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Watershed October 2010 Podcast

With the announced closure of the UK Film Council there has been much outpouring of support and detraction about the impact of the organisation. Similarly in the wider arts funding world there is much discussion about value for money and indeed what taxpayers' money should be invested in arts wise - if indeed, as some people are arguing, taxpayers should actually pay for the arts!

Against this backdrop I am drawn back to this extraordinary fact: of films released in the UK less than 1% are from the Africa. Now some would say films, indeed any art form, like any other product, should live or die by the marketplace. The conclusion being that no one really wants to see African films therefore why should they be screened.

This seems an extraordinary position if we think it is valuable to understand different cultures. But also there is simply the astonishing fact that of the vastness that is the continent of Africa very very little of its film culture is known or seen in the UK.

There are some small independent initiatives taking place across the UK of which our own forthcoming festival **Afrika Eye** is one. The team of Simon Bright and Ingrid Sinclair bring together a series of screenings and events that give a rare glimpse into a selection of African film culture. The festival runs from **Fri 29 – Sun 31 October**. See <http://afrikaeye2010.blogspot.com/> for more information.

I was responsible for getting a preview screening of the documentary on Congolese musicians **Benda Bilili** - a wonderful film that I hope does for these guys what Buena Vista Social Club did for elderly Cuban Musicians.

The documentary opened the Quinzine strand of this year's Cannes Film Festival. Myself and Robin Grbich from Trinity Film Distribution sat and watched a screening of the film and were blown away by their story and music: A group of musicians living pretty close to on the street of Kinshasa - most of whom suffered from polio

and get about in home made wheelchairs - create music with the most infectious beat and energy. They form not only a musical haven but a refuge for street kids one of whom auditions and plays a mean single stringed home made instrument. A disused zoo is their meeting place. They subsequently recorded in a studio and their performances are picked up by Belgian/French music festivals and they tour Europe. The sight of these guys bringing their music to Europe and in particular a freezing cold Scandinavia is an exuberant, joyous experience.

This global success for Benda Bilili continues and they headlined WOMAD this year- this time with purpose built wheelchairs! The documentary opens the Afrika Eye festival. Closing it is a documentary on the influential Nigerian musician **Fela Kuti** who spread the afrobeat sound and became a social and political icon.

My other observation is that if African music can travel – Benda Belilli and Fela Kuti both demonstrate that - there is no reason why African films shouldn't and I'm sure UK audiences, if they just knew what was available, would demand to see them. I hope you can come and experience some of them at the **Afrika Eye Festival**.