
H-France Review Vol. 15 (November 2015), No. 163

Cécile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship*. Oxford: Legenda, 2014. ix + 125 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-909662-01-08.

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Readers hoping for a comprehensive account of cultural representations of violent dictatorships in postcolonial Africa will be disappointed by Cécile Bishop's study. So too will readers hoping for an overview of the key socio-political developments explaining the rise to and hold on power of the continent's most infamous twentieth-century dictators. For *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship* is a cultural interpretation that often transcends its focus on the postcolonial project in order to raise important questions regarding the work of criticism more generally. At times insightful, at times frustrating, Bishop's arguments in this brief, but rewarding read are never anything less than ambitious.

The structure of this volume is relatively straightforward. An opening chapter lays out the critical methodology to be adopted and this is then applied in the following three chapters to "texts" taken respectively from literary fiction, film and political theory. From the beginning, Bishop's tack is to foreground the "interconnections between the aesthetic and the impulse towards political realities" (p. 4) that underpin these texts whilst at the same time highlighting what she sees as the "defiance of postcolonial criticism towards the aesthetic" and the way in which the "legitimacy of the field appears to be founded on the political project it supports, rather than on the aesthetic value of the objects it studies" (p. 7). It is fair to say, of course, that tensions between critics opting to take a 'textual' turn and those opting for a more 'political' turn have cut across many of the key postcolonial debates since the early 1990s at least. And whilst these tensions and disagreements constitute a vital part of the development of postcolonial studies, they have at times prompted simplified, even caricatured descriptions of what the field has achieved and what it "does."

If I have a quibble with Bishop at all, it is that in her opening chapter's description of postcolonial criticism she does sometimes teeter towards such oversimplification as well as uncertainty or even contradiction regarding her own position. For example, in a demonstration of the supposed "pressures towards the politicization of literary criticism" (p. 9) in the postcolonial context, Bishop refers to a particular reading of Ngugi wa Thionga's *Wizard of the Crow* in which certain "formal devices" are interpreted by the critic concerned as signs of "resistance" and therefore as evidence of this novel's political dimension (p. 8). Later, however, in an argument regarding "representational conventions" (p. 91) and Achille Mbembe's uses of Sony Labou Tansi's anti-realist writing, she suggests that it would be "hard to believe that fiction and reality could merely have been confused by Mbembe" (p. 91). Indeed. Surely the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality is the very least to be expected of any critic? And if the critic in question here chooses to privilege the "political" it seems clear enough, as the quotation used by Bishop demonstrates, that it is not to the exclusion of the aesthetic but rather as evidence of how, as she herself notes throughout, these aspects are inevitably entwined.

Similarly, Bishop's questioning of postcolonial criticism's "impact as a political activity" (p. 8) can be a little off-putting on occasion. How precisely is this "political activity" to be understood? Does it mean critics, regardless of their methodology, are to surrender any beliefs and convictions they might hold because their job is to attend to the aesthetic? To be fair to Bishop, she does grapple to some extent with the contradictions and aporias of the debates and tensions she identifies, and if anything some of the uncertainties and hesitations that emerge at least highlight that there is no easy way out of these issues. The efforts to restore critical balance are also laudable. Nonetheless, a more thorough and nuanced examination of the conditions that lead to the emergence of postcolonial studies, as well as to the complexities and even contradictions of its methodologies would have strengthened this opening chapter. Better clarification of critical engagement with notions of the "aesthetic" would also have been helpful. Bishop is most surely correct when she says, "I do not think one needs to endorse classic discourses about the aesthetic in order to examine aesthetic experiences" (p. 109). However, it is likely the reader looking for an alternative model will be frustrated by the rather brief section devoted to the concept towards the end of the opening chapter. Overall, more sustained attention to these issues would have avoided the impression that the aim of postcolonial criticism has been to wield the hammer of political reality against the aesthetic rather than articulate the role played by politics, history and empire in representational practices.

Whatever the failings "in theory," in practice *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship* really raises its game. It is when Bishop steps back from broad generalizations regarding postcolonial theory and immerses her arguments in the details of the films and texts she has chosen to analyse that the astuteness of her approach is most evident. Her two readings of Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer rire* not only recall Nicholas Harrison's approach to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in his influential *Postcolonial Criticism* [1], but also underline the value of attending to the complex ways in which both the aesthetic and the political operate in a fictional text and the ways in which this relationship can be (mis)interpreted according to the readings privileged. The highlight for this reader is Bishop's identification of the pitfalls of an imbalanced approach which she demonstrates in her unpicking of the flawed connection made by Dominic Thomas between his understanding of the "politics" of *Le Pleurer rire* and Lopes's problematic connections with the dictatorship of Congo-Brazzaville. In this instance, her identification of the critic's rash "impulse towards political realities" (p. 26) and the resulting misinterpretation of textual signifiers lend earlier claims about overly "political" readings far more plausibility.

Chapter two also takes on the blindspots of certain tendencies in postcolonial criticism in a way that compensates for earlier misgivings. In its analysis of three cinematic representations of Idi Amin, this chapter refuses to bow to a view prevalent in postcolonial criticism according to which literature is the paradigmatic form of representation. It also provides a welcome comparative approach, basing itself as it does on films that are respectively British, Franco-Swiss and British-Kenyan productions. This approach is further complemented by a focus on the very different generic identities of the films studied: a commercially successful mainstream "historical" drama, a 'factual' documentary and an "exploitation" film. In this instance, Bishop's tendency to tilt the balance of criticism towards the aesthetic means that some readers may need to fill in historical and political background regarding the detail of Amin's Uganda. However, her perspicacious approach towards questions of cultural/racial stereotypes reveals that it is as much the conventions of genre as it is political "truths" that shape viewers' perceptions of referentiality. Once again, her insights into the failings of overly political readings are carefully supported by examples of criticism that overlook the complexity of the aesthetic experience in the rush to establish the factual credibility of artistic representations.

The deftly argued final chapter on Achille Mbembe's academic essay, "Notes provisoire sur la postcolonie," reminds us that if postcolonial criticism has grounded itself in the analysis of cultural productions such as literature, and increasingly cinema, it has also grounded itself in a critical or theoretical literature that is often taken for granted in terms of its own aesthetic choices. If anything,

Bishop is even more impressive as she explores the connections between the conceptual and aesthetic in a genre not usually associated with the latter. Her exemplary analysis of Mbembe's figurative language and his uses of fiction persuasively concludes that even in the critical literature of postcolonial studies, "the potential effects of the text are necessarily mediated and shaped by the aesthetic experience" (p. 100).

Whatever misgivings perhaps created by the opening chapter of *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship*, the reflections in this study are ultimately sustained by the sharpness of its analytical insights and the thorough nature of much of the research that supports them. Ultimately, the book is an example of excellent scholarship that leads to a very thought-provoking consideration of the work of critical interpretation more widely.

NOTE

[1] Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

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ISSN 1553-9172