Filming Politics: IR, Aesthetics, and the Films of Abderrahmane Sissako

El Euldj, Leila

This thesis was submitted to Dr. Mirjam de Bruijn and Dr. Vineet Thakur in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations (Culture & Politics)

FILMING POLITICS:

IR, AESTHETICS, AND THE FILMS OF ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO

By

Leila El Euldj

Student number: s2875454
Email: l.el.euldj@umail.leidenuniv.nl
Word Count: 13993
(Including References, Excluding Bibliography)

Leiden University
Faculty of Humanities
July 2021

Universiteit Leiden

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my great appreciation to my supervisor Dr. de Bruijn for her crucial advice and feedback. My sincere thanks to her and my first reader Dr. Thakur for their patience and understanding.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude to LExS for their trust as well as Ms. Eijkman at the African Studies Centre and Celluloid Dreams for their kind collaboration and assistance during the research process of this project.

Thank you to my wonderful parents, family, and friends for their love and support.

Last but certainly not least, I dedicate this thesis to Siham El Euldj, whom I will forever love and miss.

INTRODUCTION

In Bamako, the audience is mostly composed of children gathered in front of a small television. Adults sit in the back while the host struggles with technical difficulties. The film finally begins, a star-studded Western where the cowboys randomly shoot people. A child watches, horror-struck, as a baby cries on top of his dead mother. Right after, a cowboy bursts out laughing, 'I shot one and two fell,' and this time the audience looks amused. The sequence, featured in the 2006 film *Bamako*, is a film-within-a-film spaghetti Western titled 'Death in Timbuktu.' Years later, the 2014 film *Timbuktu* painted a similar picture. Heavily armed men also march down the streets and occupy the roofs of Timbuktu, reigning in terror and violence, though this time they are not cowboys but members of the self-proclaimed 'Islamic police'— jihadis who have taken over the city. Parallels can also be found with the 1998 *Life on Earth.* In it, a child repetitively appears to run after a football, kicking and playing with it. On the other hand, in *Timbuktu*, young boys play a ball-less game of football to avoid the 20 lashes the jihadis might give them as punishment for practicing the forbidden sport. The three films, all directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, seem interconnected, offering a kind of continuity, an ongoing story of a country in crisis spreading over three decades.

Abderrahmane Sissako was born in 1961 in Mauritania but grew up in Mali.[1] From 1983 to 1989, he went on to study filmmaking in Moscow at the Federal State Film Institute (VGIK).[2] He shot both of his first short films in the Soviet Union, namely *The Game* (1989) and *October* (1993)— the latter of which was screened at the Cannes Film Festival the same year as part of the 'Un Certain Regard' selection.[3] Sissako, therefore, followed in the footsteps of the 'father of African film' Ousmane Sembène by studying film in the Soviet Union, highlighting how "Moscow offered support and training to [West] Africa's students where its former colonial ruler, France, was reluctant."[4] Still, Sissako settled in France in the early 1990s.[5] He is now regarded as one of the most successful and celebrated African filmmakers

[1] Basia Lewandowska Cummings, "Abderrahmane Sissako for Beginners," British Film Institute, last modified May 27, 2015, https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/abderrahmane-sissako-beginners.
[2] Ibid.
[3] "Abderrahmane SISSAKO," Festival de Cannes, accessed May 20, 2021, https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/artist/abderrahmane-sissako.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

due to regional and international notoriety and acclaim.[6] Most importantly, his films are notorious for their strong socio-political themes.

Using the works of Abderrahmane Sissako as a case study, this thesis investigates why is it relevant to look critically at cultural production, specifically filmmaking? What does it bring to the field of International Relations? To answer this, it takes into consideration the following: Which strategies, both aesthetic and discursive, does Sissako employ in his filmmaking? What does this tell us about contemporary Mali? How do his films fit into the broader tradition of African protest art? What does this tell us about the intersection between art and politics? Through a semiotics analysis of the three aforementioned films, this thesis argues that Sissako makes use of a poetic and intimate cinematic language which allows him to challenge prevalent concepts and ideas in world politics based on ahistoric and Euro-centric interpretations. By grounding his narrative in a local context, his films do not only constitute cultural history but also socio-political history. In turn, they reestablish African agency and not only reflect resistance but actively embody it, narrowing the IR gap between theory and practice. This study aims to contribute to the integration of cultural studies in international relations, by considering aesthetic forms.

[6] Lewandowska Cummings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Towards an Aesthetic Turn in International Relations

International Relations (IR) as a scholarly project is multifaceted and pluralist by nature.[7] Indeed, IR draws from several other disciplines such as economics, sociology, history, and political science, to name a few. This means that within IR there exists a wide range of theories as well as methodological, political, and interpretive approaches.[8] This diversity has been the source of much criticism both inside and outside IR. Scholars of IR have therefore extensively questioned the nature of their discipline though their efforts are not by any means unique, manifesting instead a broader trend in academia.[9] Barry Buzan and Richard Little identify two main failures of IR: theory and history. First, IR has little influence on other disciplines or public debates— its claim to establishing its own 'field' is therefore weak.[10] This is namely due to its theoretical fragmentation.[11] Second, IR tends to take a Eurocentric ahistorical and sometimes anti-historical approach[12] (what they call the "Westphalian straitjacket"[13]). The solutions provided by Buzan and Little are therefore the integration of world history and the pursuit of grand theory.[14] Amitav Acharya takes Buzan and Little's idea of the 'Westphalian straitjacket' further by emphasizing on IR's overreliance on Western knowledge structures and proposes a "Global IR."[15] The 'Global IR' project "constitutes not a theory, but an aspiration for greater inclusiveness and diversity in [the] discipline."[16] Similarly, Synne Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson contend that pluralism, specifically the dialogical pluralism of IR, is to be celebrated rather than rejected.[17] Moreover, they argue that IR scholarship is inherently political and that openness and humility in IR should be cultivated.[18] In this sense, though the opposition of theoretical fragmentation and grand theory remains a point of contention, there seems to be a consensus on the importance of pluralism.

---

[7] Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby and Rorden Wilkinson, introduction to *What's the Point of International Relations?,* eds. Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby and Rorden Wilkinson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid, 1.
[10] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, "Why International Relations Has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (2001): 21.
[11] Ibid, 32.
[12] Ibid, 26.
[13] Ibid, 25.
[14] Ibid, 38.
[15] Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (2014): 647.
[16] Ibid, 649.
[17] Dyvik, Selby and Wilkinson, 2.
[18] Ibid.

Still, these approaches arguably tell us little about how to bridge the gap between theory and practice which remains critical in IR. This need thus explains the emergence of aesthetic approaches.

Aesthetic approaches to IR rooted in the humanities narrow the gap aforementioned by combining theory and practical application. The 'cultural turn' in the social sciences surfaced in the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s.[19] This means that "'culture' became a crucial means by which many social scientists understood social processes, social identities and social change and conflict."[20] Looking at culture means looking at the production and exchange of meanings and how members of a society or group make sense of the world.[21] In IR, the interest in aesthetic forms stems from the wish for novel open-ended approaches. In other words, "aesthetics […] is about the ability to step back, reflect and see political conflict and dilemmas in new ways."[22] Here, aesthetics is to be understood not only as the art that is produced but also as the insights and understandings that are generated.[23] Roland Bleiker differentiates politically-committed art from aesthetic politics. The former exists within the realm of politics: it asserts a political position but it is not aesthetically political. The latter is less explicit and the aesthetical form allows it to operate within the political level.[24] In this sense, aesthetic politics, Bleiker argues, has the most potential for political theory for it is more reflective, leads to better understandings, and articulates what the scope of politics is.[25] Building on cultural studies, Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott similarly hold that popular culture does not merely *reflect* world politics but that it actively contributes to *making* world politics.[26] In this sense, they see popular culture and world politics as a continuum where practices and understandings are intertwined and cannot be separated.[27] Here, popular culture refers to the "lived practices such as poetry, film, sculpture, music, television, leisure activities and fashion."[28] These practices, in turn, form the space "where power, ideology, and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised."[29] Still, Grayson, Davies, and Philpott's definition

[19] Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2016), 1-2.
[20] Ibid, 2.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid, 8.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, "Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum," *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 157.
[27] Ibid, 158.
[28] Ibid, 156.
[29] Ibid.

of popular culture is arguably vague. They highlight the limits of the term —specifically as it comes to its 'popular' dimension— namely its failure to represent its diversity and implications.[30] Karin Barber defines popular culture in Africa as "a product of everyday life […] the unofficial, the non-canonical […] the culture of 'ordinary people'."[31] Barber also mentions the ambiguous and contested nature of the term 'popular.'[32] Generally, 'popular' refers to something which belongs to the people, that is the 'common people', not the elite, but even then lines are blurred.[33] Barber sees popular culture as produced, spread, and modified by everyday people (non-elites) and expressing common experiences of kinship, pain, and marginalization.[34] With his art film tendencies and screenings at international film festivals rather than achieving the financial success of Nollywood, it could be difficult to categorize Sissako as a part of popular culture. However, I argue that Sissako is not completely detached from popular culture not only because of the success his films have received but also because they incorporate forms of popular culture, namely oral traditions such as poetry or music. Additionally, his films build on a tradition of social realist filmmaking meaning they also emerge from everyday life on the ground, featuring and centering everyday Malians, and are in constant interaction with social and historical change. Therefore, I consider Sissako's work as a hybrid form of popular culture.

This thesis follows the lead of Acharya and Dyvik et al. and embraces the diversity and multidisciplinary nature of IR by drawing from cultural studies and history. It also aims to contribute to a scholarship that goes beyond a Western-centric lens and the Westphalian straitjacket. Much of the scholarship on Africa, especially in IR, is centered around conflict, economic development, and aid. Looking at the region through popular culture is thus an explicit attempt to step away from the state and to reestablish African agency. To do so, this thesis takes an aesthetic approach whereby the visual is political and can be read as text.[35] This thesis also bridges the political ambition, content, development, and repercussions of IR outlined by Synne et al.[36] with the political dimension of art as argued by Bleiker.

[30] Ibid, 161.
[31] Karin Barber, *A History of African Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.
[32] Ibid, 7.
[33] Ibid, 9.
[34] Ibid, 170.
[35] Grayson, Davies, and Philpott, 160.
[36] Dyvik, Selby and Wilkinson, 2.

Theorizing Culture and Resistance

In 2008, African-American writer Toni Morrison affirmed in *Poets & Writers* that "all good art is political! There is none that isn't. And the ones that try hard not to be political are political by saying, 'We love the status quo.'"[37] This conception of art contrasts with a long-standing skepticism towards a potential political commitment in aesthetics which is held by social scientists and artists alike.[38] This skepticism stems from the belief that art is independent of politics and translates instead one's free-flowing creativity.[39] However, the advent of cultural studies, as stated in the previous section, and the wave of decolonization following the Second World War have questioned such assumptions.

Fanon writes about culture in relation to the colonial project. He contends that colonialism "turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it."[40] Namely, colonizers frame precolonial history as akin to "barbarism, degradation and bestiality"[41] and therefore as needed to be restrained and saved.[42] Fanon mentions the place of 'native intellectuals' and how, rather than imitating the colonizer's culture or recovering a precolonial indigenous culture, they must realize that "culture begins to align itself with the national concern"[43] (these constitute the three stages native intellectuals go through).

Said also wrote about this dichotomy between the colonizer and the 'other' in *Orientalism*. For him, European culture was able to construct its identity and build its strength in opposition to the Orient.[44] In European artistic and literary production, the Orient is depicted as backward and primitive in contrast to the West. This production of knowledge serves to legitimate the ideology of Western superiority and consolidate power relations. In this sense, if one follows Fanon and Said's arguments, culture has been instrumental in establishing colonial and imperialist structures. However, this also means that culture might very well be a place of struggle, reconstruction, and empowerment. When asked about which role can culture play in resistance movements, Said affirmed that its power lies in its ability to analyze, question authority, and search for alternatives.[45] Though the significance of culture in resistance and

---

[37] Kevin Nance, "The Spirit and the Strength: A Profile of Toni Morrison," Poets & Writers, last modified November 1, 2008, https://www.pw.org/content/the_spirit_and_the_strength_a_profile_of_toni_morrison.
[38] Bleiker, 2.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001): 169.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid, 169-170.
[43] Alexander Fyfe, "The Specificity of the Literary and Its Universalizing Function in Frantz Fanon's "On National Culture"," *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 19, no. 6 (2017): 773.
[44] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003): 3.
[45] David Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (London: Pluto Press, 2003): 159.

politics is highlighted by authors like Fanon and Said, much of the literature addresses cultural productions such as literature or music and overlooks film.

Film in Africa: A Legacy of Cultural Resistance

It is no wonder the likes of Fanon and Said paid little attention to film considering it is a rather recent industry in Africa and first emerged in the 1960s during decolonization.[46] Though film activities were present in the continent at the beginning of the 20th century, they did not involve Africans who were instead treated as mere consumers (mainly of propaganda) or as objects in the colonies.[47] In the French colonies specifically, film was treated as a tool to spread French culture and the French cinematic tradition.[48] During decolonization, film equipment was introduced through gifts from technologically advanced countries to build economic and cultural ties with the now-sovereign African states.[49] The African films produced were closer to art film, mostly came from francophone countries, used celluloid film and their production was heavily dependent on French film establishment and the French state.[50] Diawara points out that "the filmmakers and technicians were usually from the countries that had donated the equipment, and the postproduction also took place in those countries."[51] This claim is also supported by De Turégano who wrote about the role of the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development in the growth of cinematic production in Africa, especially through the ministry's cinema office.[52] The aid provided by the ministry, however, was essentially allocated for postproduction and was therefore meant to be spent in France. This in turn did very little to "benefit local African infrastructures and thus perpetuated African dependencies on France for film production."[53] This is rather paradoxical considering the subject matter of those films.

Indeed, much of what was produced were sociopolitical films which subscribed to the idea of a 'Third Cinema' rooted in the desire to counter neocolonialism, Western capitalist systems, and the Hollywood establishment.[54] Third Cinema was heavily influenced by the

---

[46] Ralph A. Austen and Şaul Mahir, *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-first Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010): 1.
[47] Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics & Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992): 52.
[48] Marissa J. Moorman, "Radio Remediated: Sissako's *Life on Earth* and Sembène's *Mooladé*," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 98.
[49] Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics & Culture,* 51.
[50] Austen and Mahir, 1.
[51] Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics & Culture,* 51-52.
[52] Teresa Hoefert De Turégano, "The New Politics of African Cinema at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20, no. 3 (2002): 23.
[53] Ibid, 23.
[54] Valérie K. Orlando, *New African Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017) : 41.

revolutionary writings of Fanon; Teshome Gabriel, a key theorist of Third World cinema, even refers back to the three stages of the native intellectual in relation to filmmakers resulting in the last stage which he coins as 'combative' whereby film becomes an ideological tool.[55]

African social realist cinema emerged in the 1970s and embodied an instrument for social critique.[56] West African filmmakers continued to be influenced by the theories, ideologies, and philosophies of revolutionaries throughout the 1980s[57] and built their narratives around Afrocentric philosophical thought[58]. The figurehead of social realist film in Africa, and one of the most influential African filmmakers more broadly, is Ousmane Sembène. Sembène's films highlight a "crisis of truth"[59] and question issues of identity and power formations in everyday life while problematizing dominant conceptions of Africanness.[60] Repinecz complicates the study of Sembène's work as merely social realist and ideological and focuses instead on the self-reflexive nature of his films which allow for the viewer to "respond to fiction by questioning it as fiction"[61] and thus contribute to the viewer's "process of coming-into-consciousness."[62] Still, despite the significant legacy of Sembène across the globe, his works have seemingly been unable to reach African audiences due to poor distribution and access as well as hostile government authorities.[63] As Glover puts it: "it falls to all of us now to resurrect the great cultural workers and heroes of Africa, and especially for Africa's people and its vast diaspora."[64] Here, considering Sembène's work is therefore relevant not only because of its historical importance but also because it heavily influenced Sissako's filmmaking.

A turning point in the history of film in Africa is the rise of the Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) in the 1990s.[65] This also marks a step away from the social realist films of West Africa with themes ranging from "romance, wealth gained through witchcraft, and Christian redemption."[66] Nollywood is now not only an industrial superpower in Africa but also globally, ranking among the three largest cinema industries in the world.[67] Moreover, the advent of the

[55] Ibid, 43-44.
[56] Ibid, 52.
[57] Ibid, 55.
[58] Ibid, 56.
[59] Sam Okoth Opondo, "Cinema Is Our 'Night School': Appropriation, Falsification, and Dissensus in the Art of Ousmane Sembène," *African Identities* 13, no. 1 (2015): 46.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Jonathon Repinecz, "'This Is Not a Pipe?': Reflexivity, Fictionality and Dialogism in Sembène's films," *Journal of African Cinemas* 8, no. 2 (2016): 194.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Danny Glover, foreword to *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist*, ed. Samba Gadjigo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010): xii.
[64] Ibid, xii-xiii.
[65] Orlando, 59-60.
[66] Austen and Mahir, 2.
[67] Orlando, 60.

digital video format is very much an Anglophone phenomenon[68] and did not translate to francophone West Africa. Because of this, much of the literature, especially recent scholarship, has focused on Nollywood. For this reason, this thesis turns instead to francophone West Africa considering its earlier filmmaking and tradition of resistance and what it might reveal in terms of the contemporary strategies that are employed.

[68] Austen and Mahir, 2.

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier, this thesis takes an aesthetic approach as developed by Bleiker. Unlike mimetic approaches, which seek to uncover an authentic 'truth' in world politics, aesthetic approaches take into consideration the gap between reality and representation.[69] As Bleiker puts it: "aesthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics."[70] This means that the aesthetic dimension is far from occupying a trivial place in the study of world politics: rather, it opens new avenues of understanding and is crucial in its ability to articulate meaning. Indeed, Bleiker argues that while considering representations of the political, or of reality for that matter, one is first and foremost faced with a particular interpretation of politics and reality.[71] In the case of this thesis, this means that I consider Sissako's films not as works whose inherent value and truth need to be unveiled but partly as reflections of Sissako's own perception and understanding of Malian life and experience. Therefore, it appears more appropriate here to make use of a semiotics analysis.

Indeed, a semiotics analysis is concerned with signs and meanings. Though a method such as compositional analysis refers to all aspects of filmmaking[72], it fails to consider reflexivity and interpretation. This is because compositional analysis usually relies on connoisseurship and takes a mimetic approach, meaning it "claims to look at images for 'what they are', rather than for, say, what they do or how they were or are used."[73] On the other hand, semiology is not only descriptive but it goes beyond compositional analysis by placing a given work in broader systems of meaning.[74] In this sense, the visual, here film, is examined in all its complexity and can be read as a text. I am therefore concerned with the form, the content, as well as the implications of the films that constitute my case study. This permits reflexivity and allows me to develop a more holistic and detailed analysis.

My case study includes three sources: *Life on Earth* (1998), *Bamako* (2006), and *Timbuktu* (2014). They constitute my primary data for five reasons: they are feature films which were written and directed by Sissako, they take place in Mali, they represent three different postcolonial decades, they cover different parts of Mali —a small rural town, a large

[69] Bleiker, 19.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid, 20.
[72] Rose, 83.
[73] Ibid, 57.
[74] Ibid, 106.

capital city, and a historic city— and they have all achieved some success, making them culturally relevant.

Life on Earth (in its original French title, *La vie sur terre*) was Sissako's first full-length feature and was a part of the project '2000, vue par…' (2000, as seen by…).[75] The project was a collection of ten movies spread over four continents and translated their director's view on the transition to the new millennium by including the night of December 31st, 1999.[76] The project was first broadcasted in December 1998 and was produced by La Sept ARTE, a Franco-German venture, and Haut & Court, an independent production company based in France. The film follows Dramane, played by Sissako himself, who leaves Paris and returns to his native village of Sokolo. In Sokolo, Dramane writes, rides his bike, and meets a woman from Kourouma named Nana (Nana Baby). While the world prepares for the new millennium, life goes on in the village. Therefore, rather than being plot-heavy, the film is more interested in exploring the inhabitants of Sokolo. *Life on Earth* won several international awards at the Fribourg International Film Festival, the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou, the San Francisco International Film Festival, and the Milan Film Festival, among others.[77] However, Sissako truly gained international recognition with his third feature film, *Bamako.*

Bamako depicts the fictional court proceedings involving the African civil society as the plaintiff and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) as the defendants. The focus is mostly on the witnesses who take their turn in front of the microphone to plead their case, though the film also follows a cast of other characters including a young bar singer named Melé (Aïssa Maïga) and her husband Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré). Upon its release in 2006, *Bamako* received critical acclaim and it remains Sissako's most explicitly political film. The film was screened at major festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival, the Toronto Film Festival, and the Rotterdam International Film Festival.[78] Among others, it won the Créateurs sans Frontières Award from CulturesFrance, a project of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Jury Prize at the Carthage Film Festival, and the Best Prize at the Human

[75] "La vie sur terre," IFFR, accessed June 7, 2021, https://iffr.com/en/2007/films/la-vie-sur-terre.
[76] "2000 vu par…," ARTE, accessed June 7, 2021, http://download.pro.arte.tv/archives/fichiers/01385769.pdf.
[77] "Life on Earth," Celluloid Dreams, accessed June 7, 2021, https://www.celluloid-dreams.com/life-on-earth.
[78] "Bamako: Festivals and Awards," Archipel 33, accessed June 7, 2021, http://www.archipel33.fr/site/content/view/465/2/lang,en/.

Rights Film Festival of Lomé.[79] A French-Malian feature, it was produced by Archipel 33 — Chinguitty Films, Mali Images, Arte France, and Louverture Films.[80]

Finally, *Timbuktu*, which was released in 2014, is Sissako's latest feature film but also his most successful work. The film takes place during the 2012 invasion of northern Mali by a militant jihadi group.[81] During the occupation of Timbuktu, the group, mostly composed of and led by foreigners, introduces new laws and codes of behavior. Much like Sissako's previous films, *Timbuktu* looks at several characters including the jihadis, the inhabitants of Timbuktu, and a local Tuareg family. When one of the family's cows 'GPS' is killed by a fisherman, the father Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed) decides to confront him. However, Kidane ends up accidentally shooting him and is therefore tried for murder by the new jihadi authority. *Timbuktu* explores life under occupation and the resistance, both silent and vocal, of its people. *Timbuktu* is Sissako's most popular work; it was a favorite for the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 87th Academy Awards, and ended up winning seven awards at the 40th César Awards.[82] *Timbuktu* is a French-Mauritanian production and was produced by Les films du Worso, Dune Vision, Arches Films, ARTE France Cinéma, and Orange Studio.[83]

[79] Ibid.
[80] "Bamako: Presentation," Archipel 33, accessed June 7, 2021, http://www.archipel33.fr/site/content/view/287/2/lang,en/.
[81] Victoria Pasley, "Beyond Violence in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu*," *African Studies Review* 59, no. 3 (2014): 294.
[82] "Oscar hopeful 'Timbuktu' sweeps France's César awards," France 24, February 21, 2015, https://www.france24.com/en/20150221-oscar-timbuktu-cesar-awards-foreign-movie.
[83] "Timbuktu," Les Films du Worso, accessed June 7, 2021, https://en.worso.com/timbuktu.

EXPLORING THE FILMS OF SISSAKO: FROM STYLE TO SCRIPT

This section explores the strategies, first aesthetic and then discursive, that are used by Sissako. It argues that Sissako's poetic cinema grounds its narrative in a local context that feels both distinctly Malian and sincerely universal. By connecting local and global contexts and constructing a non-linear narrative, Sissako opens up a new temporality and challenges pervasive notions in world politics such as chrono-politics and development theory. As a result, Sissako emphasizes resistance and emancipation.

Framing Mali: Sissako and Aesthetics

More often than not, form and content are portrayed as opposed. The form becomes a mere external shell and the content is the actual object of interest. However, such assumptions are not only simplistic but they are also misleading in the sense that they fail to engage with the totality of a given work. In other words, this framing overlooks the fact that "every component functions as part of a pattern, big or small, that engages the viewer."[84] Form and content, therefore, work together and should be analyzed as such. Here, I start by looking at the form, that is the film style.

Colors and Camerawork

All three films are characterized by a warm color palette. *Life on Earth* opens with the bright white fluorescent lights of a Parisian supermarket. Dramane pouts as he looks at a sea of choices, mimicking the big ceramic ducks in front of him. A lateral tracking shot captures what seems like an endless collection of butter and cheese. Dramane proceeds to make his way through the aisles in slow motion, passing by shoes, toys, and jewelry. The film then cuts to a large African tree (Figure 1). The withered tree, supposedly signaling a drought and imminent famine in the village[85], seems to possess two major parts which meet through the various branches. These arguably represent the two different worlds of Europe and Sokolo and zooming into the branches emphasizes their interconnectivity and transnational dynamics.[86]

---

[84] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction,* 11th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), 52.
[85] Akin Adesokan, "Abderrahmane Sissako and the Poetics of Engaged Expatriation," *Screen* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 154.
[86] Elise Finielz, "Temporal Subversion and Political Critique in Abderrahmane Sissako's *La vie sur terre*," *Jump Cut,* no. 57 (Fall 2016): 1, https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-FinielzVieSurTerre/index.html.

Figure 1. An African tree precedes the title sequence, acting as the transition between Paris and Sokolo.[87]

After the title sequence, the camera arrives and stays in Sokolo. The artificial cold lightning is replaced by shades of yellow, brown, beige, orange, and red. Dramane does not appear in his Parisian apparel anymore —a long dark coat and hat— but instead wears vibrant yellow and red traditional clothing and what looks like a Fulani hat. The camera seldom moves and there is mostly a combination of medium shots and long shots. The former depicts the inhabitants of Sokolo whilst the latter lingers on the landscape: Dramane and Nana on their bikes, boys chasing birds in the fields, cattle walking under the sun. This use of color is far from insignificant, especially when juxtaposed with the poetry of both Dramane and Aimé Césaire. As Elise Finielz puts it, "the landscape's beautiful natural light and ochre colors complement the poet's lyrical words and set up a loose relation of text to imagery."[88] This loose relation entails a large scope of interpretation on the part of the viewer regarding the meaning of the story and allows "for the words themselves to provide imaginative images."[89] In this sense, sound and image do not necessarily direct each other but accompany each other, taking center stage at different points in time.[90] Similarly, the visual framing is partial and the camera regularly omits to show everything leading the audience to listen carefully.[91] Sound will be explored further in the next section.

[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Moorman, 108.

In the same way as the Sokolo portrayed in *Life on Earth*, the mise-en-scène[92] in *Bamako* includes broad open sets, which contrast with the crowded Parisian supermarket, as well as earth tones. These colors reflect not only the suffocating heat of Bamako but also the claustrophobic stagnant socio-economic condition of postcolonial Mali. In one of the film's most compelling and moving scenes, a witness named Madou Keita recounts his unsuccessful attempt to make it to Spain. Madou first crossed Niger, then Algeria before arriving in Morocco. However, the Moroccan authorities brought him back to Oujda, near the Algerian border, where he was made to board a truck that took him, and other migrants, to the Sahara. After a one-week walk back to Algeria, the group was refused entry by the Algerian authorities. Madou narrates the harsh reality of migration: the long walks without any food or water, the exhaustion, and the people lost along the way. During his testimony, the migrants appear on the screen, and the camera, which had barely moved until this point, follows them as they make their way into the desert. Here, the deliberate movement of the camera serves the narrative. During his testimony, another shot shows a woman hanging a piece of fabric. The red dye of the fabric leaks onto the floor, serving as a metaphor for the blood of asylum seekers (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Red dye flows down the floor as Madou shares how he witnessed a Ghanaian woman die from exhaustion while crossing the Sahara.[93]

Bamako makes extensive use of medium shots, medium close-ups, and close-ups. These mostly frame the witnesses as well as the men, women, and children of Bamako (see Figure 3). This strategy creates even more proximity between the audience and the characters by emphasizing

[92] The mise-en-scène, literally 'put into the scene', refers to all aspects visible in the frame such as lighting, costumes, set design and performance, for example.
[93] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.

gestures and facial expressions. It anchors the narrative to its characters who become the nexus of the film.

Figure 3. An example of a close-up in *Bamako*, here showing Madou.[94]

This use of close-ups is also present in *Timbuktu*, though the film is most similar to *Life on Earth* by combining close-ups with long and extreme long shots. This once again shows how narrative and style work in tandem: by simultaneously focusing on the protagonists and their surroundings, Sissako uses the camera to ground his characters in the world they live in. The narrative thus weaves the personal with the national and the global. The story feels both deeply personal and undoubtedly universal. As Victor Pasley puts it, "Sissako includes a number of long shots with deep focus, and long takes, not as establishing shots or finishing shots as in Western cinema, but to bring our attention to time and space and to connect characters to their environment."[95] Moreover, and as has been discussed previously, Pasley argues that color holds a critical place in Sissako's 'cinema language.'[96] Specifically in *Timbuktu*, the earth tones are disrupted by flashes of color belonging to the people of Timbuktu, thus embodying Malian resistance.[97] One example is the character of the fish vendor. At the beginning of the film, the self-proclaimed 'Islamic police' approach a fish vendor. "Sister, you must wear these gloves!"[98] they say. "Wear gloves to sell fish? How could I water fish with these gloves? Our parents raised us in honor… without wearing gloves,"[99] she responds. "Enough!" she yells before getting up furiously, holding out her bare arms, a knife in her hand.

[94] Ibid.
[95] Pasley, 297.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] *Timbuktu*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2014; Amsterdam: Cinéart, 2015), DVD.
[99] Ibid.

In doing, so she exposes a bright red Malian garment hidden underneath her now-compulsory black jilbab. "You want to cut hands? Here are two! Cut them! […] We're fed up!"[100] she cries out.

Figure 4. The fish vendor faces the occupation forces revealing colorful clothing under her veil.[101]

Sound

Another critical component of Sissako's 'cinema language' is sound. In *Life on Earth*, sound also serves to delineate Paris and Sokolo. The French supermarket is characterized by its electronic noises: machines beeping, speakers airing advertisements, and waves of indistinct voices. Sokolo, however, exists under the sounds of percussions, the kora, and the singing of Salif Keita. Sissako manipulates sound carefully by using both non-diegetic and diegetic[102] sounds. Specifically, I explore his use of voiceover (non-diegetic) and radio and telephone (diegetic). The voiceover appears continuously throughout the movie, reminiscent of oral practice and tradition.[103] The words of Dramane are filled with poetry. At times belonging to a letter destined to his father, at others stemming from his journals, they often resemble a manifest of sorts. Dramane, therefore, acts as a narrator. This way of editing breaks with conventional dramatic structures and sequencing.[104] Indeed, the film juxtaposes different shots of life in the village and "dialogue is either brief or non-existent, with the audience's attention drawn more towards the scenery, emotions and humor."[105] This emphasis on everyday life,

[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Non-diegetic sound is only audible to the film's audience (e.g. soundtrack or voiceover) whereas diegetic sound is meant to be audible to the characters and is directly attached to the story (e.g. machines beeping or dialogue).
[103] Moorman, 109.
[104] Finielz, 5.
[105] Ibid.

Finielz argues, results in a "temporal reality that goes beyond the immediate past, present or future."[106] She draws here from the works of Gilles Deleuze and likens the approach of *Life on Earth* to his idea of time-image: time-image goes beyond the movement-image, characterized by the coherence of cinematic space and temporal causality[107], by disconnecting time and movement thus creating a direct presentation of time.[108] As a result, these "suggestive but not precisely located connections between images, texts and sound"[109] bring about new and dynamic ways of perception and reception for the audience.[110] But voiceover does not represent the only critical sound component in *Life on Earth.* Radio is omnipresent: the people of Sokolo walk around with a radio or sit around it, the camera moves around the local radio studio while the host reads Aimé Césaire and his guest looks at a picture of Prince Charles, Princess Diana and their son William stuck to the wall. The radio station, an on-the-air library, is ironically named 'Radio Colon, la Voix du Riz' ('Colonial Radio, Voice of the Rice Fields) (Figure 5). This inclusion of radio is not trivial; instead, it mirrors African realities whereby radio is the first mass media. This is because of its proximity with democratizing efforts post-independence, its low cost as well as its accessibility and reach.[111] Marissa Moorman argues that this enables Sissako "to show us what radio cannot reveal about itself."[112] In other words, this use of remediation, that is the representation of one medium in another, allows film to capture radio's ephemerality and lack of visibility.[113]

[106] Ibid.
[107] Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, "Movement-Image/Time-Image," in *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/view/10.1093/acref/9780198832096.001.0001/acref-9780198832096-e-0453.
[108] Finielz, 5.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid, 1.
[112] Moorman, 104.
[113] Ibid, 105.

Figure 5. A sign for Sokolo's local radio.[114]

The people of Sokolo also use the telephone. Because they do not possess private landlines, they go in and out of the post office where the phone rarely works. The camera shows an advertisement for Sotelma, a Malian telecommunications company, which says 'our priority: a phone for everyone', before cutting back to the post office where a man is struggling to have a phone conversation. This inclusion of poor telephone communication has two major effects. First, by emphasizing the village's isolation, the film calls out the poor communication between Africa and the rest of the world, specifically Europe.[115] Second, setting useful radio and ineffective telephone side by side idealizes radio as a public good and criticizes neoliberal conditions of production.[116] Moorman contends that Sissako's emblematic poetry lies precisely in this remediation. By portraying radio and the telephone, "Sissako employs the capacity of other media to betray film, to undercut its seniority, to open up the possibilities of new cinematic dialects: the visual, narrative, and sonic are all there, but the accent he gives each is distinct."[117]

Though it is still present in *Life on Earth,* both *Bamako* and *Timbuktu* heavily feature a fundamental element of Sissako's filmmaking: music. Here, I specifically look at live performance, that is the diegetic action of singing, and I argue that it is portrayed as a vehicle for emancipation. In *Bamako*, there are several scenes featuring singing. Singing is a part of the everyday, it happens both privately —a child hums to console the crying baby in her arm— and publicly —worshipers echo the hallelujah of an English-speaking pastor; a griotte sings

[114] Finielz, 1.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Moorman, 107.
[117] Ibid, 109.

while a wedding takes over the yard where the court is in session—. The scenes seem to imply that there is great power in music for singing here soothes, heals, and celebrates. Two of the most striking examples of this are found in the characters of Zegué Bamba and Melé and happen towards the end of the film. Melé and Zegué Bamba both appear at the beginning, before the title sequence. Zegué Bamba, an old farmer, takes the stand before he is asked to wait until it is his turn to speak. "My words won't remain with me,"[118] he says before returning reluctantly to his seat. After various testimonies, he grows tired of waiting and spontaneously starts signing. The judge gestures the officer not to stop him, and Zegué Bamba rises, finally making his way to the stage (Figure 6). The tribunal lets him sing and in return, it appears like he is addressing them directly. The audience, the people in the courtyard, and those that follow the trial on the radio all listen to him in silence, visibly moved by his "sing-shout-cry […] lament."[119] His words are not translated but his sung testimony seems to transcend language, emphasizing the physicality of the performance rather than its content.[120] Indeed, "it is the immediacy of live performance that makes Bamba's enunciation so arresting for the film spectator. His performance embodies the unique power of live diegetic song."[121] In other words, the performance of music, rooted in the agency of the musician, serves as a representation of and a call to action.[122] Melé, a young bar singer who has recently decided to leave her family to go to Dakar, sings both at the beginning and the end of the film. However, she cries the second time around. The emotional value shifts and increases since the audience is now familiar with her complicated marriage and choice to leave.[123] Moreover, her tears might also be a reaction to the pain expressed in the testimonies during the trial.[124] In this sense, much like with Zegué Bamba, the focus is put on the action and physicality of singing.

[118] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.
[119] Tsitsi Jaji, "Cassava Westerns: Ways of Watching Abderrahmane Sissako," *Black Camera* 6, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 171.
[120] Alison J. Murray Levine, "Words on Trial: Oral Performance in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako*," *Studies in French Cinema* 12, no. 2 (2012): 156.
[121] Jaji, 171.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Murray Levine, 161.
[124] Ibid.

Figures 6-7. Zegué Bamba and Melé deliver emotional musical performances at the end of *Bamako*.[125]

In *Timbuktu*, music might be banned by the jihadist rebels but it arguably remains central to the film.[126] During the shooting of what looks like a recruitment video, a young Black man with a French accent hesitantly explains how he gave up rap music to follow 'God's way.' Music is located in the *haram*: the forbidden, the impure, the sinful. Still, the doubts of the young jihadi are mirrored in the visible cracks in the rebels' new laws. In an almost comic scene, an armed jihadi has to make a call to his superiors after finding a source of forbidden music, "they're singing praise to the Lord and His prophet. Shall I arrest them?"[127] Here, this ban of music not only works as a way to repress and silence the population but also embodies an active attempt to suppress and erase history by targeting oral traditions.[128] But music is not solely mentioned in relation to the jihadis. A guitar first appears in the back of a Tuareg family's tent before it is used by the father, Kidane, while his wife, Satima, and his daughter, Toya, sing. Toya later confesses to young cowherd Issan: "My father is also tall and strong, and the reason he's still alive is because he plays guitar and sings. He's not a warrior. Warriors die young. Whether he's here or not, I know he sings, but don't tell anyone."[129] Toya is only a child but, by opposing music (peace/life) and violence (war/death), she has already understood the power that lies in art. This understanding of how music, specifically the voice, becomes a tool of resistance is perhaps best exemplified in the character played by Malian singer Fatoumata Diawara. In a small room, accompanied by three other men and one woman, Diawara smiles as she sings in Bambara, "the children are crying — why? Because of unfairness, violence, fearing the future…/Here is my home/Stop crying/Because no matter

[125] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.
[126] Katy Stewart, "Musical Resistance in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu*," in "Intermedialidades em imagens (pós)coloniais," special issue, *Observatorio (OBS*)* (2020): 114.
[127] "Timbuktu," Scripts, August 5, 2018, https://www.scripts.com/script/timbuktu_21921.
[128] Stewart, 15.
[129] "Timbuktu," Scripts, August 5, 2018, https://www.scripts.com/script/timbuktu_21921.

what, Timbuktu will remain/My brothers and sisters, our land is Timbuktu/Land of love, warmth, and dignity/This is our land"[130] (Figure 8). The scene comes amid a film otherwise haunted by silence. Diawara's voice appears like an act of defiance, an instrument of agency and a way to reappropriate the very soul of the city. The words almost seem to transcend the screen to address the audience directly. Diawara herself has identified with Wassoulou traditions[131] and wrote the song (*Timbuktu Fasso*) for the film.[132] This marks Sissako's first effort to make use of an original soundtrack —he also partnered with composer Amine Bouhafa— in his filmmaking.[133] As Stewart points out, "the film, then, does not merely portray the musical resistance which sprang up in defiance of the regime, but actively contributes to it, drawing upon the star power of Fatoumata Diawara, and utilising the inherent intermedial qualities of digital film technologies to engage politically and artistically across borders and media."[134] Diawara's character is quickly arrested and tried for breaching the law. She appears in front of the court and is given 80 lashes as punishment. Diawara screams as she is being publicly whipped, but in the middle of weeping, her cries turn into song (Figure 9). Diawara thus performs both pain and resistance[135], reminiscent of Wassoulou, and directly challenges the jihadi narrative.[136] Just like with Zegué Bamba and Melé in *Bamako*, the audience does not need to speak the language to understand what is being communicated.

[130] Courtney Luckhardt, "Timbuktu Fasso - Timbuktu, my homeland," YouTube, April 13, 2016, video, 2:05, https://youtu.be/gWxiZdrFBxQ.
[131] Wassoulou is a popular genre of music found in southern Mali and is generally performed by women. Wassoulou performers sing about everyday life and injustices, among others.
[132] Stewart, 115.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid, 117.
[136] Ibid, 118.

Figures 8-9. Fatoumata Diawara in *Timbuktu.*[137]

Neorealism

The final aesthetic strategy employed by Sissako discussed here is his neorealist approach to filmmaking. Sissako, like many of his African predecessors, clearly follows in Italian neorealism's footsteps. The neorealist movement, first labeled as such by Italian critics of the 1940s, was born out of the younger generation's dissatisfaction with the conventions of Italian cinema under the regime of dictator Benito Mussolini.[138] Indeed, before neorealism, cinema was characterized by idealized opulence and melodrama, images which were in sharp opposition with ordinary Italian life at the time.[139] Drawing from art cinema traditions, neorealist films made use of a mise-en-scène that relied on real locations and lightening (instead of studio sets), non-professional actors, and long takes.[140] This gave a documentary quality to fictional narratives and allowed for a great deal of flexibility especially in terms of improvisation.[141] In other words, the narrative form did not follow mainstream storytelling and could easily be disrupted to become loose.[142] The roots of neorealist cinema are therefore located in Marxist aesthetics and the political left since their nongeneric nature was an attempt to counter Hollywood's influence and thus by extension "the perceived imperialism of American culture propelled into Italian homes and theatres by the Marshall Plan of 1947 and the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948."[143] Italian neorealism itself was the subject of aesthetic

[137] *Timbuktu,* directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2014; Amsterdam: Cinéart, 2015), DVD.
[138] Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 477.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid, 478.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, introduction to *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style,* eds. Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 5-6.

interdependence with Soviet cinema[144] and was greatly influenced by the rise of the documentary cinema of the 1920s and 1930s[145]. Considering its transnational roots, particular aesthetics, and ties to sociopolitical and cultural realities[146], it is not surprising that neorealism achieved much success, eventually crossing Italian borders and resonating with different communities around the world. Specifically, neorealism influenced Third Cinema.[147]

Sada Niang maps the historical, institutional, and aesthetic influences of Italian neorealism on Francophone nationalist African cinema.[148] Namely, many early African filmmakers of the postcolonial era were trained in Italy, later creating a transnational network that drafted and adopted a new aesthetic charter for African cinema drawing heavily on Italian neorealism.[149] In that regard, there was a creolization of neorealism on the part of African filmmakers whereby they "reshaped the themes and character types of the "Italian" film style to render it operative and comprehensible within their context."[150] Still, they held on to key principles of neorealism such as its social engagement, self-definition grounded in social reality and local context as well as its belief in the didactic function of film, for example.[151] Emblematic first-generation African directors include Ousmane Sembène, Souleymane Cissè and Safi Faye.[152] Sembène addressed, among others, both the relationship between former colonies and colonizers (e.g. *Black Girl* (1966)) and internal turmoil following independence (e.g. *Mandabi* (1968)).[153] His *cinema engagé* took a clear anti-colonial and anti-imperialist stance and mainly targeted African audiences.[154]

Similarly trained in the Soviet Union, Sissako builds on the social realist and neorealist filmmaking of Sembène by also highlighting the place of women (further discussed in the following chapter) and centering social, political, and economic themes. Neorealist aesthetics are represented by the camerawork which is in service of the narrative and the choice to feature local settings which are mainly outdoors. For instance, the courtyard where most of the events

[144] Masha Salazkina, "Soviet-Italian Cinematic Exchanges, 1920s-1950s," in *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style*, eds. Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 38.
[145] Giovacchini and Sklar, 9.
[146] Salazkina, 49-50.
[147] Giovacchini and Sklar, 6.
[148] Sada Niang, "Neorealism and Nationalist African Cinema," in *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style*, eds. Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 194.
[149] Ibid, 196-198.
[150] Giovacchini and Sklar, 7.
[151] Niang, 198.
[152] Ibid, 199.
[153] Ibid, 1999-200.
[154] Moorman, 98.

in *Bamako* unfold is located in the house Sissako grew up in.[155] Sissako constantly injects personal elements into his films: his character's name, Dramane, in *Life on Earth* is derived from his name Abderrahmane, autobiographical elements are regularly incorporated, and members of his family appear in *Bamako*[156]. Neorealist influence is also explicit through his recurrent casting of non-professional actors. Many of them keep their real names on screen and *Bamako* even features former Malian minister of culture Aminata Traoré[157] and lawyers Aïssata Tall Sall, Roland Rappaport, and William Bourdon playing themselves. Improvisation is favored with no fixed narratives prior to filming or brief shooting screenplays. This once again falls in line with Sembène's artistic and critical realism[158] and approach to fictionalizing the reality of everyday life[159]. Finally, Sissako also makes use of a flexible and non-omniscient plot structure and narration, a distinctive quality of neorealist cinema.[160] As Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith write, "neorealism's tendency toward slice-of-life plot construction gave many films of the movement an open-ended quality quite opposed to the tidy wrapup favored by American studio cinema."[161] Sissako's films all end in uncertainty— there is no denouement, no real sense of finality. We do not know the outcome of the trial in *Bamako* or what happens to the now-orphaned Toya at the end of *Timbuktu*. Here, Sissako appears to admit that it is unlikely for one to portray the totality of reality.[162]

Writing Mali: A Look at Sissako's Cinematic Discourse

Now that aesthetic forms and strategies have been discussed, it is just as important to look at the discursive strategies employed by Sissako. I first explore the non-linear structure before moving on to the topics tackled in each film. Diawara describes Sissako's cinema as "free verse rather than narrative cinema."[163] As argued earlier, the time-image means that the sequencing of shots does not necessarily work towards a resolution but the shots are instead "composed with an uncommon freedom and the way in which they relate to one another and

[155] Manthia Diawara, "The Films of Abderrahmane Sissako," *Artforum* 53, no. 5 (January 2015), accessed June 24, 2021, https://www.artforum.com/print/201501/the-films-of-abderrahmane-sissako-49416.
[156] James S. Williams, "Neoliberal Violence and Aesthetic Resistance in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (2006)," *Studies in French Cinema* 19, no. 4 (2019): 296.
[157] Ibid, 295.
[158] Rachel Gabara, "'A Poetics of Refusals': Neorealism from Italy to Africa," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 23, no. 3 (2006): 210.
[159] Ibid, 211.
[160] Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 479.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Diawara, "The Films of Abderrahmane Sissako."

to the film as a whole is typically indeterminate, ambiguous, or suggestively metaphorical."[164] The fragmentary narrative is complex, slow-paced, and layers plot, slice-of-life digressions, and meta sequences such as the spaghetti western featured in *Bamako*. Sissako's cinema has therefore often been qualified as poetic by critics and audiences alike. For instance, Akin Adesokan refers to Sissako as "a poet at heart and a nomad at home."[165] Indeed, his films are marked by their quiet and meditative nature.[166] That being said, they remain strong in their socio-political critique.

The cinematic poetry of Sissako is perhaps most manifest in *Life on Earth*. Fragments of the writings of one of the founders of the *négritude* movement, Aimé Césaire, appear throughout the film, first quoted in a voiceover by Dramane, then as an extract read by a radio host, and finally as a quote which appears on the screen. More specifically, the film makes use of Césaire's *Notebook of a return to the Native Land* and *Discourse on Colonialism.* Sissako draws a parallel between the former and Dramane who returns to his native Sokolo, therefore reappropriating the poetic narrative while still situating it in the broader context of Sokolo.[167] In this sense, Sissako tackles themes of exile and postcolonialism. The juxtaposition with Césaire is not trivial: Césaire's power lies in his articulation of emancipation and self-realization through language, connecting the two to a particular history and community.[168] This, coupled with his strong rejection of European colonial ideology[169], mirrors the narrative envisioned by Sissako. Moreover, "by revisiting the words of […] Césaire, Sissako not only pays homage to someone who deeply influenced his art, but as a director, he also gives an allegorical dimension to the trivial life of a small Malian village."[170] In other words, slice-of-life coexists with broader postcolonial disillusion, meaning Sokolo thus resides in the autobiographical and the fictional, the personal and the collective.[171] Dramane grapples with exile and expresses his wish to return and film Sokolo by quoting Césaire: "I'll arrive fresh and young in my country, and tell this country whose dust has penetrated my flesh: 'I wandered for a long time. I now return to your hideous open wounds.'"[172] He questions his departure and by extension the relationship between Africa and Europe. In his letter, Dramane asks his father, "it is nearly the year 2000 which I'm sure will bring no improvements, as you must well know.

[164] Ibid.
[165] Adesokan, 144.
[166] Murray Levine, 152.
[167] Finielz, 6.
[168] Ibid, 5.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid, 6.
[171] Ibid.
[172] *Life on Earth*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (1998; Paris: Celluloid Dreams, 2021).

Is what I learn far from you worth what I forget about us?"[173] It is easy to interpret Dramane's words as pessimistic and the film as documenting Mali's failure to develop. *Life on Earth* was marketed as "a poetic contemplation on the relationship between Black Africa and the industrial world"[174] where "the arrival of the 21st century is hardly noticed by [the people of Sokolo], who are still struggling so hard to merely enter the 20th century." The 'industrial world', to be understood as Europe, is characterized by its technology and 'mad rush', whilst Sokolo, indifferent to the new millennium celebrations, struggles to provide adequate telephone communication, marvels at the electric doors owned by the white residents of Abidjan and still has to deal with poverty, illnesses, and the birds which threaten the rice harvest. However, such a reading of Sokolo being stuck in the past and failing to catch up is arguably both shallow and misleading. I consider here Finielz' argument that *Life on Earth* rather counters global chrono-politics.[175] Chrono-politics is defined by Mignolo as the 'civilizational practice' which opposes those who fit modern conceptions of time and those that do not, therefore creating a hierarchy of progress and development.[176] Césaire himself challenges the ahistorical discourse on Africa which relies on a linear conception of time.[177] The host of the on-the-air library in Sokolo quotes *Discourse on Colonialism*: "Africa's historic tragedy was less its coming in contact with the rest of the world too late, than the way this contact occurred. It was when Europe fell into the hands of industrial leaders entirely lacking in scruples, that it expanded. Our misfortune meant it was *that* Europe we encountered."[178] Africa, therefore, does not arbitrarily exist in the 'margins of history' but should be placed in the global history of colonialism and imperialism, moving towards decolonial thinking. Finielz eloquently argues: "today indeed, it is not Africa "being late" on a scale of "development," unable to adapt to the progress of a modern changing world, but a continent, whose economies have been structured by a global capitalist system that perpetuates mechanisms of dependency, generating what is called "underdevelopment.""[179] In short, *Life on Earth* is able to challenge and deconstruct prevalent discourses in world politics (amounting to the 'Westphalian straitjacket') by actively engaging with anti-colonial and postcolonial thought, opening up new ways of conceptualizing time and history.

---

[173] Ibid.
[174] "Life on Earth," Celluloid Dreams, accessed June 7, 2021, https://www.celluloid-dreams.com/life-on-earth.
[175] Finielz, 5.
[176] Ibid, 6.
[177] Ibid.
[178] In *Life on Earth*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (1998; Paris: Celluloid Dreams, 2021).
[179] Finielz, 6.

Bamako further explores the rejection of chrono-politics present in *Life on Earth*. Both films feature the same Césaire quote: "my ear to the ground, I heard tomorrow pass by."[180] Here, past, present, and future overlap, reinventing a temporality beyond Western historicism. Sissako similarly situates local politics in their global context and offers a critique of colonialism, corruption, neoliberalism, and globalization. Because it takes place during a trial, *Bamako* relies on extensive monologues (here, testimonies) and centers on orality or the *mise-en-scène de la parole*[181]. Murray Levine argues that oral performance, that is the action of speaking, inserts some optimism in what seems like an otherwise hopeless and helpless discourse.[182] *Bamako* centers African voices and points the finger at western institutions[183] in an attempt to disrupt and reverse existing power dynamics. One after the other, members of the civil society express their frustration with the current state of Mali which they partly or entirely attribute to western structures here embodied by the WB and the IMF. During the trial, several subjects are debated. The debt is tackled by Aminata Traoré in response to a question concerning the disproportionate spending of African nations when it comes to paying off their debts instead of investing in social services. Traoré argues that the relationship between Africa and the West is itself ill-intentioned, "everything is done to make sure Africans are unaware of the system's rapacity,"[184] she says. But Traoré also places accountability at home: "the impetus is northern but the theft is local— done with our complicity."[185] Corruption also happens in the background; a guard named Jean-Paul refuses entry to people wishing to witness the trial. However, for others, he does not even ask for their papers and when a man gives him money to allow him to film the proceedings, he grants him access to the court. Traoré refuses conventional depictions of Africa and talks of pauperization instead of poverty. She holds that Africa should not be defined by poverty but that the emphasis should be on the failures of the global capitalist and imperialist system which actively works to impoverish Africa. In this sense, globalization does not benefit everyone equally. When speaking of the myth of an 'open world', Traoré asserts: "it's clearly open for whites but not for Blacks"[186] bringing to the front the legacy of colonialism and systemic racism. Madou Keita, the returned migrant, gives an account of migration, a consequence of the poor conditions at home. A man named Georges Keita hints at neocolonialism: not only were African states subjected to transatlantic slave trade

[180] In *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.
[181] Murray Levine, 153.
[182] Ibid, 163.
[183] Ibid.
[184] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.

and colonization but they now have to face "an international diktat, institutions that more or less regulate world relations."[187] Georges Keita qualifies the outcome as anti-development, an inability from these institutions to deliver on their promises and eventually furthering the scourge of "malnutrition, undernourishment, chronic illiteracy, chronic unemployment and even the total lack of decent living conditions."[188] More witnesses take the stage and offer passionate critiques of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), privatization, and overall exploitation. Meanwhile, Melé's husband, Chaka, believes that an Israeli embassy might open in Bamako and learns Hebrew in the hopes that it will allow him to find a job as the embassy's guard. Chaka's suicide at the end is implicit and the film closes with footage of his funeral. Therefore, there is a corporality to subjugation; it is not merely abstract but also physical, intimate, and forceful. This is summarized by Georges Keita when he says, "they don't just take our resources, our work, and our money, they take our minds too."[189] *Bamako* effectively communicates the effects of exploitation, both at the macro and micro levels, whilst recentering the civil society in public debates that often dismiss them.

One harmful consequence of poor living conditions, Georges Keita suggests, is alienation as well as the negation and loss of self. The film seems to make the case that this could empower terrorism. Defence lawyer Rappaport asserts: "there's another danger. We've all referred to it. It crosses all continents and has struck them all. One of the elements feeding it is poverty. Terrorism is a danger not only for Africa but for all of us […] and the fight against terrorism cannot succeed without the defeat of poverty."[190] But if Aminata Traoré shares this concern, she also points out that the responsibility does not solely fall on Africa for the West, through its neocolonial policies, has also been playing a part in fostering terrorism and mass migration. *Timbuktu* continues this debate and builds on Traoré's argument. Indeed, the film portrays Arabic and French-speaking jihadis, men who know nothing of the culture, who have clearly come from elsewhere. The imam highlights their outsider status when they enter the mosque with shoes and guns: "here, in Timbuktu, he who dedicates himself to religion uses his head and not his weapons"[191]. *Timbukutu*'s depiction of jihadis has been at the heart of much controversy. Many, from Europe and Africa alike, have criticized Sissako for his proximity with the Mauritanian government, 'humanizing' terrorists, being 'too soft on Islamists' and

[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.
[191] "Timbuktu," Scripts, August 5, 2018, https://www.scripts.com/script/timbuktu_21921.

'too kind to Tuaregs,' and for reproducing Orientalist narratives.[192] Arguably, the movie does not overlook violent repression: the film opens with a gazelle running across the desert foreshadowing Toya panting at the end and a young unwed couple is stoned to death (the latter was the real-life event that inspired the film[193]). Sissako chooses to frame things differently, contrasting with the spectacle of brutality pervasive in Amerian cinema, therefore problematizing our understanding of the occupation.[194] As mentioned earlier, the film strays away from simplistic stereotypes and sheds light on the jihadis' hypocrisy, doubts, incompetence, and ignorance. Thus, several scholars have disagreed with the controversy surrounding *Timbuktu*.[195] Odile Cazenave et al., for example, conclude that some of the criticism rests on "superficial critical readings or even misreadings of the film."[196] They argue that the film goes beyond a mere portrayal of life under violent jihadi occupation in northern Mali; instead, it layers different life experiences (or 'life on earth'), and in the light of Sissako's emblematic poetry, they amount to a metaphor, a claim that "the spectacle afforded us by a film must not fall into the trap of making humans a spectacle."[197] *Timbuktu* was initially intended to be a documentary but was filmed in Mauritania following violent escalations in Mali. Phyllis Taoua draws a comparison with the neorealist *Battle of Algiers* (1966), emphasizing the global appeal of *Timbuktu*.[198]

[192] Odile Cazenave et al, "*Timbuktu* by Abderrahmane Sissako (review)," *African Studies Review* 59, no. 3 (December 2016): 269.
[193] Ibid, 289.
[194] Ibid, 272.
[195] Ibid, 270.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid, 290.
[198] Ibid, 271.

BRIDGING CULTURE AND POLITICS: LESSONS FROM SISSAKO

Now that Sissako's aesthetic and discursive strategies have been established, I consider the following: what does his filmmaking tell us about contemporary Mali? And ultimately, how does this relate to the relationship between art and politics? I start by placing the films in their broader socio-political context and subsequently explore the place of women and agency. I argue that the films constitute a complex socio-political history and that they reestablish female and African agency.

Film as Socio-Political History

If *Life on Earth*, *Bamako*, and *Timbuktu* were produced during three different decades —the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s respectively— they also constitute and document various stages of Malian socio-political history. This, however, is not exclusive to Sissako. Rather, it falls within a broader tradition of African filmmaking. Like several of its West African neighbors, Mali gained independence from France in 1960. Much of the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s dealt with immigrant life and the Black experience in Europe (or former colonial nations, here France) with themes of alienation, exploitation, and oppression.[199] By the time Sissako started his career, African cinema was generally more concerned with questions of exile and, to quote Césaire, the 'return to the native land.'[200] This allowed filmmakers, the majority of whom also had experiences of living abroad, to critically reflect on the postcolonial state of their nations.[201] In *Life on Earth*, the colonial past still haunts Sokolo. Though the film is anchored in the Malian village, Sissako manages to paint an image of a France that is oblivious to the woes of its former colony. He does so not only through the writings of Césaire, as previously argued, but also through simple conversations. For example, a worker at the post office speaks with a French woman named Marie on the phone. When asked about the weather, he responds, "yes, it's sunny. You think it's good of us. In fact, it's our worst enemy. It's because you don't care."[202] In doing so, Sissako aligns the story with "a deliberate anti-colonial stance"[203] and arguably an anti-*neo*colonial stance as well. This criticism of France is not negligible considering the repeated French military interventions on the continent since decolonization.[204]

---

[199] Finielz, 1.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid.
[202] *Life on Earth*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (1998; Paris: Celluloid Dreams, 2021).
[203] Finielz, 1.
[204] Tony Chafer, Gordon D. Cumming, and Roel van der Velde, "France's Interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A Historical Institutionalist Perspective," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2020): 487.

Such interventions were characterized by their unilateralism and self-legitimation, thus overlooking external and local legitimating authorities and relying on assumptions of 'privileged knowledge'[205] over the territory.[206] Moreover, France's reputation as the 'gendarme of Africa' starting from the 1960s not only meant that French soldiers integrated African armies but it also entailed that their strategic and material assistance fostered a dependency on the French military.[207] The end of the Cold War, the Rwandan genocide, and increased globalization and pressure from international and regional bodies created a shift towards French multilateralism.[208] Still, the extent to which French interventions in Africa starting from the 1990s amount to multilateralism is debatable. It is rather a hybrid form of multilateralism that seems to have emerged, specifically following the 2013 Operation Serval, later morphing into Operation Barkhane.[209] Operation Serval "deployed 4000 French and more than 2000 Chadian troops against a northern Tuareg and Islamist offensive that threatened to advance on the capital Bamako"[210] whereas Operation Barkhane, which started in 2014, continued to counter terrorism, this time in the broader Sahel region.[211] This hybrid French multilateralism encompasses a regional approach which privileges coalition-building while retaining certain practices and ideas "such as the idea of France as the military protector of Africa, which coexists with the mantra of 'African solutions to African problems', or the combination of the multilateral approach with the jealous guarding of French strategic and operational autonomy."[212] The French military never appears in all three films but Sissako's work does mirror this complex and ambivalent relationship between France and Mali. If his anti-(neo)colonial stance strongly criticizes French colonial and postcolonial policies, Sissako, unlike Sembène, has nonetheless embraced foreign funding especially from France.[213] Upon receiving the award for best director for *Timbuktu* at the Cannes Film Festival, Sissako also expressed his gratitude to France for its inclusivity, openness, and humanism.[214] In this sense, both films as cultural products and their broader production and reception reflect and contribute to multifaceted historical relations between France and Mali.

---

[205] Here, the belief that the French military possessed in-depth knowledge of the continent by virtue of being in contact with its (former) colonies.
[206] Chafer, Cumming, and van der Velde, 488.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid, 490.
[209] Ibid, 493.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid, 502.
[213] Moorman, 102.
[214] Académie des César, "Abderrahmane Sissako, César 2015 du Meilleur Réalisateur, pour TIMBUKTU," Vimeo, March 3, 2015, video, 9:28, https://vimeo.com/121137687.

Most blatant and prevalent is Sissako's depiction of the effects of neoliberalism. The advent of globalization has brought with it significant changes in international relations, namely by bringing in powerful non-state actors. Such actors include international institutions like the WB and the IMF which have introduced SAPs in thirty-seven sub-Saharan countries.[215] Consequently, SAPs have held a central part in African policymaking starting from the 1980s.[216] SAPs emerged as inevitable solutions to the dire economic situation at the time which included low to negative rates of growth of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, deteriorating terms of trade, and increasing limited access to international finance.[217] Mali, specifically, had been on the United Nations Committee for Development Policy's list of 'least developed countries in the world' since 1971.[218] The goals of SAPs were therefore to enhance the industrial sector, boost competitiveness, improve the efficiency of resource allocation, and facilitate the international transfer of technical and other knowledge, ultimately reducing fiscal imbalances and leading to long-term growth.[219] However, the loans of the SAPs did not come without conditions. In *Bamako,* a woman testifies that she saw a confidential letter, which she labels 'a conspiracy', stating that if the authorities refused to privatize the transport system, the WB would withdraw subsidies for health and education in Mali. Indeed, required policy change included "currency devaluation, the removal/reduction of the state from the workings of the economy, the elimination of subsidies in an attempt to reduce expenditures, and trade liberalisation."[220] The ambitions of the SAPs have nonetheless failed to concretize. Instead, they "have resulted in the dismantling of public resources and major cutbacks in state services."[221] Additionally, they have led to significant debt, causing some countries to spend as much as one-third of their gross national product (GNP) to service SAP loans.[222] This is what the witnesses of *Bamako*, such as Aminata Traoré, denounce. Traoré states, "the disastrous nature of economic policies in which only borrowed money was invested without any benefit to the people of Mali and Africa is a moral wrong […] these 1.42 billion CFA francs [representing 60% of Malian debt cancelled by the IMF] are not fresh money injected

[215] Farhad Noorbakhsh and Alberto Paloni, "Structural Adjustment Programs and Industry in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restructuring or De-industrialization?," *The Journal of Developing Areas* 33, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 549.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Finielz, 6.
[219] Noorbakhsh and Paloni, 549-550.
[220] J. Barry Riddell, "Things Fall Apart Again: Structural Adjustment Programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 1 (1992): 53.
[221] Williams, 294.
[222] Ibid.

into Mali's economy."[223] This also echoes critiques found in scholarly literature. For instance, J. Barry Riddell refers to the devastating impact of SAPs on the lives of Africans as well as on the nature and landscapes of nations.[224] Furthermore, Farhad Noorbakhsh and Alberto Paloni argue that there has been a trend of marginalization of the industrial sectors in sub-Saharan Africa with signs of de-industrialization.[225] Though they do not assert a causal relationship with SAPs, the empirical evidence they present "seems to support the view that, in [the sub-Saharan] context, SAPs sometimes contradict their long-run objective of building up dynamic comparative advantage in industry."[226] But, as previously mentioned, this reality is not solely the product of the 'financial capitalism' and 'predatory capitalism' embodied by the WB and the IMF, as Bourdon exclaims in *Bamako*, but it is also aided by internal politics, the corruption of new elites, and a lack of democratic debates.[227] The films of Sissako shed light on the complexity of postcolonial Malian politics, taking into account how the state fits into and connects to the broader international political and capitalist systems, while centering the lives and experiences of everyday Malians. This adds a practical dimension that often lacks in IR and addresses the gap between abstract theory and practical implementation which was discussed in the literature review. By combining fictional narrative with socio-political commentary, Sissako bridges culture (here, art) and politics.

That being said, Sissako's films have also received criticism for failing to capture the entire complexity of Malian politics. French journalist, Sabine Cessou, for example, has argued that *Timbuktu* is far from the reality of northern Mali. Cessou finds fault with the unrealistic nuclear family formed by Kidane, Satima, and Toya, as well as the reproduction of the 'Tuareg myth' present in the French imagination whereby the Tuareg man is inherently 'kind' and 'good.'[228] This is especially disconcerting, Cessou holds, when the film omits any mention of the Tuareg rebels of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and their conquest of northern Mali allegedly aided by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or the militant Islamist group Ansar Dine and its Tuareg leadership.[229] Finally, Cessou finds issue with the scant depiction of violence, the visibly 'sympathetic' Islamist character Abdelkrim based on a real-life dangerous criminal, and the seemingly bizarre conflict between Kidane and

[223] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.
[224] Riddell, 53.
[225] Noorbakhsh and Paloni, 567.
[226] Ibid, 568.
[227] Williams, 295.
[228] Sabine Cessou, ""Timbuktu", le film d'Abderrahmane Sissako, loin de la réalité," last modified January 26, 2017, https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-rues-dafriques/20141222.RUE1128/timbuktu-le-film-d-abderrahmane-sissako-loin-de-la-realite.html.
[229] Ibid.

the fisherman.[230] Cessou concludes that the film is addressed to Westerners, simultaneously assisting them in differentiating 'normal Islam' from 'rogue Islam' and confirming internalized stereotypes (here, referring to the myth of the desert, the myth of nomadism associated with freedom, and the Tuareg myth).[231] It is easy to see why Cessou would claim that *Timbuktu* is made for Westerners. After all, Sissako's films have been screened at film festivals across the West and have been celebrated by Western critics. Though *Life on Earth* is rather difficult to access, *Bamako* and *Timbuktu* are easily found on online platforms whereas the proportion of individuals using the internet in Mali is minor. But as previously argued, his films present a hybrid form of popular culture and by extension appeal to a number of audiences, be they local or transnational. If Western audiences are more likely to consume his films, Sissako positions himself as a *porte-parole*, or *griauteur*, bringing voices from the continent to a broader public while preserving and transmitting knowledge.[232] Alioune Sow offers a counter-argument to Cessou by demonstrating how violence need not be explicit to be communicated, with great distress manifest even in the few words exchanged between Kidane and Satima.[233] Moreover, "Sissako uses the couple Kidane and Satima not only to distance himself from the clichés and stereotypes he has been accused of reproducing, but also to raise pertinent questions about the conflict and the occupation."[234] Hints and signs in the subtext point to the various layers of the conflict such as Kidane's gun which is linked to his past[235] or his conversation with a fellow Tuareg translator which confirms his fear of a Tuareg militancy turned radical[236]. In reality, *Timbuktu* cannot explore the full complexity of the security crisis in northern Mali and does contain flaws such as the one-dimensionality of the fisherman Amadou, as argued by Cessou, but it remains an entry point into the subject with discernable hints for a more knowledgeable audience, as Sow points out.

Centering Women and Female Agency

Before moving on to agency, it is worth briefly stressing gendered aspects of Sissako's filmmaking. In a similar fashion than Sembène in films like *Black Girl* (1966), Sissako gives a significant role to women. Far from being absent or in the background, they take center stage, expressing their grievances and leading the resistance, whether privately or publicly. This is

[230] Ibid.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Murray Levine, 163-164.
[233] Odile Cazenave et al., 281.
[234] Ibid, 282.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid, 283.

particularly noteworthy when most of the scholarly literature and public discourse focuses on men and portrays women as voiceless and helpless victims. In the same way that Chaka's suicide highlights the corporality of subjugation, women's bodies also serve as political and moral playgrounds. In *Timbuktu,* the 'Islamic' fight is also taking place through women's bodies: they can no longer sing, dress, marry, or spend time as they wish. The control of gendered and sexualized bodies serves as a way to control space.[237]

Figure 10. Imprisoned women in *Timbuktu.*[238]

But women do not only exist as mere bodies or for Sissako to issue political statements or confirm how dire and violent the situation is. Rather, they exist in their own right. Amina Traoré in *Bamako* asserts, "our countries are not imploding today because, on a domestic level, women play an important role. That is why they must refuse to be imprisoned within the conventional interpretation of the situation that says they are victims of their culture, society, and men. The men are in trouble, the women too."[239] In this sense, women are not just casualties of conflict but are active actors that should not be overlooked. Sissako himself has declared the importance of women in his films as well as in reality, having taken inspiration for his characters from real-life women.

[237] Stewart, 117.
[238] *Timbuktu*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2014; Amsterdam: Cinéart, 2015), DVD.
[239] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.

Figure 11-12. Zabou, often interpreted as an enchantress or a madwoman repeatedly defies the jihadis in *Timbuktu*. Arms stretched out, she unapologetically takes space as a rebel points a gun at her.[240]

The focus on women contrasts with a critical lack of gendered approaches in mainstream IR and fields like security studies though feminist IR theory, through the writings of scholars like Cynthia Eloe, have gained traction. As a result, Sissako's films arguably reestablish female agency.

What Place for Film in Politics? Agency and Resistance

Perhaps the most valuable lesson from Sissako's filmmaking is how it reclaims agency (here, the capacity to act). By centering African voices, Sissako refuses to be silenced nor misrepresented. The voice becomes an important tool, whether it is used to speak or sing. Music, Sissako appears to suggest, becomes central to liberation even under oppression. In this regard, music is both shelter and vector of a freedom that can also be found in the self and not necessarily solely through the state. Moreover, Sissako emphasizes local knowledge which is often dismissed as illegitimate and unfounded. When Traoré testifies against the policies of the WB and the IMF in *Bamako*, a lawyer questions her positioning as an expert on such issues

[240] *Timbuktu*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2014; Amsterdam: Cinéart, 2015), DVD.

for, after all, she is a writer. Traoré responds, "I am a citizen of this country, with my feet firmly grounded in the realities of this country. Being a writer doesn't mean I don't have a certain expertise at dealing with aggressive stances in an open debate on issues that I experience from the inside."[241] Again, this narrows the gap between abstract theories and real-life experiences of politics. Africans, here specifically Malians, are not just the objects onto which public policies are implemented but they are subjects with clear demands and complaints. Sissako steps away from mainstream theories of IR such as realism and structural realism which focus on state actors and introduces non-state actors as essential parts of the international system. The state takes the back seat, not totally absent but not omnipresent either, while civil society, international organizations, and militant groups shape world politics. Of course, reality includes a combination of state and non-state actors but in an unstable country like Mali which experiences major security and governance problems, this inclusion is especially relevant. Placed in the broader context of IR scholarship, these films stress the problems of levels-of-analysis and agent-structure.[242] The former refers to the lack of consensus over what levels of analysis and which agents should be considered in order to capture the dynamics of international politics.[243] The latter was developed by Wendt in an attempt to theorize agency and poses the following question: do agents shape social structures or vice versa?[244] Arguably, these problems cannot be solved simply through analytical terms and theoretical assumptions.[245] Rather, "enactments of agency create and transcend classic levels of analysis, and […] establish specific, often contested relationships of agents and structures."[246] In short, Sissako's filmmaking displays the need for IR to consider agency and to conceptualize it in a way that is not solely reliant on analytical solutions but that is also reflexive.[247]

Finally, by tackling explicit political themes either implicitly or explicitly in a filmmaking that has been characterized as poetic, Sissako "not only unmasks the often invisible and slow, structural violence of the neoliberal condition, but also places such disfiguring violence squarely within the domain of beauty and suggests it can be offset and remoulded through various kinds of aesthetic counter-formation. […] The cinematic frame becomes a

[241] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.
[242] Benjamin Braun, Sebastian Schindler, and Tobias Wille, "Rethinking Agency in International Relations: Performativity, Performances and Actor‐Networks," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, no. 4 (2019): 788.
[243] Ibid, 790.
[244] Ibid, 791.
[245] Ibid, 798-799.
[246] Ibid, 799.
[247] Ibid, 800.

contested, often agonistic space, a virtual battleground for the aesthetic."[248] In other words, Sissako's cinema does not only reflect the resistance of the Malian people but, through its aesthetic and narrative forms, becomes an act of resistance itself. Sissako claims both beauty and violence and challenges the audience on their preconceived ideas, playing with their sense of reality and truth, and inviting them to put their imagination into practice.[249] In *Bamako*, who exactly are the judges is never really explained and it could be argued that they mirror the audience, who has now also witnessed the trial and is capable of judgment. Film facilitates the viewer's 'process of coming-into-consciousness' as presented by Repinecz and offers an urgent call to action.

[248] Williams, 309.
[249] Ibid, 309-310.

CONCLUSION

While the Malian civil society takes the WB and the IMF to court, an interview takes place outside of the courtyard. “The other day, you were saying that the worst after-effect of structural adjustment was the destruction of the social fabric. This whole part has been erased. Can you start again?”[250], a man asks. “No one will listen. Don’t waste your time,”[251] the other responds before the recording stops. Filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako has expressed his frustration about the patronizing manner in which Africa is often spoken of. According to him, much is said of Africa but Africa says little of itself. His films refuse silence and attempt to make the world listen and pay attention. This thesis has shown that there is great value in looking critically at cultural production. Aesthetic forms grounded in social reality call the Eurocentrism of IR into question and allow for practical approaches while centering non-state actors and their agency. Sissako’s filmmaking follows a tradition of African cinematic resistance and opens up new ways of thinking about time and history. Drawing from cultural studies, this research has shown that culture does not merely reflect politics but that it contributes to it by starting discussions and actively engaging with the broader context in which it emerges. The film here, as Sissako conceptualizes it, exists as a conversation with the audience and its didactic function does not mean that it is a demonstration of the truth but that it wishes to open up consciousness to particular experiences and realities which have often been denied complexity. Sissako’s films are not perfect, they at times engage with simplistic representations, but they are arguably still valuable for IR scholarship for they allow to broaden its perspective.

[250] *Bamako*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako (2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007), DVD.
[251] Ibid.

Bibliography

"2000 vu par…" ARTE. Accessed June 7, 2021. http://download.pro.arte.tv/archives/fichiers/01385769.pdf.

"Abderrahmane SISSAKO." Festival de Cannes. Accessed May 20, 2021. https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/artist/abderrahmane-sissako.

Académie des César. "Abderrahmane Sissako, César 2015 du Meilleur Réalisateur, pour TIMBUKTU." Vimeo. March 3, 2015. Video, 9:28. https://vimeo.com/121137687.

Acharya, Amitav. "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies." *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (2014): 647-659.

Adesokan, Akin. "Abderrahmane Sissako and the Poetics of Engaged Expatriation." *Screen* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 143-160.

Austen, Ralph A. and Şaul Mahir. *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-first Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010.

"Bamako: Festivals and Awards." Archipel 33. Accessed June 7, 2021. http://www.archipel33.fr/site/content/view/465/2/lang,en/.

"Bamako: Presentation." Archipel 33. Accessed June 7, 2021. http://www.archipel33.fr/site/content/view/287/2/lang,en/.

Barber, Karin. *A History of African Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Barsamian, David. *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said.* London: Pluto Press, 2003.

Bleiker, Roland. *Aesthetics and World Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 11th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017.

Braun, Benjamin, Sebastian Schindler, and Tobias Wille. "Rethinking Agency in International Relations: Performativity, Performances and Actor‐Networks." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, no. 4 (2019): 787-807.

Buzan, Barry, and Richard Little. "Why International Relations Has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (2001): 19-39.

Cazenave, Odile, Phyllis Taoua, Alioune Sow, and Kenneth Harrow. "*Timbuktu* by Abderrahmane Sissako (review)." *African Studies Review* 59, no. 3 (December 2016): 267-293.

Cessou, Sabine. ""Timbuktu", le film d'Abderrahmane Sissako, loin de la réalité." Last modified January 26, 2017. https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-rues-dafriques/20141222.RUE1128/timbuktu-le-film-d-abderrahmane-sissako-loin-de-la-realite.html.

Chafer, Tony, Gordon D. Cumming, and Roel van der Velde. "France's Interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A Historical Institutionalist Perspective." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2020): 482-507.

De Turégano, Teresa Hoefert. "The New Politics of African Cinema at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs." *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20, no. 3 (2002): 22-32.

Diawara, Manthia. *African Cinema: Politics & Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Diawara, Manthia. “The Films of Abderrahmane Sissako.” *Artforum* 53, no. 5 (January 2015). Accessed June 24, 2021. https://www.artforum.com/print/201501/the-films-of-abderrahmane-sissako-49416.

Dyvik, Synne L., Jan Selby and Rorden Wilkinson. Introduction to *What’s the Point of International Relations?,* 1-18. Edited by Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby and Rorden Wilkinson. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth.* London: Penguin Books, 2001.

Finielz, Elise. “Temporal Subversion and Political Critique in Abderrahmane Sissako’s *La vie sur terre*.” *Jump Cut*, no. 57 (Fall 2016): 1-7. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-FinielzVieSurTerre/index.html.

Fyfe, Alexander. “The Specificity of the Literary and Its Universalizing Function in Frantz Fanon’s “On National Culture.”” *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 19, no. 6 (2017): 764-780.

Gabara, Rachel. “‘A Poetics of Refusals’: Neorealism from Italy to Africa.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 23, no. 3 (2006): 201-215.

Giovacchini, Saverio and Robert Sklar. Introduction to *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style, 3-15.* Edited by Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

Glover, Danny. Foreword to *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist, xi-xiii.* Edited by Samba Gadjigo. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Grayson, Kyle, Matt Davies and Simon Philpott. “Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum.” *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 155-163.

Jaji, Tsitsi. “Cassava Westerns: Ways of Watching Abderrahmane Sissako,” *Black Camera* 6, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 154-177.

Kuhn, Annette, and Guy Westwell. "Movement-Image/Time-Image." In *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/view/10.1093/acref/9780198832096.001.0001/acref-9780198832096-e-0453. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

"La vie sur terre." IFFR. Accessed June 7, 2021. https://iffr.com/en/2007/films/la-vie-sur-terre.

Lewandowska Cummings, Basia. "Abderrahmane Sissako for Beginners." British Film Institute, last modified May 27, 2015. https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/abderrahmane-sissako-beginners.

"Life on Earth." Celluloid Dreams. Accessed June 7, 2021. https://www.celluloid-dreams.com/life-on-earth.

Luckhardt, Courtney. "Timbuktu Fasso - Timbuktu, my homeland." YouTube. April 13, 2016. Video, 2:05. https://youtu.be/gWxiZdrFBxQ.

Moorman, Marissa J. "Radio Remediated: Sissako's *Life on Earth* and Sembène's *Mooladé*." *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 94-116.

Murray Levine, Alison J. "Words on Trial: Oral Performance in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako*." *Studies in French Cinema* 12, no. 2 (2012): 151-167.

Nance, Kevin. "The Spirit and the Strength: A Profile of Toni Morrison." Poets & Writers, last modified November 1, 2008. https://www.pw.org/content/the_spirit_and_the_strength_a_profile_of_toni_morrison.

Niang, Sada. "Neorealism and Nationalist African Cinema." In *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style*, edited by Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, 194-208. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

Noorbakhsh, Farhad, and Alberto Paloni. “Structural Adjustment Programs and Industry in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restructuring or De-industrialization?” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 33, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 549-580.

Opondo, Sam Okoth. “Cinema Is Our ‘Night School’: Appropriation, Falsification, and Dissensus in the Art of Ousmane Sembène.” *African Identities* 13, no. 1 (2015): 34-48.

Orlando, Valérie K. *New African Cinema*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017.

“Oscar hopeful ‘Timbuktu’ sweeps France’s César awards.” France 24. February 21, 2015. https://www.france24.com/en/20150221-oscar-timbuktu-cesar-awards-foreign-movie.

Pasley, Victoria. “Beyond Violence in Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Timbuktu*.” *African Studies* Review 59, no. 3 (2014): 294-301.

Repinecz, Jonathon. “’This Is Not a Pipe?’: Reflexivity, Fictionality and Dialogism in Sembène’s films.” *Journal of African Cinemas* 8, no. 2 (2016): 181-197.

Riddell, J. Barry. “Things Fall Apart Again: Structural Adjustment Programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 1 (1992): 53-68.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2016.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism.* London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Salazkina, Masha. “Soviet-Italian Cinematic Exchanges, 1920s-1950s.” In *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style*, edited by Saverio Giovacchini and Robert Sklar, 37-51. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

Sissako, Abderrahmane, dir. *Bamako.* 2006; Paris: Blaqout, 2007. DVD.

Sissako, Abderrahmane, dir. *Life on Earth*. 1998; Paris: Celluloid Dreams, 2021.

Sissako, Abderrahmane, dir. *Timbuktu*. 2014; Amsterdam: Cinéart, 2015. DVD.

Stewart, Katy. "Musical Resistance in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu*." In "Intermedialidades em imagens (pós)coloniais." Special issue, *Observatorio (OBS*)* (2020): 108-122.

"Timbuktu." Les Films du Worso. Accessed June 7, 2021. https://en.worso.com/timbuktu.

"Timbuktu." Scripts. August 5, 2018. https://www.scripts.com/script/timbuktu_21921.

Williams, James S. "Neoliberal Violence and Aesthetic Resistance in Abderrahmane Sissako's Bamako (2006)." *Studies in French Cinema* 19, no. 4 (2019): 294-313.