

Queer Bodies in African Films.

Gibson Ncube.

Makhanda: African Humanities Association, 2022. 159 pp.

ISBN 978-1-920033-99-6.

In his book *Queer Bodies in African Films* (2022), Gibson Ncube offers striking new ways of reading and interpreting the filmed human body, with implications that are important to scholarly understandings of what can and should constitute text, expression, resistance, and legibility in the burgeoning and increasingly complex field of queer African studies. Through his detailed analyses of a selected array of queer-themed films from different parts of the continent, Ncube zooms in on the materiality and corporeality of human bodies as they are depicted in films, focusing his attention on the naked and the clothed body; on bodily movements and gestures; on touch and intimacy (or the lack thereof); and on the skin, scars, scabs, implants, and genitals that comprise and define the complex and shifting lives of the protagonists on the screen. In reading and analysing the queer body itself—the flesh and skin and organs that it consists of, how it moves, and how it robes or disrobes itself—Ncube makes the central contention that queer bodies have their own “linguistic code” (2) and their “own grammars and lexicon” (8) through which they are able to “weave and tell stories” (xiii). In other words, Ncube sees the material queer body not only as a text that can be interpreted, but as a mode of expression that can intervene in and subvert the hetero-patriarchal norms and contexts in which it is located. This attention to corporeality as a form of language and expression is especially pertinent to queer lived realities on the African continent, which

continue to be overwhelmingly silenced, erased, and marginalised in social and political discourses. As Ncube rightly points out, the significance of bodies as “discursive and textualized sociocultural phenomena” (2) has largely been overlooked in this field, so that “queer bodies themselves, their embodiment, their erotic and sexual potentialities, and their relationality, have not been considered as viable and worthwhile areas of understanding queer social realities” (15).

As closely related to his focus on embodiment, I find Ncube’s readings of the silences that surround and emanate from the filmed queer body to be particularly pertinent. In analysing the choices made by filmmakers and directors from the Maghreb, for instance, Ncube highlights how the foregrounding of diegetic sound, the use of minimal dialogue, and the decision to *not* screen queer intimacy can all be read as reflective of the “social silence” (42) that is imposed on non-normative sexualities in the Maghreb countries. This highlights how knowledge and an understanding of queer lived realities on the African continent can be derived “not only from what is represented, screened, and said”, but also “from what remains unsaid, unrepresented, and unscreened” (44). Conversely, Ncube also demonstrates how queer agency, resistance, and expression can also be forged within silence, the unspoken, and the non-verbal. In his discussion of “ambivalent” same-sex sexualities as portrayed in a selection of Egyptian films, for instance, he shows how the movements of bodies—their gestures, actions, and forms of touching and relating to other bodies—can all be read as modes of expression and assertions of agency. Similarly, in his reading of the 2020 Kenyan film *I Am Samuel*, Ncube explores how the protagonists negotiate their queerness in both rural and urban settings, and in relation to familial ties and acceptance, primarily through the corporeal and the non-verbal, so that their bodies ultimately “speak (in) a silent language which articulates a generative form of transgression” (71).

This attention to subtle and often unspoken modes of transgression resonates with the work of other scholars in queer African studies who are demonstrating an increased interest in how queer lived experiences on the continent do not necessarily follow the script of overt resistance, ‘coming out’, or a desire for ‘visibility’ that is seen in Western models of sexualities and identities. Ncube references Lindsey Green-Simms’s recent book *Queer African Cinemas* (2022) in this regard, but similar ideas have also been explored by theorists such as Stella Nyanzi (2015) and Eddie Ombagi (2019). For Ncube, in fact, there is a crucial distinction to be made between “visibility” and “legibility”: whereas the

former is “perfunctory and superficial” (62), the latter gestures towards the more complex ways that queer bodies “enter discursivity” (62) and become socially understood and understandable within their specific contexts. Legibility in this sense is often achieved through “small and everyday acts” (66) that centre the corporeal and the unspoken, enacting subtle shifts in social relations.

In addition to enlarging our understandings of how queer bodies and bodily expressions can offer their own forms of text, grammar, and lexicon, I appreciate the numerous other ways that this book consciously moves away from well-trodden ground in queer African studies. In his two opening chapters, Ncube focuses on films from North Africa: looking first at Maghrebian films and then at Egyptian films. These geographical regions, as Ncube contends, are not only usually overlooked in many queer African studies but are typically considered separately to other parts of the continent, so that this field of study is generally “bifurcated” (2) between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, with scholars tending to focus exclusively on works from one of these regions. By contrast, Ncube’s aim with this book is to move away from this “fragmented and regionalised” (4) approach, as he brings his readings of Maghrebian and Egyptian films into conversation with his analyses of East African and South African films, which form the focus of his third and fourth chapters respectively. Ncube is able to draw on his multilingual training and experience in both English and French literary studies in this regard, bringing a new cross-continental and “Pan-African” (4) approach that I found to be refreshing and informative, as my work and reading in this field has thus far centred only on sub-Saharan Africa: a confirmation of Ncube’s argument that scholars tend to work exclusively on separate regions of the continent.

There were several other elements of the book that I found to be innovative and reflective of a conscious decision to forge new roads of inquiry in this field. Ncube chooses, for instance, to not focus on films from West Africa at all, given that films from this region have already “elicited considerable scholarly debates” (5). He also examines films from a wide timespan, ranging from the 1970s to the 2020s, an approach that differs considerably from recent studies that focus exclusively on 21st-century cultural production. His attention to trans identity in his analysis of the Ugandan documentary *The Pearl of Africa* (2016) broadens the scope of his inquiry from same-sex sexuality to gender identity, bringing added dimensions to his exploration of queer legibility as mediated through the body.

Finally, his analysis of South African films demonstrates a novel reading of “how intersectional bodies have evolved from the apartheid era to the contemporary post-apartheid period” (96). This comparative reading of films set within these two different eras allows him to trace the shifts in attitudes, constructions, and possibilities surrounding queer bodies located at divergent intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the country’s history—a method that contrasts notably with many similar studies in the field that have chosen to only examine the post-apartheid period.

Taken as a whole, Ncube’s book demonstrates several commendable and markedly new scopes of inquiry in queer African studies, foregrounding methods, ideas, and insights that I am sure will be productively taken up by other scholars working in this field.

Leila Hall
HallLM@ufs.ac.za
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, South Africa
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5802-2064>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v6i12.19321>