenticity, even culture—he treats as mere selling points.

The film organizes the marketing process around a neat set of themes. The opening section variously defines wood according to the different actors in the drama—the trader, the art collector, the gallery owner, the art dealer, the African anti-imperialist artist. Having problematized (as they say) the very notion of African art, the film then frontally explores the notion of authenticity, again through interviews and observation. Finally, it explores culturally varying definitions of aesthetics in African art.

At the outset, the filmmakers say that this “is a story about the meaning of art.” But it’s about more than art. It’s a case study in the mutability, through commodification, of cultural expression. The objects that Baaré hawks obtain meaning mostly in the local cultural context, which tends uncomfortably to relate to imperial experience.

Compare the reactions of the American buyer with those of the Sotheby’s buyer, with those of the German-born Côte d’Ivoire resident, with those of the Cameroon-born Côte d’Ivoire resident, artist, and author. Compare the differing and almost invariably uncomfortable critical or dismissive Western reactions to the “colon” sculptures—figures stemming from the colonial period where Western and African cultural traits meld (Africans in Western dress, or, from another perspective, Westerners with African features).

And so who is the hero, or at least the villain? Who is authentic, and who is faking it? Who should we be able to pour our contempt onto? On whom shall we exercise our immense reservoir of anxiety, self-doubt and suspicion? Without seeing the film, you would easily guess the complacent pontificators of the Western art world, the crass New York gallery owners, even the hustling middleman making international business out of interior cultural meaning of African animist creators.

But in each case, you would be wrong—at least in this film. What is perhaps most remarkable about *In and Out of Africa* is its ability to represent each character on screen with respect, as part of a narrative not about heroes and victims, authentic and inauthentic subjects, but about shifting narratives, through the shifting definition of objects made and received with passion and symbolic investment. Each character is the center of his or her own story, each story entirely plausible. Their interaction does not mitigate in the slightest their profound disjunctures. The market functions quite nicely, no matter what each actor makes of it.

In and Out of Africa's makers come to the project with keen observational skills and an ability to get people to let them hang around. Their subjects are all people who are expertly at ease with symbolic issues. Each is loquaciously aware of the creation and evolution of a market in images that make a special claim to transcendental meaning. They speak of business, of romance, of "profound taste," in many roundabout ways of the commodification of aesthetic passion. None is complacent, though all are unapologetic and mostly entrepreneurial.

And so the film documents, among other things, the creation of cultural space, the space occupied by the tenants in the New York hotel where interpretation and translation have become a profession, a way of life. As the global notion of disenfranchisement comes to be replaced with notions of the postnational and the endlessly renegotiated, the values and techniques of global salesmen like Gabai Baaré seem ever more rewarding of study. It is the success of *In and Out of Africa* that it permits repeated viewings and provokes thought by its combination of trust in its informants and trust in its own set of curiosities. It makes possible contemplation of what otherwise seems to be endlessly shifting cultural sands.

Rastafari Voices Reach Ethiopia

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The Emperor's Birthday. 1992. 52 minutes, color. A film by *John Dollar*. For information contact Volcano Films, Ltd., 52 Long Lane, Smithfield, London E.C.1. (071/600-0481; Fax 071/600-0482).

DIASPORAS INVARIABLY LEAVE a trail of collective memory about other times and places which, when refracted through the prism of history, create new maps of desire and attachment. But while most displaced peoples frame these attachments with the aid of living memory and cultural traditions, those in the African diaspora have traced their links to a homeland through the trauma of slavery and a welter of invented traditions. The maps they have imagined of Africa are made meaningful in ideologies of struggle and resistance forged in a crucible of exile.

Arguably the most poignant of these discursive topographies is that of the Rastafari faith and culture (Figure 4). Like the Garvey Movement and other forms of pan-Africanism before it, the Rastafari fashion their vision of an ancestral homeland through a complex of ideas and symbols known as Ethiopianism, an ideology that has informed African-American concepts of nationhood and cultural pride since the late 16th century.