

**Reel Resistance: the Cinema of Jean-Marie Teno.**

Melissa Thackway & Jean-Marie Teno.

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Reel Resistance: the Cinema of Jean-Marie Teno is a timely work highlighting the biography, filmic poetics and anticolonial politics of filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno.

Melissa Thackway, the book's co-author, is a British independent scholar and translator residing in Paris, who has published widely on film in Africa and the diaspora. Her 2003 book *Africa Shoots Back* underlines her postcolonial approach to film analysis.

Jean-Marie Teno is a Cameroonian filmmaker living in France. The hallmarks of his work are creative freedom, disregard for the 'canon', narrative interest in biographies and a focus on the history/politics of dominated nations. Despite his international reputation, Teno has experienced financial and professional hardships.

The title *Reel Resistance* evokes the poetics and politics of African cinema since the 1960s. It uses a metaphor harking back to the pre-digital era, when feature films followed newsreels enunciating colonial master narratives, 'defining' Africans and other subaltern peoples, shaping dominated mindscapes and cartographies.

Some African filmmakers resisted; they deconstructed colonial representations of Africa, filmed their reality, thwarted colonial silence, palimpsest and cliché. In the era of independence, some wielded the camera as a weapon or a pen. Such is the cinema of Jean-Marie Teno—narrating human stories of the present, whilst drawing inspiration from ancestral narratives and aesthetics.

Reel Resistance offers, through dialogue and academic analysis, the biography and filmography of Teno. It tracks his successes, achieved against the odds, and reveals his anticolonial aesthetics. Filming against the grain, his oeuvre imbricates history and story, through the gaze of a collectively-involved "I". The result is documentary redefined.

The epigraph of *Reel Resistance* sets the tone by citing the late Agnès Varda, whose words serve to salute the ongoing oeuvre of Jean-Marie Teno, whilst recognising others like him, "[a]ll the inventive and courageous filmmakers, those who create an original

cinema, fiction or documentary, who do not enjoy the limelight, but who continue [nevertheless]".

Teno's preface to this major co-authored volume places his own work within the documentary genre. He underlines the hurdles involved in documentary filmmaking, especially for a minority, African/Cameroonian filmmaker residing in France. Although documentary is finally emerging as a prominent genre in France, acceptance still comes at an exorbitant price: the resisting filmmaker must strenuously (and impecuniously) create alone in a medium which requires both teamwork and funding. But funding and box-office success, Teno believes, often involve submission to sanitised poetics and politics. Willingness to utter politically and culturally valid indignation must be traded off to become "an acceptable and accepted Other". In the spaces in the book dedicated specifically to his voice, Teno questions whether aspects of his aesthetics of "formal resistance" might account for the side-lining of his work by the contemporary African intelligentsia. Is his take on story too simple, he wonders? Is it too different, too far from what is expected?

Melissa Thackway's introduction emphasises the postcolonial need for a focus on *the real*, counteracting the sombre history of colonial lies and betrayal. Thackway's self-confessed subjective glance results from participating in intimate dialogue and, ultimately, collaboration with Jean-Marie Teno as his assistant on his last two films, *Une Feuille dans le vent* (2013) and *Chosen* (2018). Thackway had long been fascinated by the "force and originality" of the work of Teno, whom she describes as an "unorthodox", bold Black male African/Cameroonian filmmaker. For Thackway, Teno's films, such as *Afrique, je te plumerai* (1992), *Clando*, (1996) and the aforementioned *Une Feuille dans le vent* and *Chosen*, "push back boundaries", produce "cinematic pleasure" and form a worthy corpus for academic analysis, due to their provoking of "challenging social, political, intellectual and artistic debate".

However, personal admiration and aesthetic pleasure are not the main justifications Thackway gives for co-authoring *Reel Resistance*. She underlines, instead, the importance of Teno's cinema for Film Studies and African Studies.

Reel Resistance acknowledges the difference and asymmetry of the authors' respective "personalities and positionalities" in a work that brings together a "White British female scholar from the Global North" and a "Black Cameroonian male artist from the global South". I disagree with this forced *décolonial* dichotomy: Teno is a cosmopolitan, widely travelled artist, who has mostly resided in the North, outside his native Cameroon, whilst the influence of French language and culture on Thackway is clear.

The postcolonial concepts Thackway uses are generally on point, however I cannot help taking issue with her comfortable use of the term "subaltern", assuring the reader that not only can the "subaltern" speak (Spivak), but that he or she can also do so "refractorily"; he/she can speak back and shoot back. Unless employed with irony, "subaltern" has a tendency, surely unintended here, of naturalising, of normalising the constructed status of dominated subjects and nations. That said, Thackway's methodology, based on decolonial/postcolonial theories is rigorous, savvy and balanced.

The book is divided into three main sections. Part 1 proposes an "Introduction to Documentary Filmmaking in Africa", which "situates and contextualises Teno's work" within the global and African contexts (chapter 1), while offering "critical insights" into its "salient themes" and aesthetic characteristics. Part 2, titled "In Conversation" gives ample space for Teno to retrace and develop, in his own voice, his "first steps" and "first encounters", his commitment to "filming the real", his documentary practice and experiments, his employment of archives and other assembled audio and visual elements, his African endogenous reinvention of the documentary and his fears and visions for the future of African filmmaking. Here, in Part 2, Thackway, following keen and substantial theoretical analysis and in keeping with her postcolonial approach, effaces herself. She allows Teno room to gather together, in one place, his views and debates with film audiences and students worldwide. Thackway unobtrusively enhances Teno's willingness to address with confidence and candour, historical awareness and critical incisiveness, political engagement and soul-searching, her questions regarding his creative journey. Reaching far beyond the self, Teno delves into problematics of story, history, memory, "decolonizing the cinema", "endogenising film language", transmissions and circulations. Part 3 is devoted to substantial appendices featuring the "Writings of Jean-Marie Teno" and his filmography, respectively.

Reel Resistance is valuable as a pioneering work on Jean-Marie Teno's biography and filmography. The originality of *Reel Resistance* may be highlighted by a comparison with a worthy but altogether different monograph: *Med Hondo: un cinéaste rebel* by Ibrahim Signaté (1994). In *Reel Resistance* the co-authors present and unpack a rich, deep, multifaceted offering which is academically sound, attentive to specific films, helpful regarding the overall corpus of the filmmaker's oeuvre, whilst tackling the more overarching problematics of the documentary genre and colonial history. This is already a feat.

But there is more: in *Reel Resistance* the filmmaker and his oeuvre exist, fully and clearly, in themselves, rather than serving as pretexts and prime materials for scholarly investigation or the performance of knowledge.

Thackway's generosity and critical rigour allow her to pinpoint the international value of Teno's cinema, whilst Teno's bold and brilliant understanding of history and politics makes this work a must for readers, be they scholars or the general public. *Reel Resistance* is a treasure trove for understanding how the colonial past impacts the cultural present and future, in film and society, eliciting a wealth of creative resistance.

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