

“The World Should be Open to Film”: an Interview with Idrissa Ouedraogo

Melissa Thackway

Twenty-three years ago, I interviewed Idrissa Ouedraogo at the FESPACO film festival in Ouagadougou. It was one year after the release of his sixth feature film, *Le Cri du coeur*, the first of Ouedraogo's films not to be set in his home country of Burkina Faso.¹ The film's French setting was naturally remarked on by French critics, though mainly as a critique.² Centered on the French-born child Moktar, who returns to France to live with his parents after spending five years growing up in West Africa, the film was notable in my mind, however, for its refreshing representation of an upwardly-mobile immigrant family that moved away from familiar tropes and presciently addressed the then-underrepresented question of the rooting and sense of belonging of the emerging Afro-French generation.

But perhaps it is the film's title that most strikes me today: behind his apparently nonchalant bonhomie and generous spirit, Idrissa Ouedraogo often seems, both in his films and in his discourse, to have been expressing a *cry from the heart*: one for creative freedom, for the recognition of the continent's plurality, and for dignity. Speaking shortly after our interview in London at the BFI *Screen Griots Conference* in September 1995, Ouedraogo indeed starkly stated: “Nous tournons par urgence,” “We shoot as a matter of urgency,” continuing, “Whatever the style of the films, we all share the same desire to give African audiences and people back their pride.”

Whether in his challenges to what he repeatedly in the 1990s expressed to be the overly homogenizing and often stigmatizing label “African cinema,” or in his experimentations with more allegorical film forms and aesthetics at a time when cinematic social realism predominated (experimentations that nonetheless did not eschew social critique), or in his assertion of the freedom to shoot exactly where he liked, or in his reflections and later practice of a more locally-based film economy—touched on in this interview and later clearly articulated in his interview in Jean-Marie Teno's 2009 film *Sacred Places*—Idrissa Ouedraogo's films and career both mirror and embody the evolving debates that have animated filmmaking in Africa over the decades concerning film form, content, directorial intent, audience, and distribution.³ The seeds of his later move away from the type of big-budget filmmaking that earlier won him both international and local acclaim, to smaller, locally-funded and

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distributed productions can already be read between the lines. But perhaps what transpires most of all from this interview, in hindsight, is Idrissa Ouedraogo's refusal to be pinned down, a characteristic that permeates both the words and masterful works of this assuredly, and now eternally, free spirit.

Paris, 2018

Ouagadougou, 1995

MT: After having shot several films in rural African environments, why did you choose to set your latest film, *Le Cri de Coeur*, in a French town?

IO: Quite simply because I wanted to. It's important to be able to shoot wherever we want, wherever we feel is right. The world should be open to film.

MT: Do you think that audiences readily accept African filmmakers changing their settings and styles in this way?

IO: There are prejudices about what African directors should or shouldn't do, but it must be said that these prejudices exist on both sides. Certain Africans unquestionably think that an African shouldn't shoot in Europe, that you lose something, that you're not truly African in Europe. Personally, I have distanced myself so far from what is commonly referred to as "African cinema" that it doesn't bother me anymore. I think that people will gradually accept that we shouldn't restrict ourselves. Even if you're initially misunderstood, even if people tell me that my character doesn't resemble your average immigrant, in a few years' time they might see things differently.

MT: Do you try to reach a certain type of audience in your films?

IO: When you make something, you hope that all kinds of audiences will see it. Even when a person shuts himself up in his hut to make something, he might do so for himself first of all, but then wants others to see it too. No one makes things for a specific, determined audience. I believe that the function of art is to reach out to other horizons, other skies, even though people rarely have the same cultures or the same visions of the world.

MT: You produced Cheikh Oumar Sissoko's film *Guimba*. Does this collaboration reflect a certain solidarity between African filmmakers?

IO: I can only speak about my own personal experience. African filmmakers are not all alike. They don't have the same tastes, the same desires. We don't all share the same vision of the world just because we're all African filmmakers. All that always puts us in a ghetto. We aren't alike, we don't think the same things, and we don't have the same desires. That's normal. It's the diversity of ideas, of opinions that will lead to the creation of a real national cinema one day, and perhaps to thriving African cinemas too.

MT: Do African filmmakers make enough of a mark in international film circles?

IO: They will eventually. Our cinema is still in its early stages. It is still seeking its path and it is certain that when we do find it by accepting that we maybe don't have to produce in the same conditions as the Europeans, that there may be another way, we will have found the real solution to our problems. Film is economic too, after all; it involves money. But we don't have much, so we have to reinvent the cinema differently. That's what we should be thinking about now.

MT: Do you think that we get to see enough images made by people of different cultures?

IO: No. Western countries reject the complementarity of overseas film, which is a real shame. I hope that that will change one day, I really do, in the interest of world film. We have all reached a certain type of expression that is impossible to renew anymore because all the big stories have been said and done. They can only be given a new lease on life by taking all cultures' contributions into account.

MT: Does film reflect the culture it is from?

IO: What's marvelous in film is that all peoples share major universal emotions such as joy, fear, violence, and hatred. So there is already something fundamentally open in what we call the world's major emotions. These emotions are an integral part of film.

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Notes

1. His subsequent 1997 film, *Kini and Adams*, was shot in Zimbabwe, with English-speaking South African and Zimbabwean actors.
2. In *Le Monde de l'Education*, for example, one French critic wrote that Ouedraogo would have done better not to "leave the landscapes and villages of his homeland" that were so "charming" in his previous works, and in *Télérama*, another stated that Ouedraogo "who stunned us with his African tales, fails to film French actors and landscapes."
3. In the documentary, after a pirated copy of *Yaaba* is screened in the Ouagalese video parlour that Teno is filming, Teno visits Ouedraogo at his office. In the ensuing interview, Ouedraogo declares that the bootleggers and informal distributors are right to make his film available, as he neglected this type of local working-class audiences' access to his works and the construction of a more locally-appropriate film economy, ending the interview on the essential question of why filmmakers make films, and for whom.

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