



‘Emergence’ on Screen and on Stage:

Brief report on the 5th CODESRIA FESPACO workshop

Ouagadougou, Burkan Faso,

February 27-28

Ten years of CODESRIA FESPACO workshops

On February 27-28, 2017 CODESRIA in partnership with The African Guild of Filmmakers and the Pan African Film & Television Festival (FESPACO) organized a workshop on the theme “‘Emergence’ on Screen and on Stage.’ The workshop, which was held in Ouagadougou, as part of the bi-annual activities of FESPACO. Since 2007, the workshop has been a side event of FESPACO, and has served as an opportunity for CODESRIA and its partners to assemble scholars, artists and practitioners to discuss burning issues in African film and theater.

‘Emergence’

CODESRIA invited artists, scholars and practitioners to reflect on ‘Emergence’ on Screen and on Stage in Africa. ‘Emergence’ has come to dominate discussions of political economy in Africa. Whether styled as the various *‘plan[s]emergent’* that are bandied about in many francophone countries or dressed in other slogans like ‘A better Ghana,’ the ‘Cameroon of Greater Achievements’ or the ‘African renaissance’ for example, the idea of rising out of an abyss into a place and time of glory has come to play multiple roles in African life. ‘Emergence’ and its synonyms have become integral parts of the struggle over the (re)presentation, definition, governance, dominance, exploitation and ‘development’ of the continent in ways that recall the storied history of ‘emancipation’ and ‘liberation’ in an earlier era. It has been a defining theme for Pan-Africanism in literature since Casely Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911)

The idea of emergence is also integral to African film and theater as a favored leitmotif around which stories are created and performed. The spouse emerging from an abusive marriage, the student finally emerging from a period of scholarly mediocrity, the former house-help emerging from a life of poverty and hardship, the community finally freeing itself

from the oppressive tyrant and the poor society attaining the heights of wealth all embody the idea of the shedding of shackles to achieve better states of being.

On another level, talk of the rise of film industries often captured in the terms Nollywood, Ghallywood, and ever new ‘...woods’ is common, and parallels pervasive discourses concerning our national and continental creative economy.

Workshop deliberations

The workshop assembled 47 filmmakers, theater professionals, researchers, academics, the press and practitioners from intergovernmental organizations and civil society. They were drawn from 14 African countries as well as Brazil, USA, UK, France, Belgium, Canada and Germany. The second day of the workshop also saw the participation of a contingent of 28 students from the University of Ghana, Legon.

The workshop involved three roundtables and three panels that were each tasked with grappling with a pair of questions. The first roundtable on ‘Thoughts on the meanings of a travelling concept’ dealt with the following questions: What is emergence? How is emergence conceived of in the many spaces and times in which it is deployed and invoked? This was followed by the first panel, which focused on ‘Theories of positive social and artistic change’ and dealt with how emergence happens and what the many imaginaries of how societies, people, institutions, art forms, etc. ‘emerge’ are.

The second panel was on the theme ‘The end point/destination of emergence.’ The questions addressed were ‘Where are we emerging to? What are the many ways in which the destination of the emergent are headed imagined and portrayed?’ The second roundtable was preoccupied with ‘The making of the past in emergence discourses.’ It explored what African societies are emerging from and how the space and time from which these societies are emerging from are portrayed.

Panel 3 focused on ‘The toils of emergence’ and grappled with two questions: What are the (potential) costs of emergence? What are the costs of the struggle to achieve it? The final roundtable came under the theme ‘Going beyond emergence: The silenced and distorted visions.’ It reflected on the following questions: What are the alternative visions and conceptions of the better life that are silenced, side-lined and muted in dominant discourses on emergence? What are the alternative visions and conceptions of the process for striving toward the good life that dominant discourses on emergence mute or elide?

Presentations and discussions reflected a general concern with and skepticism over the term ‘emergence,’ its origins, uses and promise. In dealing with ‘emergence’ the workshop touched on many important issues including the evolution of theater and film in Africa and the relations between these art forms and the scholarly and policy worlds. The wider political, economic and cultural environments in which film and theater evolve received much attention.

The question of identity arose and received much attention. It is, after all, a certain self that emerges or is emergent and defining what this self is and what it should be provoked lively

debates. Related to the issue of identity was that of citizenship. What rights, responsibilities and privileges do we arrogate to various segments of our ‘emerging’ society? There was much reflection on how our understandings of identity and citizenship affect how our societies evolve and the possibilities for improving the lives of people. The centrality of politics whether seen in a wholly negative light or portrayed as the only pathway toward remaking societies in ways that improve the lives of people was acknowledged.

The workshop achieved most of its key goals including the following: 1) Creating space for a robust discussion of the concept of emergence in film and theater as well as on the political and economic stages in Africa; and 2) promoting dialogue between different generations of scholars and artists in the CODESRIA community with the goal of renewing the Council.

Next steps

The CODESRIA Secretariat will follow up the workshop with the following:

1. *Policy brief*: A policy brief will be published to bring discussions at the forum to a broad policy audience.
2. *Journal issue*: A special issue of one of CODESRIA’s journals will be published with the best papers from the conference to make debates available to a scholarly audience.

A more detailed report on the workshop will be published soon. For further information please contact Zeynabou Kane at Humanities@codesria.org.