

BOOK REVIEW

Melissa Thackway and Jean-Marie Teno. *Reel Resistance: The Cinema of Jean-Marie Teno*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2020. 253 pp. Photographs and Film Stills. Bibliography. Appendices. Index. \$68.98. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1847012425.

Reel Resistance: The Cinema of Jean-Marie Teno is a collaboration between the Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno and Melissa Thackway, a film scholar and teacher. In the preface, Teno explains the impetus for working with Thackway on this project. In the introduction, Thackway recounts how her passion for Teno's work was born and evolved from her scholarship on African cinema in *Africa Shoots Back* (James Currey, 2003). The nature of their various collaborations and close friendship is thus articulated from the outset. This volume provides a hands-on discussion of Teno's life story, his major films, and his approach to documentary filmmaking as it evolved over time.

Part One opens with "Documentary Filmmaking in Africa: An Introduction," in which Thackway covers a lot of ground for readers who may be unfamiliar with the subject. She discusses definitions of the documentary as a genre and reviews the history of documentary filmmaking in Africa. This background on early African cinema and the documentary as a genre provides context for understanding the emergence of Teno's filmmaking in the 1980s. The second chapter, "Critical Insights: Reading the Films of Jean-Marie Teno," offers a sustained discussion of Teno's work. Thackway considers important characteristics of his style and the evolution of his vision. Of course, there is attention to his commitment to observing the world around him and aspects of his political engagement. Thackway also examines the filmmaker's subjectivity and the ways in which he is present in his films, including his use of voiceover narration that features his own voice. She continues by developing the importance of history and memory in Teno's films and what she characterizes as "(Hi)stories, Memory: Decolonial Readings of the Past." Her critical approach is clearly informed by the "decolonial" turn found in work by Walter D. Mignolo and others. There is some discussion of how Teno engages with the archive of colonial history, and issues of imperialism and European hegemony are presented for reconsideration. Finally, there is attention to Teno's transnational and exilic life in between France, where he lives in Mèze, and Cameroon, where he was born and where the vast majority of his films are set.

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The second part of the book is devoted to a series of wide-ranging conversations between the two authors that spans some hundred pages, beginning with the filmmaker's childhood in Cameroon. Although Teno has given many interviews over the years, there is considerable new material here for scholars who are already familiar with his work. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this part is how Teno discloses the persistent effects of his fraught relationship with his father and the absence of maternal love. He talks about his schooling in Cameroon and France and about one of his first jobs working as an editor at a television station in France. With this background established, they discuss Teno's first films and how his keen and abiding interest in filming the real world around him took hold. Indeed, the desire to represent his neighborhood, his country, and his people's hardships is a motif that runs throughout the entire discussion of his filmmaking practice. The authors also cover a range of topics such as his thoughts on the documentary as a genre; aesthetic innovation from Djibril Diop Mambety to the present; his embrace of subjectivity, and his use of voiceover narration. Their conversation deals with institutional factors such as the changes at FESPACO as well as the *Guilde of African Filmmakers* in France. Teno laments the politics involved in funding films today and the insufficient critical reception of his work. In terms of the field of African filmmaking, more generally, he is critical, and rightly so, of the homogenizing effects of globalization on newer filmmakers and neoliberal funding models. The high points of his career have come in the form of meaningful friendships with like-minded artists and fruitful exchanges with audiences who discover his work, as in the retrospective of his films at the "Escales Documentaires" festival in Gabon in 2013. The scope of their exchange is extensive, while also focusing on specific aspects of image, sound, and the conceptualization of history. The tone is candid, with the kind of comfort and frankness that can exist between close intellectual friends.

Part Three includes two appendices. The first offers selections of Teno's writings about film, including his 1995 essay "Freedom: The Power to say No." The second contains a complete list of Teno's films with titles, production details, and synopses. A brief bibliography of critical works of particular interest to Thackway is provided, but it is not an exhaustive list of criticism on Teno's work.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Higgins, MaryEllen. 2015. "The Winds of African Cinema." *African Studies Review* 58 (3): 77–92. doi:10.1017/asr.2015.76.

Izzo, Justin. 2015. "Jean-Marie Teno's Documentary Modernity: From Millennial Anxiety to Cinematic Kinship." *African Studies Review* 58 (1): 39–53. doi:10.1017/asr.2015.3.