
ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO: SECOND AND THIRD CINEMA IN THE FIRST PERSON

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In theoretical texts and manifestoes written in the late 1960s and early 1970s, filmmakers in Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba advocated a revolutionary cinema they called Third Cinema, which constituted a transformative social practice and functioned as an instrument of political change and consciousness raising. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino declared that this cinema of the struggle against imperialism was “the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time” and represented “the decolonization of culture.”¹ They and other filmmakers distinguished their anticolonial cinema from a dominant and capitalist First Cinema and a Second Cinema that was artistic, intellectual, and auteurist. This tripartite framework, in which film style was mapped onto geography and ideology, persists in contemporary film criticism. Political films from the so-called Third World are set against big-budget Hollywood productions as well as European art films deemed overly formalist and therefore insufficiently political. The work of Abderrahmane Sissako, however, transcends the conventional opposition of the Third and Second Cinemas, of political cinema and art cinema. Sissako, who was born and raised in West Africa but has been based in Europe for over twenty years, reminds us not only that films from outside of North America and Europe may be formally experimental, but that formally experimental films may be politically as well as aesthetically revolutionary.

Art cinema has been notoriously difficult to define. The term first referred to a group of almost exclusively European films that appeared in the middle of the twentieth century and gained popularity around the world as alternatives to mainstream Hollywood. Italian Neorealist and French New Wave films are canonical examples, as are the films of Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Alain Resnais, and Akira Kurosawa. David Bordwell was among the first critics to describe art cinema as a category, which

he located somewhere between classical Hollywood film and more radical modernist film. Bordwell developed a list of characteristics shared by art films, focusing on the psychological complexity of their characters, their episodic and open-ended narratives, and their pursuit of ambiguity. It was now a film's director or auteur, moreover, and not star, studio, or genre, who would serve as "the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension."² Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (and Bordwell himself in a 2008 afterword to his 1979 essay) stressed instead a shared production and distribution context for art films, particularly their exhibition in an ever-growing number of national and international film festivals.³ Steve Neale shared this interest in art cinema's "institutional basis" and concluded that art films shared certain characteristics only because these features "contrast with those of Hollywood."⁴

For Latin American Third Cinema filmmakers, European art cinema was indeed a first, but ultimately inadequate and outmoded, alternative to bourgeois Hollywood. Julio García Espinosa proclaimed that "when we look toward Europe, we wring our hands. . . . The fact is that Europe can no longer respond in a traditional manner but at the same time finds it equally difficult to respond in a manner that is radically new."⁵ Glauber Rocha, one of the leaders of Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, went even further: "Our bourgeoisie has been colonized by Neo-Realism and the *nouvelle vague*. . . . Fox, Paramount, and Metro are our enemies. But Eisenstein, Rossellini, and Godard are also our enemies."⁶ Why such enmity between film movements linked by their resistance to Hollywood's global reach? Solanas described the Second Cinema as "nihilistic, mystificatory . . . cut off from reality," whereas the new Third Cinema was a "democratic, national, popular cinema" that "gives an account of reality and history."⁷ European art cinema, which did in some cases seek out realistic settings by shooting on location rather than in the studio, devoted itself more systematically to the construction of what Bordwell has called a subjective psychological realism. The Third Cinema, to the contrary, was interested in the People, in popular history and living conditions, and not at all in individual psychology. Filmmakers rejected centuries of European and North American political, economic, and cultural (including cinematic) colonization in order to show a Latin American reality that had previously been repressed. Solanas and Getino stressed, however, that revolutionary cinema does not merely document or illustrate a situation, but instead "*attempts to intervene in the situation . . . provides discovery through transformation.*"⁸ Neither mirror reflection of nor poetic reflection upon an existing reality, their new realism would analyze the world in order to transform it.

The African cinema was born just as the new Latin American cinema began to flourish. In the years following the independences of the late 1950s and early 1960s, African filmmakers worked, like their Latin American colleagues, to decolonize culture, to reclaim the cinema and their cinematic image from their former colonizers. In 1973, a group of Latin American and African filmmakers met and proclaimed that their goal was a critical and transformative realism, the production of "films reflecting the objective conditions in which the struggling peoples are developing . . . which bring about the disalienation of the colonized peoples at the same time as they contribute sound and objective information for the peoples of the entire world."⁹ The collective statement published after a 1974 meeting in Burkina Faso stated that film content

should reflect African “social realities” and answer the questions: “Who are we? . . . How do we live? . . . Where are we?”¹⁰ The 1980s and 1990s saw a return to theorizing Third Cinema as a “cinema of subversion” in both the Latin American and African contexts as well as with respect to minority filmmaking in countries such as the United States.¹¹ Critics and filmmakers have continued to emphasize that Third Cinema responds to questions about a collective “we,” reflecting “objective conditions” in developing regions and rewriting colonial and neocolonial history from the perspective of decolonized peoples.

Associating the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” with the individual(ist) protagonist of cinema from both the United States and Europe, Clyde Taylor contrasts it with the Xhosa proverb “A person is a person only because of other people” and a strictly collective African protagonist.¹² Tahar Cheriaa claims that in African cinema “the individual is always pushed into the background, and the hero . . . never occupies the foreground. The principal character in African films is always the group, the collectivity, and that is the essential thing.”¹³ This strict opposition of African collectivity and Western individuality pervades both Western and African theorizing about African narrative in any medium.¹⁴ With respect to film, moreover, it extends from protagonist to author; Third Cinema has from its beginnings rejected the auteur concept so central to art cinema. The 1975 Algiers Charter on African Cinema declared that “the stereotyped image of the solitary and marginal creator which is widespread in Western capitalist society must be rejected by African filmmakers, who must, on the contrary, see themselves as creative artisans at the service of their people.”¹⁵

A profound ambivalence about the creative role of the filmmaker is evident in Third Cinema theory’s disdain for the formal innovation characteristic of the Second Cinema as well as in its rejection of a filmic first-person voice. In 1974, Tunisian critic and director Férid Boughedir maintained that a filmmaker essentially “reproduces reality,” choosing in the process either to lie or to tell the truth. He argued that “art is a luxury” and not a priority for African cinema, since art cinema tends to “make reality flee.”¹⁶ A film in the service of its people, then, should be easily understood, with none of the ambiguity so valued in European art films. Teshome Gabriel, who has been at the forefront of critical discussions of Third Cinema in Africa, remained undecided on this issue. In 1982 he wrote that Third Cinema films “try to expand the boundaries of cinematic language and devise new stylistic approaches appropriate to their revolutionary goals” as revolutionary filmmakers seek “the demystification of representational practices as part of the process of liberation.”¹⁷ Several years later, however, he praised radical content in conventional form, claiming that “Third Cinema film-makers rarely move their camera and sets unless the story calls for it.”¹⁸

Although documentary film was favored by the Latin American Third Cinema movement for its realism and accompanying revolutionary potential, the genre has not been popular with African filmmakers. Africa, like Latin America, has long been defined by the images created of it and its people by exploring, conquering, and colonizing outsiders in newsreels, adventure films, and ethnographic films. As early as 1907, French colonial documentary offered spectators back in the metropole images of what were advertised as “real” and “strange” landscapes and wild animals along with occasional

gestures toward ethnography. Gaumont Actualités's *En Afrique occidentale / In West Africa* (1920), released as part of a "Teaching Series" on African geography, opens with images not of landscapes but of people, Africans engaging in everyday activities that then characterize the continent: traditional artisans at work, women pounding millet and cooking dinner around a fire, and fishermen going out to sea in a pirogue. These documentary images of Africa were inextricably melded with colonial propaganda, particularly after the beginning of the First World War. As the 1931 Colonial Exhibition approached, the number of documentaries shot in the colonies accelerated, and a new kind of critical and political attention was paid them. In the wake of the Exhibition, famed anthropologist Marcel Griaule produced *Au pays des Dogons / In the Land of the Dogons* (1938) and *Sous les masques noirs / Under the Black Masks* (1938), both filmed in what is now Mali. Griaule's films were screened not in commercial movie theaters but at the Museum of Man in Paris, and he laid the groundwork for a French tradition of ethnographic filmmaking. The best-known examples of the genre are the films of Griaule's disciple Jean Rouch who, from the mid-1940s until his death in 2004, filmed largely in West Africa with a few notable exceptions. Rouch was not alone, however; the Committee on Ethnographic Film that he co-founded in 1952 sponsored a number of self-proclaimed filmmaker/anthropologists, and ethnographic documentaries were also funded by the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS), the Ministry of National Education, the National Pedagogical Institute, and the Cinémathèque for Public Instruction.

Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, the pioneering Senegalese filmmaker and film critic, responded to Rouch and his colleagues with his own ethnographic work in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1955, he shot *Afrique-sur-Seine / Africa on the Seine*, depicting the lives of a group of African students in Paris, which was followed by *Une nation est née / A Nation Is Born* (1960), *Lamb / Traditional Wrestling* (1963), and *Môl / The Fishermen* (1966). Vieyra described how African filmmakers must work against the long history of colonial cinema:

Using cinema, Westerners created an image of the black world that they transmitted to their children. . . . The African cinema is in the process of reestablishing the truth about Africa, because Africans themselves have taken charge of their cinema. The vision is becoming an interior one.¹⁹

Yet most of this work was done at first through historical fiction films. Ousmane Sembene (Senegal), Moustapha Alassane (Niger), Souleymane Cissé (Mali), Med Hondo (Mauritania), and others reconstructed and retold precolonial and colonial African history from the point of view of the Africans who had been consistently silenced by colonial cinema. Aside from Vieyra, very few of the first generation of West and Central African filmmakers made more than one documentary; the exceptions, Blaise Senghor (Senegal), Safi Faye (Senegal), Pascal Abikanlou (Benin), Inoussa Ousseini (Niger), and Timité Bassori (Ivory Coast), produced (auto)ethnographic films in the 1960s and 1970s. They were for the first time representing their own people and their newly

independent nations, and, like the African directors who were producing historical fictions, many undertook a questioning of the conventions of filmic realism.

In Faye's *Kaddu Beykat / Letter from My Village* (1976), residents of her home village of Fad'jal discuss the taxes that are forcing farmers to sell crops for cash instead of growing food to feed their families. This staged discussion is combined with a fictional love story as well as scenes portraying various aspects of daily life in the village. *Fad'jal / Come and Work* (1979) begins with similar scenes of everyday life and then stages a retelling and reenactment of the history of the village. The film concludes with a discussion of a pressing contemporary political issue, state ownership of land. Faye described her goal to be a particularly African realism, in terms that recall both Latin American and African manifestoes of Third Cinema: "What I try to film [are] things which relate to our civilization . . . a typically African culture. . . . I make films about reality." Speaking about her documentaries, however, she stated that "for me all these words—fiction, documentary, ethnology—have no sense. . . . At the end of my films people wonder if there is *mise-en-scène* or not."²⁰ Faye had acted for and then trained with Rouch and was familiar with the French ethnographic tradition. She chose to refuse documentary's claim on reality by not only blurring but refusing to identify the boundaries between filmic genres, performing precisely the kind of "demystification of representational practices" described by Gabriel.

Faye's films are not only the rebellious descendants of a tradition of French ethnography, but also the innovative ancestors of documentaries produced by a group of young West and Central African filmmakers beginning in the early 1990s. David Achkar (from Guinea), Mahamat Saleh-Haroun (Chad), Samba Félix Ndiaye (Senegal), Mweze Ngangura (Congo), Jean-Marie Téo (Cameroon), and Abderrahmane Sissako, among others, have made films, mainly in French, in which their individual stories are linked to analyses of colonial and postcolonial national history. Like Faye, they have worked to escape the bounds of the conventional documentary realism so often affirmed by European filmmakers documenting Africa from and for the outside. Unlike Faye, however, they have rejected ethnography altogether while experimenting with different formal possibilities in order to mix fiction and history, feature and documentary filmmaking. All have chosen to narrate their films in the first as well as the third person, in the singular as well as the plural, and all force us to rethink any easy definition of realism. These filmmakers destabilize the opposition between Second and Third Cinemas, between art and politics, and thus allow us to explore a wider range of possibilities for contemporary African Third Cinema.

Of these filmmakers, only Sissako has consistently put himself on-screen, not only using his own voice for a narrative voice-over but also often playing a starring role. Born in Kiffa, Mauritania, home to his mother's family, Sissako spent most of his childhood in his father's home in Mali and grew up speaking Bambara but not Hassanya. He returned to Mauritania for the end of high school but left again at the age of nineteen to study film at the State Institute of Cinema (VGIK) in Moscow. Sissako spent a total of twelve years in the Soviet Union (and then Russia) and has been based in France since 1993. Sissako's films, like his life, are cosmopolitan in the best sense, traveling widely while remaining firmly anchored in Africa. When asked about

filmmakers who have influenced him, he has responded with a tentative embrace of the art cinema canon if not of its auteurs: “I have liked some films. I am less attached to filmmakers. But I would say off the top of my head maybe . . . Antonioni, Visconti, Fassbinder, a film of Bergman, another of Cassavetes . . . Tarkovsky.”²¹ Yet Sissako is all too aware of who has been excluded from this canon. In film school in the 1980s he watched an average of three films a day for five years, discovering all of the “*grands auteurs*” of European cinema but not a single African film.²² Although he is one of very few African filmmakers whose films have been widely circulated in the art cinema festival circuit, Sissako uses his presence on-screen to resist the controlling persona of the auteur as well as art cinema’s emphasis on subjective psychology.

In *Rostov-Luanda* (1997), his first feature-length film, Sissako returns to the village of his birth, which then almost immediately becomes a new point of departure, the place from which he will leave for Luanda, Angola, in search of a friend, Afonso Baribanga, an Angolan with whom he studied Russian in Rostov-on-the-Don before starting film school. Sissako met Baribanga on the train from Moscow and was fascinated by how different their lives had been, even though both were African and Baribanga was only five years his elder. Whereas Sissako was born after the official withdrawal of the French from West Africa, Baribanga had fought, “Kalashnikov in hand,” for Angola’s independence from Portugal.²³ We are introduced to Sissako’s project not by an omniscient authorial voice-over, but by the voice of his cousin, whom we see speaking to Sissako and his childhood nurse, Touélé. He begins in Hassanya and then switches to French:

I haven’t seen Abderrahmane since he was a child. He was born in Kiffa. His mother’s house is there. The house of his uncle Mohammed is there. There are some who leave for France to study and who never return home, who never even think about returning home. What Abderrahmane has done is an act of honor. To say outright “I’m returning to Kiffa to see my parents and the house where I was born.” However, he told me he has an Angolan friend whom he hasn’t seen for sixteen years and that he must go to Angola to see his friend. And I asked him the question “Why spend your money to go to Angola with the risks involved and lose your money?” He told me, “Cousin, that’s true, but on the other hand I’m right, man is called to travel, to suffer, to know people, to know customs. I am traveling to Angola to have my adventure, to be an adventurer.”

Sissako must go home, an act of honor, in order then to continue his travels and make a film, which is another act of honor. This adventure is his calling, yet it calls him toward somewhere and someone else, someone whose life story intersected with and parallels his own in important ways.

Several minutes later, we hear the first voice-over in Sissako’s own voice: “I set out before dawn, Kiffa gets farther away, Touélé watches over me, Touélé who was my nanny, and in whose hand mine was clenched as a child.” After a close-up of Touélé,

we see the sands of the desert rushing by outside of the window of the car. The traveling shot shifts almost seamlessly to a snowy instead of sandy landscape out of a train window, and we hear Sissako speaking in Russian with his and Baribanga's former Russian teacher, Natalia Lvovna, their voices echoing over a transcontinental phone line. Sissako asks her to send him her only photograph of Baribanga since he is leaving for Angola to look for him. An Angolan cityscape follows a fade to black, and Sissako's voice-over becomes suddenly historical: "In 1975, Angola became independent. For me, this hard-won liberty announced a communal hope for my continent. It was in 1980, in the U.S.S.R., that I became friends with Afonso Baribanga. Seventeen years later, I wish to find him again. Seventeen years of war for Angola."

Landscapes of Mauritania, Russia, and Angola glide past in quick succession, linked by Sissako's life story, which is linked to that of Afonso Baribanga. Both of their lives are linked to the fate of Angola as a place of symbolic hope for Africa, a hope cruelly dashed by years of unending war. Traveling across the country, Sissako begins a series of interviews with Angolans, men and women of all colors, born in Africa and Portugal, poor and middle class, living in the countryside and the city. He asks them about their personal histories and about how they have managed to survive the history of their country. These interviews are conducted in Portuguese and Creole with the aid of a translator, except for the rare occasions when direct communication is possible in French or in Russian. After each conversation, Sissako shows Natalya Lvovna's photograph, one of the very few pieces of documentary evidence from the past that appear in the film, to the person with whom he has been speaking and asks if they recognize Afonso Baribanga. His biographical project, the search for the long-lost friend in the photograph, becomes inseparable from the images he finds along the way. Sissako tells us that his memory of Baribanga is becoming blurred, "Not that I'm forgetting him, but his features are now drawing new faces, to whom my search leads me. Thus is drawn the portrait of a friend."

Back in Luanda, Sissako shows the photograph to a man with whom he speaks in Russian, a man named Cassanje who does know someone in the picture, not Baribanga but another of the Africans who learned Russian in Rostov. Sissako learns that Baribanga is still alive and lives in what had been East Germany. The adventure therefore continues and concludes in the landscape of a fourth country, and we see Sissako being driven up to Baribanga's apartment building. A brief image of Baribanga on his balcony, however, is all we see of him, and we never get his side of his story. Sissako's multilingual and multivocal adventure story has been about his own process of finding his old friend by discovering the history of his friend's people. Sissako has said of filmmaking that "when you do this job, you have a deep desire to say things and I think that the best way to do so is to talk about oneself or around oneself. It's the best way to approach the Other."²⁴ Describing autobiography and biography as inseparable processes, he subverts the opposition between filmic first and third persons as well as Third Cinema's resulting rejection of the first person in favor of the People. In *Rostov-Luanda*, talking about and around himself enables Sissako's approach to Baribanga, Angola, and colonial and postcolonial African history.

In order to talk about Baribanga via talking about himself, Sissako had to begin in his birthplace: "I had never gone back to Kiffa where I was born and spent the first

forty-five days of my life. So, before looking for Bari Banga [sic], I decided to go back to Kiffa. To find myself."²⁵ His first-person narrative, as we have already seen, requires the biography of Baribanga, which in turn requires a history of Angola via the testimony of Baribanga's compatriots. Noting that "my projects always take place outside of the country I live in," Sissako also links personal narrative to an experience of displacement.²⁶ While *Rostov-Luanda* was still in pre-production, Sissako called the film a "personal history" in which "I want to recount an internal exile. . . . I want to reveal Mauritania to myself, understand how it exists in me. I didn't grow up there. 'Rostov-Luanda' is a way of projecting myself and of setting up a contradiction with another African country that Mauritians do not know." As had Third Cinema filmmakers in Latin America, Sissako sought to understand and portray a regional instead of merely national reality, a solidarity among African countries generally held at a distance not only by geography but by colonial history.

Sissako's next film, *La vie sur terre / Life on Earth* (1998), begins with fluorescently lit images of the overflowing shelves of a Super Monoprix in Paris. After a medium shot of Sissako riding up an escalator carrying an enormous stuffed animal, we see his father in Sokolo, Mali, reading a letter in French whose words we hear in the filmmaker's voice:

"Dear father, You will be a little surprised, and perhaps even worried, to receive a letter from me. I hurry therefore to tell you that all is well, and I hope the same is true for you. Contrary to the message I sent you through Jiddou, an important change means that I will soon be with you, in Sokolo. The desire to film Sokolo, the desire also to leave, as Aimé Césaire said. Even more so since we will soon be in the year 2000 and nothing, most likely, will have changed for the better, as you know better than I. Is what I learn far from you worth what I forget about us?"

The letter continues over footage of Sissako arriving at his father's compound, accompanied by Salif Keita singing "Folon," a song in Bambara about coming home. Sissako then continues to quote Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, "And on my way, I would say to myself: 'And above all beware, my body and my soul too, beware of crossing your arms in the sterile attitude of the spectator, because life is not a spectacle . . . because a man who screams is not a dancing bear.'"²⁷ Césaire and Sissako, different kinds of exiles returning home in different ways, together warn us that the documentary filmmaker can be a type of tourist, watching others' lives from behind the camera instead of participating in them.

Sissako begins, then, with another voice-over and another homecoming, to another of his hometowns. Sokolo is the village of his father and grandfather; he was born in Kiffa, but this is where he grew up. Prior to screening his first adult return to Sokolo, Sissako raises the question of what he has gained as well as lost in Europe. He has said of his long absence from Sokolo that "exile is an experience of solitude which helps to understand oneself better and to better understand where one comes from. But it's

better for this experience not to be contemplative.”²⁸ Sissako returns to film his desire to leave, returns to film, but refuses to be a spectator in his native land. Although he had already appeared on screen in *Rostov-Luanda*, here he is no longer an interviewer but instead a character, playing a role in the drama of Sokolo on the eve and first day of the new millennium. We see him with his father, speaking with others in the village, trying to place a phone call from the post office, flirting with a young woman in a love story that is never told but rather hinted at via a courting dance on bicycles through the streets of the village. His family members and others in the village speak to their struggles to keep the farms going, to earn enough money to feed their families. Although Sissako rejects the position of the objective observer, he does not replace it with a portrayal of himself as a psychologically complex character. He remains as opaque as his fellow characters, to whose suffering he bears witness without violating their privacy and dignity. For Sissako, “filming myself was a way to appropriate the camera differently, to say ‘I am an actor in this life and I expose myself. As I am filming you, I will be filmed in turn. . . . I am one of you despite everything.’”²⁹ This “everything” includes his exile and resulting difference, the fact that he left Sokolo and no longer shares the fate of its residents.

I have called *Life on Earth* a documentary film and stated that it tells a story that takes place at the end of 1999 and beginning of 2000, but I have also noted that the film was released in 1998. One might well wonder how this is possible. In fact, Sissako has not recorded New Year’s Eve in Sokolo, but has instead staged events that have not (yet) occurred. All of the actors in this fiction, however, are playing themselves; the credits at the end of the film identify Sissako as himself, his father, Mohamed Sissako, as the father, his uncle as the tailor, and so on. We see the men of Sokolo sitting in the street and listening to Radio France International reporting on New Year’s Eve activities all over the world, counting down the last hours of 1999 to a 2000 that is at the time of filming still two years away. Like Faye, Sissako destabilizes the boundaries between fiction and documentary, leaving his spectator constantly unsure of how much *mise-en-scène* there is in his film. He breaks the basic rules of documentary realism in this



FIGURE 18.1. Sissako appears on-screen throughout *Life on Earth* (Sissako, 1998), here attempting to place a phone call at the Sokolo post office.

documentary fiction, or fictional documentary, and does so in order to situate himself as he makes a point. Although he lives in Europe, Sissako films himself in Sokolo at this crucial moment in the future as Sokolo and the rest of Africa approach the new millennium, Sokolo in opposition to and yet intimately connected to the Europe on the radio. The residents of Sokolo listen to at least two radio stations, RFI and the very local (and ironically named) Colonial Radio, which in the film features a reading from Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. Again using Césaire's words, Sissako reminds us of the particular tragedy of Africa's first contacts with Europe, one legacy of which will be the two continents' incommensurate New Year's Eves. *Life on Earth* was originally supposed to be entirely fictional, but Sissako felt that this would constitute an "abdication of responsibility, an escape to avoid reality." This reality, one that most of the world wishes to ignore, is the relationship between African history and the African present: "There is a lack of will to understand this continent. Explanations are often hasty and people forget how recent decolonisation is, only thirty-five years ago, and before that there was a century of deportations of millions of individuals."³⁰ Sissako's portrayal of life in Sokolo and his anticolonial message are very much in the spirit of Third Cinema, and they are not attenuated but rather strengthened by both his participation on-screen as actor and his formal experimentation as filmmaker.

Sissako's most recent film, *Bamako* (2006), was released almost a decade after *Life on Earth* and several years after his fictional feature *Heremakono: En attendant le bonheur / Waiting for Happiness* (2002). *Bamako* is not a documentary film, and it seems at first to conform more readily to the tenets of Third Cinema than does any of Sissako's earlier work. His most overtly political film to date, *Bamako* stages a trial in which ordinary Africans sue the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, detailing the crimes and damages caused by international interference in African affairs in an era of so-called globalization. African governments are also accused of what amounts to depraved indifference to their own citizens. Taking advantage of the double meaning of the French word "*la cour*," which means both courtyard and court, *Bamako* takes place in the interior courtyard of a house in Bamako, Mali. Like *Rostov-Luanda* and *Life on Earth*, *Bamako* clearly rejects a colonial or, more specifically, neocolonial vision of African history and reality. Unlike in these earlier films, however, our protagonist seems to be collective, a representative group of Africans set in opposition to Europe and North America, and Sissako himself seems to be absent from the screen.

Despite its apparent straightforwardness, however, *Bamako* is formally innovative and quite intricate. Sissako filmed the trial scenes in digital video, using four cameras. A camera is almost always visible in the frame, reminding us that the trial is a staged performance. At the same time as he employs this reflexive strategy, Sissako incorporates personal elements as well as documentary strategies into the film. The film was shot in the courtyard of Sissako's recently deceased father's house in Bamako, a house in which Sissako was raised. He used lawyers and judges that he knew instead of actors in the trial scenes, as well as real witnesses, from Aminata Traoré, writer and former minister of culture, to a farmer and *griot* from southern Mali, to a young man who has not been able to find a job. All use their own names and participated in the scripting of their testimony and dialogue. In addition to the trial, the film contains lengthy scenes

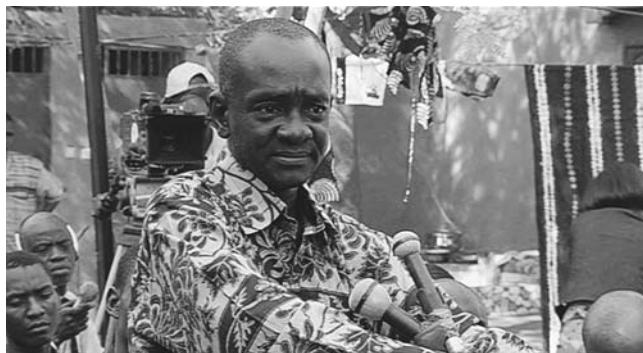


FIGURE 18.2. In one of many reflexive moments in *Bamako* (Sissako, 2006), the camera behind a witness reminds viewers that the trial has been staged.

of the everyday lives of the people who live around the courtyard. These unresolved subplots, filmed in 16mm, function to pull the film away from a strictly political focus and toward a Second Cinema or art cinema practice. Of the story of Chaka, who commits suicide as his marriage dissolves and his wife prepares to return home to Senegal, Sissako has said:

[*Bamako*] is without a doubt my most direct film with respect to its topic. This is something I don't like, it's not my nature. I was therefore careful to think of a counterpoint at every moment. . . . One can be in Africa and be solitary, as everyone is. Chaka is a man who is very alone, even if he lives in a courtyard filled with people. Even if the strength of this continent is its capacity to share what little it has with everyone. In this collective life, man can also be alone.³¹

Abandoning a comfortably complete opposition of individualist Europe and communitarian Africa, Sissako simultaneously points to the indistinct boundaries of filmic genre.

The reflexive effect produced by the many visible cameras in *Bamako* is further complicated by the insertion of a film within the film, a western called *Death in Timbuktu* that is ostensibly shown on a television set to residents of the courtyard. This mini-western plays both with and against the themes of the trial. A group of black and white cowboys arrive in what must be Timbuktu, to the northeast of Bamako, and start to shoot at the local citizens at random. One of the black cowboys laughs at the carnage he has wrought, bragging that he has killed two, a mother and child, for the price of one. Another lurks mysteriously, watching the others. Sissako cast his film-world friends as the cowboys, including American actor Danny Glover (who also produced *Bamako*), Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, Congolese actor and filmmaker Zéka Laplaine, and a certain "Dramane Bassaro." Dramane is a nickname for Abderrahmane, Bassaro is Sissako's uncle's family name, and the face we can just barely see under this cowboy hat is that of Abderrahmane Sissako. From filmmaker as interviewer in

Rostov-Luanda to filmmaker as character in *Life on Earth*, Sissako is now filmmaker as character in a film within a film, a dizzyingly reflexive mise-en-abyme. At the end of this five-minute sequence, a title credit is followed by "Directed By," but no director's name appears.

The credits for *Death in Timbuktu* are in English, although the characters speak in a mixture of French and English. The Hollywood domination that inspired the rebellions of both Third Cinema and art cinema meant that American westerns flooded the African market for decades, and many African filmmakers remember watching them as children along with innumerable Kung Fu films and Hindi musicals. Sissako nods to a canonical First Cinema genre in a markedly non-Hollywood way, reminding us of the Wild West atmosphere of our globalized world. One of the witnesses in the trial responds to a French lawyer's praise of globalization by noting that the world might be open for white people but is not for black people. Another witness is a young man who was sent back to Mali after crossing the Sahara desert to Algeria in the hope of then reaching Europe by boat. This dark view of the flip side of contemporary cosmopolitanism returns once again with a humorous twist. Chaka is studying Hebrew because he thinks that an Israeli embassy will open in Bamako and he will then be the perfect candidate for a job as a guard there. But the fact that both white and black cowboys are shooting at the citizens of Timbuktu again complicates any simple opposition between Europe and Africa and reminds us of the complicity of some Africans in the crimes against their own people. And the fact that the actors playing the murderous cowboys form an international collection of actors and directors forces us to consider the different ways in which Africa has been shot (the pun works only in English) on film, with more or (most often) less regard for the individual and collective suffering of the continent's inhabitants.

Although they considered the Second Cinema to be overly formalist and thus the enemy, Espinosa, Rocha, and Solanas were nonetheless interested in developing a new film form to express their revolutionary politics. In their writings, they rejected even those currents within European art cinema that had influenced them the most, emphasizing their struggle to create films that reflected a uniquely Latin American reality. Sissako, working in a very different context and historical moment, similarly works to reflect the complex reality of his native continent of Africa. Living and working between Africa and Europe and bearing the legacies of both the Third and the Second Cinemas he has, to return once again to Gabriel's first thoughts on Third Cinema and formalism, found ways to "devise new stylistic approaches appropriate to [his] revolutionary goals." All of Sissako's films strongly reject a colonial representation of Africa and Africans, at the same time refusing a colonial model of documentary representation. Sounding very different from the early Third Cinema activists, however, Sissako has said that "I don't want to tackle problems that must be resolved, that doesn't interest me."³² The openness and lack of resolution characteristic of his films create a pervasive sense of ambiguity reminiscent of European art cinema as described by Bordwell. Yet Sissako replaces art cinema's investigations of individual psychological reality with explorations of individuals in their historical and political contexts, reclaiming at the same time a first-person voice for Third Cinema. In order to answer

questions like “Who are we?” and “Where are we?” he first asks “Who am I?” and “Where am I?” Reaching out from his own stories to the stories of others to, finally, wider historical movements, Sissako is able to foreground himself without relegating others to the background.

NOTES

1. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema,” *New Latin American Cinema: Theory, Practices, and Transcontinental Articulations*, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 34, 37.
2. David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 152, 156, 154.
3. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Art Cinema,” *Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Nowell-Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 570; Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, 160.
4. Steve Neale, “Art Cinema as Institution,” *Screen* 22, no. 1 (1981): 13, 14.
5. Julio García Espinosa, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” in *New Latin American Cinema*, 78.
6. Cited in Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, eds., *Brazilian Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 88.
7. Cited in Paul Willemsen, “The Third Cinema Question,” in *New Latin American Cinema*, 229.
8. Solanas and Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema,” 47.
9. “Resolutions of the Third World Film-Makers’ Meeting, Algiers, Algeria, 1973,” in *African Experiences of Cinema*, ed. Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 20.
10. “Séminaire sur ‘le rôle du Cinéaste africain dans l’éveil d’une conscience de civilisation noire,’” *Présence Africaine* 90 (1974): 10, 12. All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise specified.
11. Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: An Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), 95.
12. Clyde Taylor, “Black Cinema in the Post-aesthetic Era,” *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 90.
13. Cited in Elizabeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Film Making* (London: Zed, 1991), 210.
14. A famous example is Fredric Jameson’s controversial description of all “Third World” literature as “national allegory,” in which “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (“Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 [Fall 1986]: 69). For more on this topic, see my *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).
15. “The Algiers Charter on African Cinema, 1975,” in *African Experiences of Cinema*, 25.
16. Férid Boughedir, in “Séminaire sur ‘le rôle du Cinéaste africain,’” 123, 130.
17. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World*, 24, 95.
18. Teshome Gabriel, “Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics,” in *Questions of Third Cinema*, 60.
19. Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, *Réflexions d’un cinéaste africain* (Bruxelles: OCIC, 1990), 61–62, 132.

20. "Four Film Makers from West Africa," *Framework* 11 (Autumn 1979): 18.
21. "'A Screenplay Is Not a Guarantee': Abderrahmane Sissako with Kwame Anthony Appiah," *Through African Eyes: Dialogues with the Directors* (New York: African Film Festival, 2003), 38.
22. *Rostov-Luanda, Le film africain* 22 (November 1995): 9. See also Olivier Barlet, "La leçon de cinéma d'Abderrahmane Sissako," *Africultures* (July 2003), available at <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=2796> (March 7, 2008).
23. *Rostov-Luanda, Le film africain* 20 (May 1995): 18.
24. Olivier Barlet, "A propos de *La Vie sur terre*: Entretien avec Abderrahmane Sissako," *Africultures* 10 (September 1998), available at <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=469>.
25. "'A Screenplay Is Not a Guarantee,'" 40.
26. *Rostov-Luanda, Le film africain* 22 (November 1995): 8.
27. I am citing Mireille Rosello and Annie Pritchard's translation of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* rather than the film's subtitles. Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995).
28. Elisabeth Lebovici, "Sokolo n'est pas que beauté," *Libération* (May 22, 1998), available at <http://www.liberation.com/cannes98/port2205d.html> (January 25, 2001).
29. Alessandra Speciale, "Abderrahmane Sissako: Pour l'amour du hasard, il faut partir," *Ecrans d'Afrique* 23 (1998): 29.
30. "Entretien avec Abderrahmane Sissako," *Le film africain* 28 (May 1998): 2.
31. Heike Hurst and Olivier Barlet, "'Ce Tribunal, Ils y Croyaient!': Entretien avec Abderrahmane Sissako," *Africultures* (May 2006), available at <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=4428>.
32. *Cinéma et libertés: Contribution au thème du FESPACO 1993* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1993), 92.