

# An African in Paris, Fighting to Preserve His Dignity

Long out of distribution and now streaming, Med Hondo's "Soleil Ô" is an unclassifiable allegory of economic migration and systemic racism as relevant now as it was in 1970.

By [J. Hoberman](#) July 22, 2020

Robert Liensol as the unnamed protagonist in "Soleil Ô," Med Hondo's debut feature. Criterion Collection

A "colonized" African man with hope in his heart and a

degree in accounting relocates to his European "motherland" and experiences a brutal disillusionment. His story provides the focus of Med Hondo's first feature, "Soleil Ô" (1970), an exemplary militant film that is coolly confrontational and at times bleakly humorous.

The movie, long out of distribution, has been restored and is now streaming on the Criterion Channel. Its title referring to a West Indian song about the horrors of slavery, "[Soleil Ô](#)" is a work with power to both inform and judge its viewers.

Hondo opens the film with a compressed history of European imperialism, involving forced conversion to Catholicism and induced tribal warfare, before following his unnamed protagonist (Robert Liensol) to Paris, where in the first of many misapprehensions, he begins searching for an address that is actually in Marseilles.

Dapper and reserved, the man has a difficult time finding any sort of work, let alone a job in accounting. (In one bit of business, an established migrant takes his suitcase and offers him a broom.) Graffiti warns of the "black invasion" or the "Negro-Arab menace." Hostile whites run the gamut from hysterical to sullen. Some are indifferent, others offer ineffectual solidarity — debating each other rather than engaging the protagonist.

In certain respects, Hondo's film suggests Jean Rouch's staged documentary "[Petit à Petit](#)" in which former

colonial subjects make an ethnographic exploration of their colonizer's domain, though "Soleil Ô" is more radical in that the filmmaker himself is a former subject. (Hondo, who was born in Ain Beni Mathar, Morocco, to parents of Mauritanian and Senegalese descent, emigrated to France in the 1950s and [died last year](#).) "We'll colonize them back," one young African jokes at a meeting called to discuss the warehousing of migrant workers.

Hondo self-financed and shot "Soleil Ô" over a period of years. (Some of the cast is drawn from the Griot-Shango theater, which Hondo, who also had a career as an actor, co-founded with Leinsol.) In the tradition of similarly made first features like Satyajit Ray's ["Pather Panchali"](#) and [John Cassavetes's " Shadows,"](#) it is a movie that raises pragmatic invention to an aesthetic principle.

Hondo employs a number of strategies, including animation, interpolated interviews, slapstick skits and staged documentary — as when he films the response of Parisians to the spectacle of his protagonist embracing a white woman on the Champs-Élysées. Perhaps because it fits no fixed category — variously or simultaneously autobiography, allegory, cinéma vérité, and guerrilla theater — "Soleil Ô" was taken by some for an exercise in African new wave when it premiered at the 1970 Cannes Film Festival. Still, it is impossible to mistake the burlesque of French citizenship classes or crescendo of disgust and rage with which the movie ends.

The New York Times critic A.H. Weiler [found](#) “Soleil Ô” more unsettling when it opened in New York, characterizing it as “sharply direct” and “disturbingly vivid.” Hondo does not pull his punches. The movie is not only a bitter firsthand analysis of economic migration but also a similarly cutting critique of systemic white supremacy. Half a century has scarcely blunted — and may have even enhanced — its relevance.

## **Soleil Ô**

Streaming on the [Criterion Channel](#).

**Rewind is an occasional column covering revived, restored and rediscovered movies.**

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