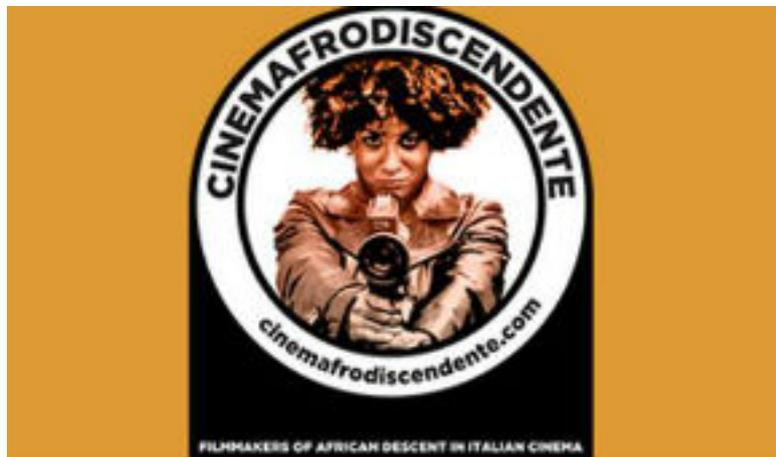


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A new blog on line from October 1st 2015

# **Cinematrodiscendente: Filmmakers of African Descent**



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**Abstract:**

Cinematrodiscendente.com: a new blog about Filmmakers of African Descent in Italian Cinema, on line from October 1st 2015

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**CINEMAFRICA | Africa e diaspora nel cinema**

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Have you ever watched an Italian movie made in the 50s or 60s, a genre or even auteurist film, and stopped at the apparition of a black actor or actress with the impression you saw him/her somewhere else? Perhaps, in some cases, it would have been impossible to establish the identity of that performer; maybe the character was never called by name and the credits were sketchy. Still, some of those filmmakers of African birth or descent have cut across many decades in Italian cinema, making his/her mark in dozens of titles, even if only in secondary roles. Like Black American John Kitzmiller (44 films between 1947 and 1965), a chemical engineer based in Italy in 1947 as a captain of the US Fifth Army. Neorealist director Luigi Zampa launched him as an actor in *Vivere in pace*, which was given the Best Foreign Language Film award by the New York Film Critics Circle. He spent the rest of his life primarily in Italy, working in feature films and TV-dramas under the direction of prestigious directors like Fellini and Lattuada, and winning the first black performer in the entire history of Cannes Film Festival the Best Actor award as lead in the Yugoslavian war movie *Dolina miru* (France `tiglic, 1956). Most of you couldn't possibly figure it out, (neither did we) but we're talking about a little army of people, almost six hundred in the whole history of Italian film and TV drama. The majority of them signed up as actors or actresses, but you can find directors, screenwriters, DPs, producers, music composers, editors, film programmers, casting agents.

Many were US-born. Some others, like Kitzmiller, found in Italian cinema their first major role, such as Dots M. Johnson, who starred as a black GI in an episode of *Paisà* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946), or Vonetta McGee, chosen by Luigi Magni as the lead actress in his first work, *Faustina* (1968). A bunch of them found in Italy a sort of Eldorado in the period of Blaxploitation, like Woody Strode (15 titles between 1968 and 1989) and Fred Williamson (22 titles between 1974 and 1991). Many more came from African countries, like Eritrean Zeudi Araya, former star of the erotic-exotic genre and now a prominent film producer. Some were born in former colonies of Italy (Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia), or countries facing the Mediterranean Sea that have been historically linked to Italy (Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt), or maybe countries connected to Italy since the spread of immigration during the 80s (Senegal, Nigeria). Some others were born in Italy, of mixed origins or second generation citizens like actress Esther Elisha or directors Jonas Carpignano and Fred Kuwornu.

No one had ever thought of dedicating a whole site to researching their stories and experiences, so that's why we did it, as a small unit located in Rome.

Our interest in African cinema and films related to the African diaspora urged us to serve as film programmers for a film festival based in Rome, now ceased, called Panafricana (2004-2007) and to open in 2006 a still running website called Cinematofrodiscendente-Africa e diaspora nel cinema, the first and only in Italy dedicated to this topic. To address specifically the double question of the image of Africa and diasporas and the experience of filmmakers of African descent in Italian cinema, we started a research project that was to include a book, *L'Africa in Italia*, published in 2013 (Roma, Aracne editrice) and this blog which you've discovered, to be launched in October 2015.

Cinematofrodiscendente was created to open a gateway to the experience of filmmakers of African birth or descent, practitioners in any way involved in Italian film industry and culture, from the silent era up to the present day. Many of them were or are really talented but could never or rarely prove it, or, at any rate, couldn't find their way to notoriety or success. Our work is a tribute to their art and experience, and more generally speaking, our contribution for a counter history of Italian cinema, one inflected by postcoloniality, race and gender, able to combine the analysis of ways of representation, modes of production and questions of style.

Nihilist, Postmodernist and Postcolonial thinkers, from Nietzsche to Mbembe, have produced a highly critical theory of archive, presenting it as a metaphor for a structure of power/language, delimiting what is thinkable, or a concrete and organized deposit of texts conceived to protect and consolidate the dominant order in colonial and postcolonial ages. We identify ourselves in this tradition of thought, but we strongly believe in the legacy of Subaltern Studies, and in the necessity to engage a battle in the academic domain and outside, in order to promote a more inclusive approach to history and a more open narration of present time, more attentive to postcoloniality, race, gender and class, starting from our concrete domain of research, that is film, media and visual studies.

Cinematrodiscendente can be defined in this sense also as an initiative developing under the lineage of postcolonial digital humanities, as an open-access, postcolonial, decentralized archive, conceived to stimulate and integrate contributions from users worldwide, not necessarily academic experts.

The Afrodescendant experience in Italian cinema is a topic that has never been explored nor even envisaged in the history of Italian film studies up to now. Our efforts should be interpreted as a contribution to the agency of filmmakers of African descent in Italian cinema: to the configuration of a historical base knowledge; to a 360 degree debate on the past and on the present time; to a concrete promotion of their actual experience. The choice of English as a communication language is intended as a strategic tool to maximize the impact of our research, that addresses to Italian and international audience; yes, it is a risk as well, as we re not English native speakers, and we re aware that English is the language of global communication and the Internet, but also of the global cultural industry, with all its patterns of commodification of cultural productions coming from subaltern and transnational artists and practitioners.

This is all a big challenge for which we need a personal contribution from all of you, Internet users, world citizens, filmgoers and film lovers, as readers and active users of this blog. Follow us here and on our social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube); send us your suggestions, comments, and information to enrich our database. Be a part of it.

[www.cinematrodiscendente.com](http://www.cinematrodiscendente.com)

### **Cast&Credits:**

#### **Credits**

*Concept:* Leonardo De Franceschi

*Editors-in-chief:* Maria Coletti and Leonardo De Franceschi

*Web Designer:* Daniele Giovannini

*Logo:* Claudio Gnessi, in collaboration with Renato Cimagalli, from an idea by Maria Coletti

*Model:* Gamey Malatesta Guilavogui

*Photo:* Dario Li Gioi

*Backstage shooting:* Alice Iammartino

*Editorial contributors:* Alessio Altieri, Andrea Capruzzi, Iman Childs, Giovanna Di Martino, Isabella Fabrizi, Claudia Floridia, Luigi Forgione, Renato Loriga, Simone Neri, Renata Ornella Orlando, Daria Picardi, Francesco Russo, Sara Talevi, Ylenia Talevi