

DIRECTOR Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso, born 1954), *Tilai* (1990)DIRECTOR Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauritania/Mali, born 1961),  
*La vie sur terre* (1998)DIRECTOR Cheikh Omar Sissoko (Mali, born 1945), *Genèse* (1999)

featuring

# AFRICAN CINEMAS

TERESA HOEFERT DE TURÉGANO

**A**T THE CANNES INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2002, three films made by African directors were featured: *Abouna, notre père*, by Mahamat Saleh Haroun (Chad); *Heremakono*, by Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauritania/Mali); and *Kabala*, by Assane Kouyaté (Mali). Almost every year since 1966—when *La noire de . . .* by Ousmane Sembène from Senegal was shown—African films have been included in the official or parallel program of the festival. Cannes is certainly one of the most prestigious and globally recognized film festivals, and having a film selected there is no small matter. It is noteworthy then that African films shown at Cannes and numerous other festivals are rarely programmed for regular screenings in Africa, Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world. Nevertheless, in the late 1980s and early 1990s African films did gain considerable visibility, for they were in cinematic fashion at the time, later to be replaced by Iranian and new Asian cinemas.

The ubiquitous term *African cinema* usually refers to films made by directors from countries of sub-Saharan Africa where French is spoken, but it also generally evokes a type or genre of film. Strictly speaking, African cinema refers to all the films made by directors from any country on the African continent from Morocco and Egypt down to South Africa, including the diaspora. In practice, however, Egyptian cinema is labeled as such (or as part of Arab cinema). Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian cinemas are often called North African, Maghreb, or Arab cinema. Nigerian and Ghanaian cinemas are usually grouped together because of their common colonial history and because their industries developed in a somewhat similar manner. There is also sporadic film production from other English- and Portuguese-speaking regions. In the South African region, filmmaking evolved in a distinct manner because it was far more integrated into the American system. This essay high-

lights film in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa, which is the most internationally recognized African cinema.

It is noteworthy that films made in certain countries are labeled nationally, whereas others are labeled with the generic term *African cinema*. For example, Ferid Boughedir and Moufida Tlatli are considered Tunisian film directors, while Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso) and Ousmane Sembène (Senegal) are often referred to as African film directors. This lack of a national or more specific reference in the latter case should be noted. It is often justified because there are commonalities in the film history of the sub-Saharan countries, in part due to the influence of French policy and in part because the countries face similar conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition. Indeed, there are no clearly distinguishable genre differences that adhere to national boundaries in the area, so in one sense there is a regional logic. Even so, in a film world that has historically sought its legitimacy in national terms, the denomination in a singular form remains problematic. Before turning to feature filmmaking in sub-Saharan Africa, a brief cinematic *tour d'horizon* of the continent would be useful.

## A CONTINENTAL *Tour d'Horizon*

IN SOUTH AFRICA, systematic film production began in 1911. It was not until 1956 that Americans really took over the market, buying out the main South African interests. Even prior to 1957, film production in South Africa consisted mostly of Hollywood-emulated products made mainly for white audiences. During the 1980s, as the anti-apartheid boycott gained strength, international distribution linkages slowed down and production all but collapsed. "What apartheid therefore facilitated," according to Tomaselli and Shepperson, "was the exclusive



Still from *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil* (1998), directed by Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal)

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institutionalisation of a Hollywood and domestic conservative cinema within a specific set of relations of regulation: race/space, authoritarian censorship, and financial access mainly for whites.<sup>1</sup> During the 1990s, South Africa restructured its film industry, adapting French and Australian models. Zimbabwe then followed South Africa’s example, adopting new legislation in 1996 to establish greater coherence between these two important African film industries. With the end of legislated apartheid, many countries on the continent looked to South Africa, hoping to collaborate cinematically with this wealthy country that had a long-standing film industry. After 1995 some sub-Saharan directors filmed and used the postproduction facilities in the region. For example, Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso) and Jean-Pierre Bekolo (Cameroon) worked on *Kini and Adams* and *Aristotle’s Plot*, respectively, in Zimbabwe. As yet, however, there has been no significant change in African filmmaking as a continental project.

In Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique, cinema developed in a revolutionary spirit, often as documentaries linked to struggles for independence and inspired by film movements in Brazil and Cuba. Mozambique was particularly active in this domain and hosted filmmakers from around the world to help develop cinema in the country. When Ruy Guerra directed the National Film Institute, he invited Jean Rouch and Jean-Luc Godard to spend a year working and helping develop a national film policy. Today, the rare filmmakers who surface in these countries are more or less integrated into the francophone film circuit in Europe.

Somalia used to host the Mogadishu International Film Festival, but, as is the case in Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan, feature films are exceptions. These anglophone countries have not been able to benefit from the same support as filmmakers in the francophone countries, making it even more difficult for a filmmaker to reach the international circuits. In Nigeria, a theatrical cinema trend—in which Yoruba theater performances were filmed—surfaced during the 1970s and became highly successful with popular audiences, but for the development of cinema this did not prove very beneficial. Ola Balogun, a well-known Nigerian director, resorted to making films of Yoruba theater in order to earn a living, but the public was less interested when he made his own creative films. This practice of filming local theater tra-

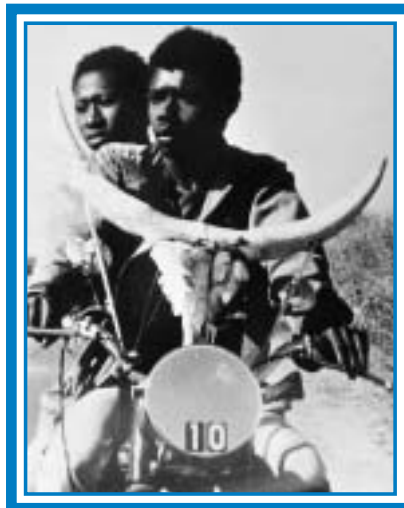
ditions is not exclusive to the Yoruba in Nigeria and can be seen elsewhere on the continent (e.g., with Koteba theater in the Ivory Coast).

Today, Nigeria and Ghana are rather exceptional because of their prolific videofilm industry, which followed the breakdown of the developing film tradition. Homemade videofilm theaters flourish, with entrepreneurs setting up a videocassette recorder in a private or public space and selling cheap tickets for the projections. Mechanics, taxi drivers, and the average person about town now make their own films on video. Melodramas flourish as a soap-opera genre, as do films that delve into religious and spiritual beliefs in the everyday lives of the people. In both Nigeria and Ghana, this videofilm industry has even appropriated parts of the cinema infrastructures through collaboration in exhibition, distribution, and production.<sup>2</sup>

Egypt has the oldest film industry on the continent, and from the postwar period and into the 1990s, Egypt was producing about fifty films per year and served as a major exporter of films throughout the African continent. Most of this cinema consists of melodramas, social dramas, historical epics, and farces—all with much singing and dancing. It is largely a popular cinema, although some filmmakers, such as Youssef Chahine, grew out of this mainstream industry to become internationally renowned making films that were both popular and intellectual. Today, Indian musical melodramas and Chinese kung-fu films have replaced the strong position that Egyptian films held in export markets throughout Africa.

In northern Africa, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia also have a long film history.

Screenings of the Lumières’ *cinématographe* were organized in Algiers and Oran in Algeria in 1896 and in Tunis in 1897. Although films produced in these countries have not benefited from the same local popularity as the Egyptian films, they are better known abroad, especially in European art houses. Nevertheless, post-independence cinema was at first a state enterprise in these countries. Algeria was the most structured in developing its cinema, although conditions deteriorated again significantly in 1995 and have changed little since then. Filmmakers like Mohamed Lahkdar-Hamina came to the fore with *Le vent d’Aurès* (1966) and *Chronique des années de braise* (1975), which won the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 1976.



Still from *Touki Bouki* (1973), directed by Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal)

In Tunisia and Morocco, the local productions were seen even less than in Algeria. Tunisian filmmakers like Nouri Bouzid, (*Bezness*, 1992), Moufida Tlatli (*Les silences du palais*, 1994), and Ferid Boughedir (*Halfaouine*, 1990) have brought sustained international attention to their national cinema. Local producers (Ahmed Attia, Dora Bouchacheb), film editors (Kahena Attia), other personalities (Tahar Chariaa, Nourredine Sail), as well as the Carthage International Film Festival all contribute to the industry. Like the sub-Saharan filmmakers, these North African filmmakers also find support in France and Europe, and their films also circulate largely within the European film and festival circuits.

## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

THERE IS A STRONG FILM CULTURE in such countries as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. Burkina Faso, for example, hosts biennially the renowned Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou (FESPACO) and is a central hub of activity in the region. Since the 1960s, filmmaking in this region has slowly but consistently developed into a diverse and rich panoply of cinematographic images.

Many people think of African cinema as a certain type of filmmaking: that is to say, “village” films with themes of conflict between “traditional” and “modern” ways of life. In reality, there are many different types and genres of feature films made by African directors as well as a diversity of aesthetic forms. Some scholars have typologized African films—like Ferid Boughedir and Guy Hennebelle, who were among the first—with revisions made by scholars such as Manthia Diawara.<sup>3</sup> While it is nearly impossible to quantify the work of so many filmmakers, Boughedir proposed five main trends in African films: (1) a political (or sociopolitical) trend, in which “the filmmakers analyse reality through social, economic and political criteria. The clash of the old and new is explained in terms of a confrontation between social classes with antagonistic interests, in terms of national or foreign power, in terms of economic choice, in terms of dependence and independence, in terms of a struggle to change the authorities and institutions from which the situation criticized arises”; (2) a moralist trend, in which the emphasis is on human change as opposed to institutional change and the clash between old and new is given as a moral choice; (3) an “umbilical” trend, reflective of an identity crisis on the part of the filmmaker, corresponding to Fanon’s “second phase” of the colonized intellectual who has first sold his soul to the West and attempts a “blind return to his roots”; (4) a cultural trend, in which a discussion of civilization is based on culture rather than on politics or morals and tradition is integrated in its positive and negative aspects; (5) a commercial trend, in which

films often have a moral message.<sup>4</sup> These categories provide an initial basis to better understand early African cinema, but they need updating to capture the scope of contemporary sub-Saharan filmmaking.

Many films today explore the complexities of daily life and what modernity means for Africans. In terms of genre, one finds, for example, comedies, road movies, and many dramatic narrative films. An important facet of many African films lies in the rich storytelling traditions of the continent. Not only has the history transmitted through oral tradition become the subject of many films, but narrative and aesthetic techniques from that tradition are also often manifest in the film language.

A sociopolitical trend continues to be a very important thematic in African filmmaking, and Diawara has defined it more specifically in terms of social realism. This is not a genre, however, for sociopolitical concerns cross many different types of African films. In multifaceted ways, modernity is a common thread found in these films. In some cases it is postcolonial modernity, in others it is a specific African modernity or a



Still from *Hyènes* (1992), directed by Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal)

global modernity that is addressed. Films like *Mandabi* (1968), *Xala* (1974), *Guelwaar* (1992), and *Faat Kiné* (2000), by Ousmane Sembène (Senegal), are good examples of this category, as are such films as *Finye* (1982) and *Waati* (1995), by Souleymane Cissé (Mali); *Nyamanton* (1986), by Cheikh Oumar Sissoko (Mali); and *Laafi* (1991) and *Wendemi, l'enfant du bon dieu* (1992), by Pierre Yameogo (Burkina Faso). For example, Djibril Diop Mambéty, the inspirational and very contemporary Senegalese filmmaker, turned the struggles of everyday people into urban poetry with films such as *Touki Bouki*, *Le Franc*, and *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil*.

An explicit moralist trend is less evident in contemporary African film, although the dilemma between old and new is sometimes represented in these terms. An all-encompassing, ideological militancy is no longer the order of the day, and it is at a much more personal level—through the daily social intricacies of life—that films struggle with moral issues. Films like *Haramuya* (1995), by Drissa Touré (Burkina Faso); *Le prix du*

*pardon* (2001), by Mansour Sora Wade (Senegal); *Hyènes* (1992), by Djibril Diop Mambéty (Senegal); and *Le Damier* (1996), by Balufa Dakup-Kanyinda (Congo), among others, attest to this tendency.

There is an interesting tendency toward reflexivity—in terms of filmmaking as a profession in Africa and in terms of questioning the cinematic medium—that is far more predominant than an earlier umbilical trend: for example, in films like *Un certain matin* (1992), by Regina Fanta Nacro (Burkina Faso); *Bye Bye Africa* (1998), by Mahamat Saleh Haroun (Chad); *Souko* (1997), by Issiaka Konaté (Burkina Faso); *Aristotle's Plot* (1996), by Jean-Pierre Bekolo (Cameroon); and, less explicitly, in *Life on Earth* (1998), by Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauritania/Mali).

Sissako, whose films have practically all been shown at the Cannes Film Festival, is one of the most well-known and interesting African filmmakers on the scene today, and his best work is highly reflexive. He combines a poetic and intellectual film language that is often an exploration of the self. His refined minimalist aesthetic orchestrates space, light, sound, and silence in ways that beckon the spectator to read between the lines. In contrast, Haroun, whose latest film was also selected for Cannes, often strives for a style of cinema that is more concerned with engaging the spectator through emotion, color, drama, and suspense and through more constructed narrative forms concerning issues of contemporary identity in Africa.

Just as it has become an increasingly pervasive subject in many of the world's cinema traditions, the cultural trend continues to flourish in African filmmaking, although it has evolved in diverse dimensions. The way that traditional social and cultural practices participate in contemporary society is a concern of many groups, in particular those who feel threatened by the various guises of hegemonic forces, from local to globalized forms of governance and power. In its most evident cinematic form, this tendency is seen in films that are directly inspired by historical and oral narratives: for example, *Keita! L'héritage du griot* (1995), by Dany Kouyaté (Burkina Faso); *La Genèse* (1999) and *Guimba* (1995), by Cheikh Oumar Sissoko (Mali); *Ceddo* (1976), by Sembène Ousmane (Senegal); and *Taafa fanga* (1997), by Adama Drabo (Mali). There is also a tendency within this cultural trend to highlight particular moments or cultural traditions within the history of a particular group, and the attachment to political issues is often absent or abstract in such films as *Yeelen* (1987), by Souleymane Cissé (Mali), and *Tilai* (1990) and *Yaaba* (1989), by Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso).

A commercial cinema, in the sense of having an industrial basis with popular spectatorship and a continual flow of production, does not yet exist. If we understand commercial as related to more mainstream and popular cinema, then there is a noticeable evolution in this direction. Films like *Wendemi* (1992), by Pierre Yameogo; *Haramuya* (1995), by Drissa Touré; *Samba Traoré* (1992) and *Kini & Adams* (1997), by Idrissa Yameogo; *Faat Kiné* (2000), by Sembène Ousmane; and older films like *Bal*

*poussière* (1988), by Henri Duparc; and *La vie est belle* (1987), by Mweze Ngangura and Benoit Lamy (Congo), move in this direction, but they often maintain simultaneously a moral and didactic fiber. In this commercial direction, there is an increasing effort on the part of various film directors to film in video, specifically for local television.

The filmmaking culture that developed in the zones where French is still spoken was given impetus by a number of factors. After independence, France financially promoted African film production, which has contributed to a specific film culture and a *cinéma d'auteur*. A strong socioeducative tendency was also promoted in French policy, and this, too, has marked African fiction film. The beginnings of fiction filmmaking in this region of Africa are also influenced, to a certain degree, by Third Cinema politics and aesthetics. The idea behind Third Cinema was that film should take into account local realities and contribute to the educational, social, economic, and political development of the community. In addition, many African filmmakers grew up seeing Hollywood films, westerns, and action films, so this is also reflected in various ways in the filmmaking.

Filmmaking in this region has developed in a very collaborative manner between Africa and Europe, with considerable amounts of funding coming from sources in Europe. The films made by African directors from the francophone regions of Africa are the most widely known and distributed in Europe and North America. They seldom have distribution contracts prior to completion, usually circulate in international and alternative circuits, are often marketed in national or regional ways, and are highly dependent on the recognition gained at international film festivals. It is difficult to obtain distribution in Africa because the film markets are dominated by foreign films, especially Hollywood productions, Indian musical melodramas, and Chinese kung-fu films, but when African films are shown they are often avidly attended by local audiences.<sup>5</sup>

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

THE ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN FICTION FILMMAKING has been shaped by both the aesthetic qualities of the cinema and by the conditions of production and distribution. On the one hand, there was an aspiration that African filmmakers would create a new cinematic language that was "authentically African"; on the other hand, the reality of a financially and geographically displaced system of production has shaped the way many scholars have approached this cinema. A boom of writing on the subject occurred in the 1990s following the first English monograph on the subject written by Manthia Diawara (1992). With few exceptions, most of the English-language work consists of edited volumes. Prior to this period, most of the writing on African cinema was in French, by Pierre Haffner among others, and the

journal *CinémAction* has always devoted writing to African filmmaking.

The question of the authenticity of an African film language has long accompanied the subject. African filmmakers are generally expected to be Africans first and not simply filmmakers as such. For example, whereas Haffner (1978) argued that an example of authentic African cinema was the popular African cinema consisting of cinematic adaptations of Koteba theater performances made in the Ivory Coast, Frank Ukadike (1994) has argued for certifying the authenticity of African feature films because they are based historically in African oral traditions. While the question of cultural authenticity is, in itself, a problematic line of argumentation, it has largely been pursued because of the specificities in the context of production. The dialogue between cinema and oral traditions; the strategies of the griot; and various means of storytelling, improvisation, linguistic codes, et cetera, transformed and appropriated by the cinematic language, do nevertheless present some of the specificities of this African cinema.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to follow some of the current formal film analysis, which brings to the fore cinematic structures that draw on local oral narratives and transform and innovate oral practices into cinematic form and see this work in combination with ongoing historical, social, cultural, and political analyses.<sup>7</sup>

That cinema should contribute to the social and political development of African societies lay at the origins of this art, and the creation of the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI) in 1970 was motivated by these objectives. Even though the FEPACI still exists today, it no longer plays the ideological role to which it once aspired, and African cinema has increasingly diversified. More and more, the desire of African filmmakers to use their art to express themselves does not always coincide with the desire to contribute to the development of "Africa," be it a locality, nation, region, or continent. Even so, the idea of contributing to knowledge about Africans and contributing to the knowledge of Africans themselves, through fictional narratives and without didacticism, remains a very important characteristic in African cinema from this region.

In conclusion, African filmmaking in sub-Saharan African often foreshadows current and future discussions on contemporary filmmaking in many other parts of the world. As transnational financial collaboration and co-production become more and more of a necessity and as more and more groups of people continue questioning specific identities, the experience of African fiction filmmaking already has a long experience of mapping identity into a financially transnational and complex context. **WLT**

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Shepperson and Keyan Tomaselli, "South Africa," in *The International Movie Industry*, ed. Gorham Kindem (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 157.

<sup>2</sup> On Nigerian film, see, for example, Haynes, *Nigerian Video Films* (1997); and Jean-Christophe Servant, "Boom de la vidéo domestique au Nigeria," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2001. On Ghanaian film, see, for example, Birgit Meyer, "Popular Ghanaian Cinema and 'African Heritage,'" *Africa Today* 46, no. 2 (1999); and Nii Laryea Korley, "Ghana: The Video Boom," *Écrans d'Afrique* 7 (1994), 66–70.

<sup>3</sup> Ferid Boughedir credits Guy Hennebelle's initial work on these themes; see Boughedir, *Le Cinéma africain de A à Z* (1987). See also Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Ferid Boughedir, "African Cinema and Ideology: Tendencies and Evolution," paper presented at "Africa and the History of Cinematic Ideas," British Film Institute, September 1995. This is an updated version of his earlier thematic.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Sama, "Le film africain étranger sur son propre territoire," 1993.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Manthia Diawara, "Popular Culture and Oral Traditions in African films," *Film Quarterly*, spring 1988, 6–14.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Harrow, *African Cinema* (1999).

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