

from the Nordic Africa Institute's National Liberation in Southern Africa series; see, especially, Sellström (1999, 2002).

5. Clarity Films' website for *Have You Heard* provides an interactive timeline to make chronological sense of the many events discussed in the film: [www.clarityfilms.org/haveyouheardfromjohannesburg/timeline.php](http://www.clarityfilms.org/haveyouheardfromjohannesburg/timeline.php).

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## **ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO'S *TIMBUKTU* AND ITS CONTROVERSIAL RECEPTION**

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**Abderrahmane Sissako, director.** *Timbuktu*. Original title: *Timbuktu, le chagrin des oïseaux*. 2014. 97 minutes. In French, Tamashek, Bambara, Songhay, and Arabic (with subtitles in English and French). France/Mauritania. Worso Films.

Abderrahmane Sissako made history with the release in December 2014 of his most recent film, *Timbuktu*, which portrays the occupation of northern Mali by a radical Islamist group. *Timbuktu* became the most widely viewed African film in the history of cinema, with more than 1 million viewers in France and netting U.S.\$10 million at the box office.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the film has been the subject of critical controversy over the filmmaker's association with the current president of Mauritania and was almost not shown at FESPACO due to security concerns. The film's reviews, reception, and nominations for awards over the course of the last year have been marked by glorious praise and polemical attacks, which reveal significant cultural and political tensions about the depiction of Islam, freedom of expression, and the radicalization of Muslims in France, Africa, and beyond.

Sissako directed this feature film and also co-authored the screenplay with Kessen Tall. Sylvie Pialat, a French businesswoman and independent film producer, produced *Timbuktu* with Worso Films (and others including Arte and Dune Vision) on a relatively modest budget of €2.5 million. Sofian El Fani, who worked on *Blue is the Warmest Color* (winner of the Palme d'Or in 2013) did a remarkable job with the film's cinematography. Sissako has said that *Timbuktu* was inspired, in part, by an incident of an unmarried couple being stoned to death in Aguelhok, near the region of Kidal in Mali, during the Islamic occupation in 2012 (see Dowd 2014). The filmmaker had originally intended to make a documentary and decided against the genre for fear of retribution against anyone who might speak candidly, and he ultimately dropped the idea of filming in Mali altogether (where many of his previous films are set) after a bombing outside the army barracks in Timbuktu made his crew's security a

tangible issue for him. The story is set in Timbuktu, as the title indicates, although most of the scenes were filmed in Oualata, a town in southeastern Mauritania, with only two days of filming on location in Timbuktu.

The opening sequence of the film announces hunting as a central motif. First we see Islamists in the back of a pickup truck tracking a gazelle across the desert, occasionally shooting at the graceful animal running for its life with their assault rifles. But they do not shoot to kill; they say they enjoy the sport of the chase and want to tire out the animal. Next comes a symbolic tableau about the assault on art and the decimation of culture; we are presented with a medium shot of African masks and statuettes lined up on a sandy embankment being shot at, and then the camera moves in for a close-up that lingers on what remains of the breasts on the female figures. Together these two sequences introduce the theme of voracious destruction and the perpetration of violence that will destroy everything in its path: animal life, human life, culture. Timbuktu was an ancient center of Islamic learning, culture, and trade during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Unfortunately, the full extent to which Ansar Dine, an Islamist sect with ties to Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb that occupied northern Mali, devastated the city's irreplaceable cultural artifacts, from mausoleums to manuscripts, is not developed in the film and thus remains only implicit, at the symbolic level.<sup>2</sup>

"I worry about Mali because I am a citizen of the world," says Sissako (Dowd 2014). "The fact I grew up there is secondary. It's appalling that a group of people can turn up and transform Islamic society, which for centuries has been tolerant and kind, into something so intolerant." Sissako's cosmopolitan concern for the people of northern Mali fuels the narrative in *Timbuktu*, which is elaborated with a focus on how the Islamists behave collectively and individually. We see them leverage the humanity of a white Western hostage, tending to his medical prescriptions so that they might collect a ransom, demonstrating how they operate as a terrorist group. When they leave their base camp in the mountains to patrol the city on motorcycles, we see them fully in action: Islamist recruits announce the implementation of Sharia law using megaphones, going street by street, and speaking in local languages. Women—even fishmongers—must wear veils, socks, and gloves, while men are told to roll up their pants legs in the style of the Taliban. There shall be no smoking, no soccer, and no music. Adultery during Ramadan is proclaimed the worst sin of all. The dissemination of these new rules culminates in a masterfully ironic scene that undercuts the moral basis of their claims to be imposing a purer version of Islam, when a group of jihadi men make an unholy entrance into a mosque with their shoes on and guns slung over their shoulders. The dialogue that follows with the imam clearly establishes the contrast between the men of faith in Timbuktu, who want to pray in peace, and the foreign fighters who carry AK-47s without respect or knowledge of Islamic customs. "Have you come to do your jihad in the mosque?" asks the imam, who explains that his commitment to his own spiritual self-examination must come before imposing laws on others.

Sissako also makes deft use of irony elsewhere as he continues to reveal the hypocrisy of these men with guns. One day Abdelkrim, an Islamist who sneaks away to smoke, sets off on patrol in his truck and visits the nomadic camp outside Timbuktu where a Tuareg family lives. Abdelkrim asks his driver in Arabic to tell Satima, Kidane's beautiful wife, that she should cover her hair. She replies in Tamashek with dry irreverence that he should not look at things he does not like to see. In this scene, the Islamist appears as a foreign bully who seeks to impose oppressive standards of female modesty even as he is flirting with a married woman who was minding her own business.<sup>3</sup> Sissako creates other moments of beautiful irony when French recruits who are avid soccer fans sit around talking about their favorite teams and players, even though the sport is explicitly outlawed—a scene that drew laughter from the audience at the Burkina Cinema in Ouagadougou (Sotinel 2015). In another scene that elicited a similar response, the Islamists attempt to film a propaganda video and cannot get the former hip-hop artist to make a convincing statement. "We're not doing, 'Yo, man,'" says the videographer, "we're doing religion" (see Scott 2015). They are never able to capture even fake sympathy for the cause of radical Islam. Yet one of the most beautiful cinematographic moments in the film is a scene in which a group of boys play soccer without a ball. This small act of defiance affirms their humanity in the face of such an inhuman instrumentalization of religion.

The central conflict in the film that eventually spirals out of control involves Kidane, Satima's husband, and a fisherman named Amadou. First Sissako establishes the beautiful simplicity of their Tuareg way of life with magical scenes in which Kidane plays his guitar and sings with his wife, and the family spends time together talking and drinking green tea in the shelter of their tent. One day Issan, a boy who tends their cattle, comes back to the house in tears and informs Kidane that Amadou killed their favorite female cow because she got tangled in his fishing net. Satima, who had previously asked her husband to allow them to leave the area to escape the encroachment of the Islamists, advises her husband to go unarmed when he confronts Adamou. When Kidane disregards his wife's wise advice, it leads them into trouble. After he accidentally shoots and kills the fisherman, Kidane is arrested and tried by a tribunal set up to enforce Sharia law. While the loss of cattle for a modest Tuareg family is not in itself a trivial matter, in the grander scheme of things the quotidian nature of this conflict fails to capture the actual brutality of the Islamists who cut off thieves' hands, raped innocent women, and destroyed Sufi shrines with pickaxes.

Kidane's arrest and unexpected separation from his family are effectively interwoven with other dramatic scenes depicting the general atmosphere of terror inflicted on the local population, albeit in rather discreet terms. One evening, some young people are playing music and singing when the Islamists barge in and arrest the female singer. Fatou continues singing even as the zealous police punish her with a public whipping, another small act of defiance against their barbaric interpretation of Islam.

These tensions reach their peak when a man and a woman are buried up to their necks in sand and stoned to death in the town square in punishment for adultery. The lingering close-up on their dead faces recalls the opening sequence when Sissako displayed, in similar fashion, the symbolic destruction of culture. Sissako evokes the insanity of this situation by intercutting the public stoning scene with images of an Islamist man who breaks into uncontrollable dance in the privacy of a courtyard of a crazy lady who cannot quit talking about the Haitian earthquake that destroyed so many lives. The jarring juxtaposition of a fanatic dancing and the lingering close-ups of two lovers stoned to death and left as a public spectacle conveys the human tragedy for perpetrators and victims.

The drama concludes with another senseless death. Kidane and Satima's beautiful daughter, Toya, misses her father, whose sudden and unexplained absence from home has left her bereft. She waits in vain for his phone call. But just as Kidane is about to be shot in public, Satima arrives in town on the back of a motorcycle. As Kidane runs to greet his wife, his executioners misinterpret this as an attempt to flee and kill both the husband and wife. In the final sequence, Sissako makes poignant use of dramatic irony when we see Toya, who viewers know is now without any parental protection, running across the desert in search of her parents in the city. Sissako also deliberately employs the same kind of tracking shot used to film the graceful gazelle in the opening scene, which suggests a grim fate for this lovely twelve-year-old girl who will eventually be shot (whether by accident, in sport, or as punishment) or will have to face the new order in town as an orphan.

The strongest aspect of Sissako's *Timbuktu* can be seen in the way he orchestrates the confrontation between radical Islam's dehumanizing appropriation of religion, with its brutality and ideological rigidity, and the defiant humanity of ordinary citizens. The way he captures the simple way of life of a pastoralist family outside the city offers a lesson that unfortunately has been seen far beyond the Tuareg lands, as these scenes no doubt seem familiar and relevant to viewers in other places, from Afghanistan to northern Nigeria. The jihadists were able to take over, Sissako has said, because there was not enough social structure to keep them out. In this respect, *Timbuktu* follows up on the legacy of poverty and dispossession that Sissako addressed in his film *Bamako* (2006), which presents a critique of the devastating effects of neoliberal policies in Mali. One of his motivations for making the film was to get leaders in Mali to pay more attention to problems in this Saharan region, which has been largely left to fend for itself, with much of the population living in extreme poverty. Sissako also indicts the West and observes,

The underlying problem is obvious and it's only the Western world which can sort it out. Wealth is distributed completely unfairly around the world and that inequality creates areas of huge poverty such as Mali. Dire poverty provided fertile ground for the groups we show in the film. None of that is very hard to understand. The international community is now

spending tens of millions of euros in Timbuktu and Kidal and Gao. If that investment had come years ago, many of the problems in northern Mali could have been avoided. It's a shameful failure by the West, and of course, it's not only in Mali. Just look at what's happening with Boko Haram in Nigeria: the details are different in each country, but many of the same underlying problems are the same. (Dowd 2014)

Sissako's ability to provide both a local perspective on the specific issues ordinary people face while speaking in their native African languages and an informed critique of a dynamic that has implications worldwide—in this case, the moral hypocrisy of radical Islamic jihad—makes *Timbuktu* a powerful and relevant film. A. O. Scott (2015) observed that “with some adjustments, it could have been set in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria or Pakistan. But the glory of ‘Timbuktu’ lies in its devotion to local knowledge, in the way it allows its gaze to wander away from violence toward images of beauty and grace.”

The film's premiere took place in Nouakchott at a film festival in September 2014 that was attended by the Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and several ministers in his government (see Al-Sheikh Mohamed 2014). Sissako had recently announced that he had become a cultural advisor to Abdel Aziz, a development that has attracted some vigorous criticism (and to which I shall return later). Sissako's *Timbuktu* was nevertheless a stunning success in the West. In addition to the captivating cinematography and original soundtrack, the film offers a valuable African point of view on a timely conflict in much the same way Newton Aduaka did with *Ezra* (2007). *Timbuktu* was the only African film officially selected in competition for a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014. While Sissako's film did not win, it was warmly received and took two minor awards, the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury and the François Chalais Prize. *Timbuktu* is the first Mauritanian film to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Although *Timbuktu* did not win the Academy Award, it got rave reviews from some of the most reputable film critics in America, from Richard Brody at *The New Yorker*, who called it “an extraordinary film” (see <http://cohenmedia.net/films/timbuktu>), to A. O. Scott (2015) at *The New York Times*, who wrote, “Not just a timely movie, a great one. . . . *Timbuktu* feels at once timely and permanent, immediate and essential.”<sup>4</sup>

After winning a remarkable seven Césars on February 20, 2015—including Best Film, Best Screenplay, and Best Director—*Timbuktu* played concurrently in 282 movie theaters across France and was ultimately seen by more than one million French viewers, making history as the most widely viewed African film in France (Forster 2015a; Nouchi 2015). It is undeniable that the timeliness of Sissako's critique of radical Islam contributed to the film's phenomenal success in France for reasons partially beyond his control, involving the national trauma of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting on January 7.<sup>5</sup> Following the attack, the response across the Muslim world was particularly

intense when the editors at *Charlie Hebdo* featured another cartoon of the Prophet Mohamed on the cover a week after the shooting. But in addition to the offensive images of the Prophet, the fact that the vandalism of dozens of mosques across France went practically unreported further inflamed anti-French sentiment in West Africa. Days of violent rioting erupted in Niger and protests, mostly peaceful, swept across West Africa.<sup>6</sup> As A. O. Scott (2015) has noted, *Timbuktu* was briefly banned in a cinema in the Parisian suburbs in the wake of violence associated with the *Charlie Hebdo* incidents. But these African responses to the incident would have a direct effect on *Timbuktu*'s screening and reception on the African continent.

When the film was shown in Burkina Faso on March 5, 2015, Siegfried Forster (2015a), reporting for *Radio France Internationale*, remarked, somewhat inaccurately, that "the most watched African film in the history of cinema finally arrived in Africa." Although it premiered in Nouakchott, *Timbuktu* was screened at the Burkina Cinema in Ouagadougou as one of nineteen films in official competition for the Étalon d'Or de Yennenga at FESPACO. Thomas Sotinel (2015) reported in *Le Monde* that local viewers fortunate enough to see the first public screening in Africa were not overly enthusiastic about the film. Some viewers felt that *Timbuktu* simply did not live up to its hyped-up image in the media, while others cited serious omissions and lamented the fact that the film did not adequately capture the climate in which hands were chopped off and women raped during Ansar Dine's occupation of northern Mali. On the other side, the Malian filmmaker Souleymane Cissé defended Sissako's film and claimed that *Timbuktu* represents an "awakening in African cinema" (Bornet 2015). In the end, Hicham Ayouch won the Étalon d'Or de Yennenga for his film *Fièvres* and Sissako's film was snubbed, winning only minor prizes for music and decor (see Courbet 2015).

One of the issues that surrounded the mixed reviews of the film in Africa relates to the filmmaker's controversial association with the current Mauritanian president. President Abdel Aziz is a high-ranking military officer who arrived in power by a series of coups before standing in an election that he ostensibly won in 2009. However, political opposition parties in Mauritania boycotted the last presidential election in 2014, in which Abdel Aziz won another five-year term with 82 percent of the vote (BBC News 2015). The Mauritanian president is credited with having helped negotiate a ceasefire involving terrorist groups in northern Mali and has close ties with both the United States and France in their counterterrorism initiatives in the region. At the same time, he is viewed inside and outside his country as a leader who detains dissidents and does not guarantee the freedom of expression that is necessary for open debate of contentious issues such as slavery (see, e.g., Forster 2015b). On February 20, 2015 (the same day as the French Césars and two weeks before FESPACO opened), Nicolas Beau (2015) posted an article on his website, Mondafrique.com, that sparked a polemic in the world of French-speaking Africanists.<sup>7</sup> He launched a scathing attack on Sissako, with very little to say about his film *Timbuktu*



except that it is boring and irrelevant, but primarily challenging the artist's relationship with Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Beau made the questionable claim that Sissako somehow "agreed" to make a film about the occupation of northern Mali in order to divert attention from the more important subject matter of slavery in Mauritania and the detention of activists who oppose the practice, which is nominally illegal but remains a stubborn issue. The scandal that Beau's article created was already in full bloom by the time the jury members in Ouagadougou deliberated and awarded their prizes. At least for some critics and viewers in Africa, it appears that one aspect of this smear campaign stuck: a common viewpoint is that Sissako may be pleasing to French viewers, but he does not have the ethical courage of a politically engaged artist at home.

Another aspect of controversy surrounding the screening of *Timbuktu* in Africa involved the government's initial decision in Burkina Faso to cancel the film's public showing. A spokesman for the government had initially made a statement saying that the film would not be shown due to "security concerns" as a result of the "current environment in West Africa" (Obenson 2015). This statement was soon retracted and the film screening went ahead as planned with heightened security measures, including the use of metal detectors for the first time at FESPACO. While there were no specific credible threats, it is also true that the region had been experiencing an uptick in violent popular protest that was not unrelated to the timely subject matter explored in Sissako's film.

For example, on January 16, 2015, after Friday prayers, protests erupted in Zinder, Niger's second largest city, with reports of demonstrators waving the Boko Haram flag for the first time on Nigerien soil. This event marked the beginning of a wave of violence across this country that shares a border with Burkina Faso (Agence-France Presse 2015; Graham-Harrison 2015). Peaceful protests also took place after Friday prayers in several other countries in the region including Algeria, Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania. On January 17 the violence escalated across Niger, sparking widespread riots in which forty-five churches, thirty-six street vendors, five hotels, several bars selling alcohol, a police station, the French Cultural Center in Zinder, an orphanage, and a Christian school, among other locations, were burned and vandalized (Al-Jazeera 2015; Massalaki 2015). Protestors told reporters they were demonstrating against *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoon depicting the prophet Mohamed on its cover after the shooting in Paris. Yet in addition to the sense of many Muslims that their faith was being mocked in the French press, there was also a wave of anti-Islamic violence that swept across France, including graffiti and shots fired at mosques, that went virtually unreported in contrast to the spectacular reaction to the deaths of eleven French people (*Le Figaro* 2015). This asymmetry added to an impression of bias and disregard for the lives and values of Muslims in France, generating a sense of social isolation in Europe and angering relatives in Africa. According to religious scholars in Niger, there is now cause for concern among moderate Muslims in the country who say that powerful imams in

cities like Zinder have started to instrumentalize their faith for political reasons (Boisbouvier 2015).<sup>8</sup> Of course, these are precisely the dynamics that set the stage for the recruitment of young men into the kind of radical Islamic groups that Sissako represents in *Timbuktu*.

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## Notes

1. For basic information about the film and its production, see [www.facebook.com/timbuktu.lefilm](http://www.facebook.com/timbuktu.lefilm).
2. See Tharoor (2012). Ansar Dine, a radical Islamist militia, has set about destroying mausoleums and shrines in the historic Malian city of Timbuktu, which was once a great center of Islamic learning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In addition to the Malian-led Ansar Dine, there were other radical Islamist groups involved in the occupation of northern Mali; they included the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, a Tuareg-led separatist group; the Islamic Movement for the Azawad, a faction that split off from Ansar Dine in January 2013; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, which was based in Gao and believed to be led by a Mauritanian. The secular Tuareg nationalist groups that have led rebellions in the region over the years were "overrun" by the groups linked to Al-Qaeda with which they formed temporary ill-fated alliances in the early days of the occupation after the overthrow of Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012. For more on this subject, see Polgreen (2012, 2013).
3. Sissako's depiction of the Tuareg family whose lifestyle and values are at odds with the radical Islamists in town is an accurate portrayal of the relationship between these two groups in the region. While there has been a history of animosity between Arab Islamists and Tuareg pastoralists in the Saharan region generally, it is true that some Tuareg men, primarily young men, have been recruited by radical groups in recent years, as we see in Sissako's film.
4. See also Okeowo (2015); Weissberg (2015); Anderson (2015). For more reviews and information, see <http://cohenmedia.net/films/timbuktu>.
5. On the morning of January 7, 2015, Said and Chérif Kouachi, who claimed an affiliation with Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen, went on a shooting rampage at the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The attack killed eleven people and wounded eleven others, and was followed by related attacks and casualties in the Ile-de-France region.
6. For a report of anti-Muslim violence in France, see *Le Figaro* (2015). For accounts of the anti-*Charlie Hebdo* protest in Africa, see Al-Jazeera (2015). See also Graham-Harrison (2015); Massalaki (2015).
7. A notice that malicious content was removed from the site was posted on May 16, 2015. For a discussion of the impact of this article, see Forster (2015b).
8. Three years prior to this violent protest, the *Washington Post* published an article warning that this would be the next frontline of an emerging struggle against terrorism. See Raghavan (2012).

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