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Udenta's Revolutionary Aesthetics and The African Literary Process: A Review

Christopher Anyokwu
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In its first incarnation, the book entitled *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process*, published by *Fourth Dimension Publishers* in 1993 made quite a splash owing in large part from the fact that it was authored by a relatively young MA degree holder and, more remarkably, the text of the book was completed much earlier in 1986, when Udenta O. Udenta was even much younger. Right from the off, Udenta burning with the fiery idealism of youth had audaciously announced the unabashedly polemical thrust of his book. Many years later, precisely in 2015, Udenta brought out the Second Edition of the book, its second incarnation. The reason for this is quite straightforward: between 1993 and 2015, the world had undergone seismic and tectonic paradigm-shifting convulsions, some—almost tipping the world over the edge, from geopolitical irruptions and economic meltdowns to ecological disasters, all of which had impacting humankind in more ways than one. Udenta himself in the Second Edition of his book makes a song and dance about these aforementioned issues, particularly the economic crisis of 2008/9 that had swept across the world, especially in the USA, an apocalyptic event that had partly contributed to the spectacular advent of President Barack Hussein Obama.

The term “Revolutionary Aesthetics” was not very common in these benighted sable parts unlike it was in the Western Hemisphere but was popularized – it has to be said – by Udenta O. Udenta with his book under review. Many scholars and researchers, prior to the publication of this remarkable *tour-de-force* were unfamiliar with what the term really denoted, even though the tellingly anticonservative and *anti-status quo* word “Revolutionary” seemed to let the conceptual cat out of the epistemic bag. They could surmise on the face of it that “Revolutionary Aesthetics” seemed to chime with the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as well as that of the duo’s sedulous epigones and aphebe-

mimic-men. But Udenta is not one to indulge in any kind of ideational *footsie* by leaving his readers scratching their heads over definitional imponderables. Early on in the Second Edition (which we are here reviewing), he lays out the definitional contours of the catchphrase “Revolutionary Aesthetics”. Accordingly, Udenta avers that “Revolutionary Aesthetics” as a system of knowledge, “deploys the tools of dialectical enquiry in the understanding, analysis and mediation of reality and by so doing absolves itself of the temptations of absolutist thinking. Its essence is the perpetual journey of man to a new state of awareness and being...” (23-4).



Additionally, as a “science of possibility” (27), “Revolutionary Aesthetics” is deployed to unearth and critique the “possibility that is embedded in contemporary African condition of failed and failing states, war and social conflicts, calamitous liberal economic experimentations, mass poverty, institutionalized corruption, graft and sleaze, and political and pseudo-democratic processes that shut out the people from mainstream involvement and participation, are reposed revolutionary ingredients that are constantly arming African people and creative writers, and must also constantly keep our critics alert to its future destiny” (27-8). Hence, according to Udentia, so long as Africa is plagued by hydra-headed and asphyxiating socio-economic and political contradictions and crises, revolutionary aesthetics shall “remain a credible epistemic force that will continue to mediate, logically and coherently, the main direction of African literature” (35). Thus, for Udentia, revolutionary aesthetics is a literary and cultural theory whose emergence and advent has been necessitated by the scandalously abject failure of traditional pro-establishment bourgeois-oriented theories as well as other seemingly “revolutionary” theories ostensibly rooted in praxis and deriving their enabling afflatus and propulsive orientation from Marxism. With the egregious depredations of postmodernism and post-colonialism in African literature, African theoreticians, scholars and critics have been unable to produce a counter-hegemonic and frontally

revolutionary poetics to erect an impregnable firewall necessary to stake out a secure turf for authentic indigenous art. Through the process of acculturation, tutelage and literary apprenticeship, in Udentia’s view, many African writers seem to project dominant, hegemonic ideological stances, thereby acting almost like unconscious media of bourgeois class consolidation against “the wretched of the earth” (92).

We are given to believe that the people are the real agents of social change and transformation and, therefore, a people-oriented or a people-centred “perspective” *a la* Lukacs must be mainstreamed into mimetic orthodoxy or scribal currency. As hinted briefly earlier on, Udentia seems to make short work of what he regards as the ideological diffidence of theoreticians such as Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare as well as the temperate and sedate accommodationism of the leading-lights of the reactionary and conservative intellectual wing of the decadent rapacious right-leaning political establishment, such liberal humanists as Abiola Irele, Eldred Jones and Dan Izevbaye, among others. Such Africanist critics as Chidi Amuta, Emmanuel Ngara, Adrian Roscoe, O.R. Dalthorne and Eustace Palmer do not appear to fare much better either in Udentia’s meta-critical assessment. Therefore, the opposing ideological camps in African literary criticism, to wit: the *sociological* and *formalist* are equally dismissed out of hand as “Eurocentric criticism of African



literature" (94), an apparent storming of the hermeneutical Bastille that creates ample room for a revolutionary aesthetic alternative. This "alter/native" methodology is in part hinged upon the aesthetic merits of the theory of critical realism, in Udentá's view.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Udentá goes to great lengths to invoke some canonical and iconic figures to validate his claim in this regard. He projects critical realism, highlighting it as *progressive* and affiliated to his beloved revolutionary aesthetics (97), citing for good measure such world-renowned theorists as Georg Lukacs, Dmitry Markov and A. Ovchanenko as enabling arch-priests of dissent. Udentá plunges, hammer and tongs, into the raging controversy surrounding revolutionary aesthetics by taking his auditors by the hand to the very beginnings of the theory:

[Revolutionary aesthetics'] beginning is traceable to the early part of the 20th century in Russia before the Socialist Revolutionary of 1917. The basic method of the movement is clearly articulated in the works of Maxim Gorky, especially Mother and Forma Gordeyev. Revolutionary aesthetics is an ideological reaction to the contradictions of capitalist and semi-capitalist societies and a purveyor of a new vision of social reality embodied in

the theory and practice of revolutionary change. (102).

He continues: "In 1934, at the meeting of [the association of Soviet writers], revolutionary aesthetics was "adopted as the main method and guiding philosophy of Soviet art. The definition given it then is a "truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development" (103).

By the same token, Udentá elaborates on the formative stages of revolutionary aesthetics by letting the readers know that the theory benefited from the "intellectual currents of the 20th and 21st centuries" (72), including the work of Lukacs, notably with his notion of *reification* and the evolution of *class consciousness*; Antonio Gramsci's emblemization of the organic intellectual as the catalyst for a successful proletarian counter-hegemony; from the critical theories of the Frankfurt School of Literary Theorists (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Eric Fromm, Lowenthal, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, etc, etc.). In the motley crowd of inspirers and trail-blazers is thrown the likes of Louis Althusser, (with his innovative concepts of *Ideological State Apparatuses*. (ISA) and *Repressive State Apparatuses* (RSA), Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton as well as some postcolonial theoreticians such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Aijaz Ahmad (74). The nub, therefore, is that *revolutionary aesthetics* is geared towards the total rejection of the social order (158), being as it is a



materialist dialectical method of literary and cultural enquiry.

Realism, as against modernism and postmodernism, is said to be the *form* of revolutionary aesthetics (164). Although, as noted above, revolutionary aesthetics is materialist criticism, it is *distinct* from other variants and spin-offs of the Marxist theory of art. (172, 174).

Thus, given the blind-spots and pitfalls of Sovietized Marxism, “the Stalinist rigidification of intellectual, ideological and cultural freedom and thought, not to mention the human quagmire that the collectivization policies of the 1920s and 1930s unleashed, an alter/native methodology was needed. The harsh fate that Georg Lukacs’ ground-breaking histori co-philosophical work, *History and Class Consciousness*, suffered upon its publication in the early 1920s in official Soviet Marxist intellectual and political circles convinced many Western Marxists that a third Marxist intellectual and ideological force was required to salvage it from a crippling mechanical, uncreative and deterministic rendition of historical dialectics.” (180). At all events, revolutionary aesthetics, the brainchild of a cognoscenti of Western Marxists (Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse and, to a considerable extent, Walter Benjamin) became an oppositional force against “the liberationist spirit of the Enlightenment; instrumental reasoning and the stifling spirit of the culture industry” (180). In brief, revolutionary aesthetics may be said

to be characterised by the following constitutive elements:

- (a) Historical materialism;
- (b) “Epistemic sphericity of dialectical reasoning” (107);
- (c) Aesthetic inheritance of radical poetics;
- (d) History or historicity;
- (e) Class consciousness;
- (f) Polemics
- (g) Organic laws of social transformation,
- (h) Primacy of idea-content over bourgeois cult of “form” – depicted here as bourgeoisified mumbo-jumbo; and
- (i) The prioritization of image/*voice* of the *declassé*, also known as post-colonial subalterns.

It may be argued, therefore, that revolutionary aesthetics’ grand vision is couched in the following excerpt: “Revolutionary aesthetics as a giant stride in the transformation of mankind’s aesthetic and cultural consciousness, grew out of concrete experiences, and as a methodological system is apprehended not only by its formal elements, but also by its revolutionary content which is based on a logical cognition of reality” (107).

How do we, then, transpose and incorporate revolutionary aesthetics into African literature? If it is already at work therein, how do we recognise it? Udentia O. Udentia posits thus “the development of revolutionary aesthetics in Africa takes various forms, shapes, genres and styles” (115). He adds: “At the present stage of its growth, it allows



for a lot of *experiments* (emphasis added) because of the increasing complexity of the current global formation" (115). In the author's view, African literature has been able to demonstrate resistance (thanks to some revolutionary-minded writers and critics) to colonialist and postcolonial strategies of continent-wide material despoliation and spiritual denigration (37). He equally has "choice words" for those he regards as "African economic refugees" who embrace postmodernism and post-structuralism as passport to acceptance in western academe. This group of cultural *elite*, the so-called African intelligentsia in the Diaspora, point at their ancestral homestead with the left hand, all in a bid to secure western absolution (38). They end up spewing "*fossilized* and primeval intellectual tradition foisted on African literary scholarship by colonial imperialism and neo-colonial dependency" (670).

Udenta is delighted to announce to his readers that it is not all doom and gloom on the African continent as some true scions of the soil are holding out a lot of hope and optimism for the race. In this connection, therefore, he pinpoints the likes of Ngugi, and Omafome Onoge as precursors of revolutionary aesthetics (71). He also references such illustrious exemplars as Sembene Ousmane, Alex La Guma, Festus Iyayi, Femi Osafisan, Tess Onwueme and Tunde Fatunde, as worthies of the radical consciousness.

In *Part Two* of the book, a section dedicated to textual analysis and evaluation, some representative novels and drama are expertly critiqued. Udenta from Chapter 5 to 11 brilliantly investigates and interprets the novels of Iyayi, Meja Nwangi, Achebe, Ogbuefi as well as the plays of Onwueme and Fatunde. In doing so, he deploys sometimes what he refers to as "The Eagletonian Schema"; "The Dialectics of Radical Consciousness"; "The Dilemma of "Tradition" and feminism, among others. He sieves minutely through these texts in an attempt to elucidate the ideological blind-spots of other Marxist-derived theories as well as liberal humanist approaches and procedures, the better to clear up enough discursive space for revolutionary aesthetic paradigms. Fittingly, he talks up the comparative advantages and superior insights of revolutionary aesthetics, an oppositional materialist theory rooted in scientific praxis and phenomenological hermeneutics. Even so, Udenta is adamant that the future of the critical practice in Africa lies in the groundwork already done by the pioneering figures such as Sembene Ousmane, Iyayi, Osofisan, Ngugi, La Guma, Onwueme, Osundare and Fatunde. To demonstrate this, he succinctly explores, for instance, Ousmane's novel, *God's Bits of Wood* in which the socialist novelist democratizes the heroic ideal via a discrete and judicious assignation of heroic self-immolation to both old and young, male and female, educated and unlettered folk.



The revolutionary efforts of the people, *the strike* – the novel's central subject matter – is called off, paving the way for the return to normalcy. By the same token, Udentia examines Osofisan's play *Morountodun*, an epic drama about a peasant revolt against agents of capitalism and the eventual victory of the lumpen-proletariat. Although unexplored, he references also Osofisan's other plays *Red is the Freedom Road* and *No More the Wasted Breed* as works built around the idea of revolution and its propulsive forces, namely *the people*, whom he refers to as "the revolutionary class".

He dips in and out of Alex La Guma's short novels such as *A Walk in the Night*, *A Threefold Cord*, *Time of the Butcher-Bird* and *The Stone Country* and explores in relative detail Ngugi's masterpieces *Petals of Blood*, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *Devil on the Cross*, and *I Will Marry When I Want*, among others. The same can be said of his critical exploration of the formal and contentual features of Tess Onwueme's plays especially *The Desert Approaches* which he considers exemplary in its revolutionary possibilities. Festus Iyayi's novels - *The Contract*, *Heroes* and *Violence* are thoroughly critiqued, highlighting the novelist's adept internalization and deployment of the relevant formal and ideological planks of revolutionary aesthetics conveyed mostly through characterisation, language and plot development as well as via authorial ideology. On his part, Tunde Fatunde seizes upon the

Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) as the language of wider communication (LWC), the people's *lingual franca* to hold life-transforming dialogue with the *hoi polloi*. In his expert hands, literature comes alive as a veritable weapon of social criticism, mass conscientization and revolutionary battle-cry.

This review would be incomplete if we fail to mention the pivotal role ascribed to scholars such as Omafome Onoge and Georg M. Gugelberger as well as other left-wing critics. Onoge's essays such as "The Crisis of Consciousness in Modern African Literature", "Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature" and "The Possibilities of a Radical Sociology of African Literature" are diligently worked into the interpretive lineaments of this book. Equally deserving of praise is Udentia's discrete quarrying of theoretic *nous* distilled from Georg M. Gugelberger's edited work entitled *Marxism and African Literature*, especially Gugelberger's polemical introduction to the volume of essays and his own article captioned "Marxist Literary Debates and Their Continuity in African Literary Criticism". Udentia makes it known to his readers that but for the pioneering vision of these critics, successive generations of African writers of the radical persuasion would not have had an ideological compass to guide them. Thankfully, several generations of radical, left-leaning writers and critics are spared self-defenestration and their discombubolation by bourgeois apologues of normative



stasis. Bold, brave and brilliant as Udentia O. Udentia's book clearly is, it still behooves on us to call attention to a few niggling structural and stylistic defects *writ large* in the work. In many instances, the author tends to conflate creative works of art with theoretical postulations. Marxist *theory* is one thing and its *praxis* embodied by the literary text is another. Thus theory and praxis interpenetrate and cross-fertilise one another on occasion. But theory is theory, practice is practice. There also appears to be a tendentious attempt on Udentia's part to interpose himself between text and reader/auditor, through his overtly pedantic self-projecteering. In this regard, his penchant for grandiloquence, convoluted syntax and allied infelicities only serve to emboss sheer verbosity or what Longinus in "On The Sublime" calls "tumidity".

Unsurprisingly, then, this egregious instantiation of constipated intellection leads the critic to vitiate the worthy exertions of fellow travelers such as Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare as well as the usefully countervailing visions of the likes of Izevbaye, Irele, Amuta, Ngara and other Africanist scholars. Udentia's pugnacious stance of "a plague on all houses!" metastasizes, predictably, into excessive digressions into non-literary fanciful byways. What's more, Udentia's brand of revolutionary aesthetics is largely exogenous in provenance, only partly domesticated and "earthed" through the promethean exertions of post-

colonial theorists and critics such as Ngugi (see *Decolonizing the Mind, Moving the Centre, Writers in Politics*, etc, etc); Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory* and Gayatri Spivak's work, notably "Can The Subaltern Also Speak?"). Very little, if any, is locally sourced, leaving one to wonder why on earth Udentia considers it appropriate not to mine the cornucopia of Africa's oral tradition, for methodological insights.

On the decolonization project, revolutionary aesthetics at best might be "accommodated" through a hybrid interfusion in order to avoid the unfortunate situation of a paralysis of praxis. However, more disturbing is what is proposed here as an abuse of revolution arising principally from misunderstandings about the true *nature* of revolution. Highlighting the "gradualist spirit" of revolution *qua* revolution, Terry Eagleton notes: "Revolutions are usually a long time in the brewing, and may take *centuries* to achieve their goals. Seizing political power is a short time affair; transforming the customs, institutions and habits of feeling of a society takes a great deal longer" (181, emphasis added).

Thus, the broad mass of the people is not *revolutionary*, *per se* merely on account of their millennial deprivation and Biblical poverty. They need to undergo radical transformation in mental and social orientation through education and ethical re-engineering. This is what Karl Marx refers to as a people transiting from a "class-in-itself" to



"a class-for-itself". Revolution, therefore, inheres in the very long trek of the *proles* from relative innocence to full radicalization, a prelude to action. By way of recapitulating, Udentá's *gung-ho* polemicization with its accompanying desacralization of altars betrays Bloomian anxieties, particularly of generational variety: kill the father; long live the son! The likes of Irele, Izevbaye, the *Bolekaja* Troika, Emmanuel Ngara, Chidi Amuta and others should be asked over to the banqueting-table. Put more plainly, these critics and theoreticians should be applauded for their respective contributions to the development of African literary scholarship. It is well and good to give Gorky the eagle feather, but let the eagle perch, let kite perch. Regardless of Udentá's best efforts to stultify and stymie other variants of Marxism, all in a strenuous effort to stake out a conceptual and theoretical space for the erection of revolutionary aesthetics, it is undeniable that they all are spin-offs of Marxism with especial stress on Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach, namely: philosophers have succeeded in interpreting the world; the point, then, is to *change* it. This overarching imperative is the motive force of all Marxist-derived theoretical paradigms, not least, Udentá's brand of revolutionary aesthetics.

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Authors' Biodata