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Mobutu, King of Zaire: An African Tragedy. First Run/Icarus Films.

Reviewed by Sheila Petty

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Mobutu, King of Zaire is award-winning filmmaker Thierry Michel's ambitious portrait of Mobutu Sese Seko Wa Zabanga, who rose to power in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the early 1960s and was eventually ousted in 1997. Divided into three parts, the documentary series is based on rare archival material unearthed in Kinshasa and extensive interviews conducted with a variety of participants in Mobutu's rise and fall, including members of Mobutu's government; CIA officials; members of various foreign government administrations; and others. Part One is entitled "The Quest for Power" and covers the years from Mobutu's birth, his career as a journalist, and the manner in which he insinuated himself into power. What is truly remarkable is the ease with which Mobutu manipulates the media to create a mythological portrait of himself as "chief" of the Zairean people. This is evident in Michel's powerful use of Mobutu's own self-serving media interviews which depict him as a champion of the people. For example, Mobutu's use of his children in media situations is strikingly similar to photo opportunities of American presidents and their families conducted around the same time. Another unique aspect of the archival interviews with Mobutu is the way in which he employs a cultural argument to justify his assuming absolute power. Interviewed by two European journalists after the public hanging of ex-prime minister Everest Kimba and three other former ministers, Mobutu justifies his actions by taking the stance that as a chief, in the Bantu sense of the word, he has undisputed power to determine what is in the best interests of his people. He chides the journalists for expecting a western style democracy and asserts that Zaire will be governed according to a Bantu moral code. This demonstrates Mobutu's skill in pressing the right political hot button issues to deflect criticism of his regime. Although Part One, and indeed, the rest of the series employs "voice of god nar-

ration," it is generally successful as a transition device. One weakness that is evident is the fact that the use of language is often judgmental and clearly anti-Mobutu. In one notable example, the narrator's sarcasm is transparent as he describes Mobutu's demeanor during a visit from King Baudouin I: "You could say that in all aspects he does his utmost to imitate the Belgian monarch." Such commentary demonstrates the documentary's clear bias, which is detrimental only in the sense that it truncates the process of discovery for the viewer. Part Two, entitled, "The Upper Hand," documents the period from 1969-1988, in which Mobutu entrenches his control and creates a kleptocracy based on the personality cult of "Mobutisme." Backed by his MPR Party, Mobutu assumes a godlike persona which leads to an atmosphere of absolute power and corruption. One of the most engaging progressions from Part One to Part Two is the way the filmmaker demonstrates Mobutu's ability to take refuge in whatever political argument he finds convenient at the time to explain his excesses. During an archival interview, Mobutu moves from presenting a cultural argument for his tyranny to turning blame back onto colonialism as he charges that corruption was not a Zairean invention, but rather, was an evil imported into the culture during colonialism. Michel is especially adept at offering both explicit and implicit commentary on these issues through his use of narrative and aesthetic strategies. One of many examples occurs during the interview with Sakombi Inongo, Mobutu's former Minister of Information. Michel depicts him in a loosely-framed medium shot that shows an unusual amount of the decor behind him for a standard interview set-up. As the minister disassociates himself from the various "courts" that corruptly profited from Mobutu's regime, the viewer cannot help but be struck by the luxuriousness of the white furniture and brass sculptures set in the background. The obvious wealth of his surroundings calls into question

the validity of the minister's denial of personal profit on a subtextual level. <p> Although it could be argued that the series is a personal biography of Mobutu, Part Three: "The End of a Reign," is weakened by the narrow focus on Mobutu's personal life. Unlike the previous parts which document Mobutu's rise to power in considerable detail, Part Three suffers from a lack of context as the political figures and circumstances behind his fall are barely sketched. This is particularly problematic in terms of Laurent Kabila, who is instrumental in dismantling Mobutu's power. Furthermore, the lack of contextualization, such as an explanation of the exact circumstances of the death of Mobutu's son, Konga Mobutu, raises the possibility that those viewers who are not fully conversant with the historical aspects of Mobutu's regime, will be confused as to whether this death occurred through natural causes or was a direct result of political instability. <p> Nevertheless, Part Three does contribute some chilling moments of illumination. In particular, one truly eerie incident concerns the execution of Mobutu's ally Nicolai Ceaucescu, whose actions in Romania so closely mirror those of Mobutu. In his interview, Inongo reveals that Mobutu was very upset with Inongo's decision to air the grisly footage, presumably in fear that the Zairean people would be influenced to undertake a similar coup. Another interesting, although underdevel-

oped, revelation is the fact that it was widely believed that Mobutu used sorcery to support his regime. Thus, as two of his children and others close to him die, his power is undermined as many take the position that his magic is rebounding on himself. Unfortunately, Michel does not provide enough of a cultural context to make this much more than an intriguing digression. <p> Taken as a whole, <cite>Mobutu, King of Zaire</cite> represents a significant historical document of an important period in the history of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The power of this work to engage the viewer is supported by the awards and nominations that the series has garnered including: Best Documentary Nominee: 1999 International Documentary Association; Special Mention: 1999 European Film Awards; and the 1999 Prix Arte: European Film Academy. It has broad classroom application and would be a challenging addition for film, history, postcolonial, cultural, ethnological and African studies courses, among others. In addition, the film series could be viewed in conjunction with such works as <cite>Lumumba: Death of a Prophet</cite> (1992) by Raoul Peck. Those interested might also wish to consult Thierry Michel's other two documentaries on Zaire: <cite>Zaire, the Cycle of the Serpent</cite> (1992) and <cite>The Last Colonials</cite> (1995), also distributed by First Run/Icarus Films. <p>

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