

# The Global Auteur

## The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema

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## Abderrahmane Sissako: On the politics of African auteurs

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Abderrahmane Sissako is in many ways the epitome of the film director as auteur as the term is commonly used in both academic and cinephilic circles. One of few African filmmakers whose films have circulated widely on the international festival circuit, Sissako's career has from its beginnings been linked to the Cannes Film Festival. His film school graduation project, *The Game (Le Jeu)*, was selected for the 1991 Semaine de la Critique, and *October* (1993) and *Heremakono: Waiting for Happiness* (2002) were shown in the Un Certain Regard section of the festival. *Life on Earth (La Vie sur Terre)*, 1998) was featured in the Director's Fortnight, and *Bamako* (2006) was presented out of competition. *Timbuktu*, Sissako's most recent film and his first to be screened in official competition, had its world premiere at Cannes in 2014.<sup>1</sup> *Timbuktu* won seven César awards in France the same year and was a finalist for the Academy Award for best Foreign Language Film in the United States. Sissako was then named the 2015 President of the Cannes Cinéfondation and Short Films Jury, following in the footsteps of Martin Scorsese, Jean-Pierre Dardenne, and Abbas Kiarostami. A prolific filmmaker of consistent quality, Sissako is thoughtful and articulate when discussing his work. Trained at the renowned State Institute of Cinema (VGIK) in the Soviet Union, he has a wide-ranging knowledge of global film history. As a result of Sissako's prominence at the most prestigious festivals, many of his films have been shown at smaller festivals and local art cinemas and are available for purchase on DVD.

Yet once we remove Sissako from this festival context, he fits less easily into the auteur mold. Born in Mauritania, Abderrahmane Sissako spent

most of his childhood in Mali, returned to Mauritania for the end of high school, then left again at the age of nineteen to spend a total of twelve years in Russia. Sissako was next based in France for twenty years and now once again calls Mauritania home. When asked about filmmakers who have influenced his work, Sissako has responded with a tentative embrace of European and North American art cinema; "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" (Appiah 2003, 38). Resisting before giving in to the cult of auteurs, Sissako is very aware of the limits of a canon that he learned later than did his film school classmates. Growing up in Mali, he would occasionally see a movie, but "did not grow up in a universe of cinema." Once he arrived at the VGIK, Sissako remembers, "The cinephilia that I had not discovered in Africa, I ended up having an academic obligation to acquire" (Valens 2006, 18).<sup>2</sup> As a student there, he watched three films a day over the course of five years, discovering all of the *grands auteurs* of European cinema but not a single African film (Anon. 1995, 9). In what follows, I will discuss Sissako's major films, all shot in Africa despite his three decades in Europe, in the context of the African cinema's uneasy relationship with auteurist filmmaking.

We know the story well; the French filmmakers, critics, and cinephiles at *Cahiers du Cinéma* began writing about cinematic authorship in the mid-1950s as they rediscovered and reread Hollywood films. In the wake of Alexandre Astruc's *caméra-stylo*, François Truffaut famously rejected a certain French tradition, clearing the decks for *Cahiers* to praise directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks as masters of the medium. Yet while in English we tend to speak of auteur theory, the *Cahiers* critics invoked not a theory but a *politique des auteurs*, a policy or program of authorship that was also a politics of authorship.<sup>3</sup> André Bazin formalized in print the early internal debate about these politics, writing in "On the *politique des auteurs*" (1985) that he disagreed with his younger colleagues about the relationship between directors and their films. According to Bazin, "the work transcends the director," and he stressed that any film, and especially a Hollywood film, is the product of a tradition and an industry, irreducible to an individual genius (249, 251–2). Bazin reminds us of the complex politics of intersecting traditions and industries inherent in any consideration of film authorship in an age of global cinema.

A part of the story that we know less well involves a film often cited as the first made by a sub-Saharan African director, a film created at the same time and in the same place as the *politique des auteurs*. Paulin Vieyra, pioneering Senegalese filmmaker and critic, attended the French Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies (IDHEC) in the early 1950s. He formed the Groupe Africain du Cinéma with several friends and shot *Africa on the Seine* (*Afrique sur Seine*) in the streets of Paris in 1955. Vieyra was

closely connected to the journal *Présence Africaine*, founded by Alioune Diop in 1947, which commissioned Alain Resnais and Chris Marker to make *Statues Also Die* (*Les Statues meurent aussi*), completed in 1953 and then banned by the French government. Vieyra, Resnais, and René Vautier, director of *Afrique 50*, an earlier banned anticolonial documentary, had overlapped at the IDHEC. Vieyra was in communication with Resnais, Marker, and Vautier, as well as with famed ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, whose Comité du Film Ethnographique funded *Afrique sur Seine*. *Cahiers* embraced Rouch's work, reviewed *Statues*, solicited comments and lists of favorite films from Resnais, and was at a minimum aware of Vautier via Georges Sadoul, but there is no evidence of any contact between Truffaut, Bazin et al., and Vieyra. *Cahiers* never wrote about *Afrique sur Seine*, and Vieyra never wrote about *Cahiers*. All French-speaking filmmakers and/or critics, they shared the same Left Bank space but seem to have inhabited separate cinematic worlds.

While Vieyra was beginning his filmic career in Paris, on the other side of the Atlantic the New Latin American Cinema was coming into its own. By the end of the 1960s, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino had declared that their anticolonial Third Cinema represented "the decolonization of culture" (1997, 37), distinguishing it from a dominant and capitalist First Cinema and a Second Cinema that was outmoded, intellectual, and apolitical. Julio García Espinosa proclaimed that European cinema had offered a first but ultimately inadequate alternative to bourgeois Hollywood; "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" (1997, 78). In the years following the independences of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Vieyra and other African filmmakers similarly worked 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 maintained that their goal was a critical and transformative realism, the production of films "which bring about the disalienation of the colonized peoples" (Bakari and Cham 1996, 20). A year later, the collective statement published after a conference on the "role of the African filmmaker in awakening a consciousness of black civilization" asserted that film content should reflect African "social realities" and answer the questions: "Who are we? ... How do we live? ... Where are we?" (Anon. 1974, 10, 12).

Bill Nichols noted as early as 1976 that "many argue that the debate about *auteur* criticism is passé" (221). The *auteur* went on, however, to become an integral aspect of the new critical category of art cinema in the late 1970s, according to David Bordwell made up of films whose author, and not star, studio, or genre, served as "the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension" (1999, 719). Despite its original connection for *Cahiers* to Hollywood, the term *auteur* came to signify a most-often European art cinema director with a style or set of themes that

could be read across his entire oeuvre.<sup>4</sup> For Nichols, the way forward for auteur criticism was to be found in links with genre studies, structuralist analysis, and other schools of film critique. Forty years later, however, there have been no sustained attempts to create such a link with postcolonial film studies. The politics of authorship has extended, of course, to decisions made by European and North American festival organizers and critics about which directors qualify to be auteurs, and only a very few filmmakers from the global south have been chosen. Scholarly discussions of auteur theory for decades dealt almost exclusively with European and North American films. And postcolonial filmmakers associated with or inspired by the Third Cinema movement did not want to produce art films or be auteurs.

Early African filmmakers and critics, like their Latin American colleagues, specifically rejected auteur 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” (25). Since the 1970s, definitions and descriptions of African cinema have relied on an opposition between individualistic Western art films and communitarian, political, and social realist African films. Mahama Traoré, Senegalese filmmaker and co-founder of the FESPACO pan-African film festival in Burkina Faso, referred to auteur cinema as he described his transition to an authentically African political cinema; “My first films still depended on the idea of cinema that was instilled in me in Europe: that of auteur cinema. A very individualistic idea. From now on, my cinema is deliberately integrated into a political process. It is no longer Mahama Traoré who is explaining himself in my films, but also the group of which I am a part” (Hennebelle 1975, 91–2). The term African auteur would seem to be an oxymoron.

However, there is at least one exception upon which both European and African critics have agreed—Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, often called the father of African cinema. If *Afrique sur Seine* was the first film by a sub-Saharan African director, Sembene’s 1963 *Borom Sarret* is generally considered to be the first film shot by a sub-Saharan African director in sub-Saharan Africa. Over the course of his career, Sembene created both new content and style for a cinema rooted in African oral traditions. Several of his films were screened at Cannes, although never in competition, beginning with *Black Girl (La Noire de...)*, 1966) in the Critics’ Week section, and Sembene served on the 1967 Feature Films Jury. Vieyra’s 1972 book about Sembene’s first decade of filmmaking contains three parts: “The Man,” “The Oeuvre,” and “The Auteur.” Critical works about Sembene in the years since have overwhelmingly considered him as an auteur filmmaker, assessing his many films as a unified oeuvre that constitutes a major contribution to both African and World Cinemas.<sup>5</sup>

Sembene described the African filmmaker as a *griot*, or oral storyteller and historian, and David Murphy and Patrick Williams invoke his work and build on Robert Stam’s contrast between the individualist, French *caméarystyle* and the communal *griot* in order to propose the term *griauteur* as “an appropriate figure for contemporary African filmic practice” (2007, 8–9). This solution to the dilemma of African film authorship knits together opposing terms into a single neologism. But if the *griot* is, in the words of Sembene specialist Françoise Pfaff, “the chronicler of his people’s history” (1995, 126), then a *griauteur* would remain in the camp of the collective.

Aboubakar Sanogo has identified an auteurist approach within early African cinema that includes the work of Sembene, Souleymane Cissé, Haile Gerima, and Djibril Diop Mambéty, a “socially relevant, pedagogic, and avant-gardist project” whose filmic products circulate mainly via film festivals (2009, 227). But this auteurist trend has been seen as destructive to the development of African film audiences and industries. Mweze Ngangura, a filmmaker from Congo born five years after Mambéty and ten after Cissé, has throughout his career insisted on the importance of entertainment cinema, arguing that “the infatuation with ‘a cinema of authors’... has only succeeded in alienating the African audience from its own cinema” (1996, 60–1). And scholars Teresa Hoefert de Turégano (2005, 73) and Melissa Thackway (2014, 19 n.1) assert that auteur-based, early African cinema was made possible by French funding, which then inhibited the creation of infrastructures for film production and exhibition in Africa. Ngangura’s opposition between Europeanized auteurism and a more authentically African entertainment cinema reappears in critical discussions of contemporary African filmmaking. Manthia Diawara contrasts *art et essai* films made by Africans living in Europe and designed for non-African audiences to a “new popular African cinema” that includes Nollywood (2010, 138). In the past twenty years, the production in Nigeria and Ghana of video films distributed on videocassette, video CD, and the internet has increased exponentially. Like the products of early Hollywood and unlike auteur cinema, the stars of Nollywood are actors and actresses, not directors, and the films are perishable—shot in a few days and not intended to be masterpieces or build an oeuvre.<sup>6</sup>

So can a contemporary African auteurist practice exist without being contaminated by European film style, festival preferences, and funding? Sanogo in a more recent essay lists Abderrahmane Sissako, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, and Nadia El Fani as examples of a new generation of African auteurs, of a “clear-sighted and globally ambitious auteurist tradition” (Sanogo 2015, 149). Filmmaker Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, who is based in France but films in his native Chad, has declared himself an auteur while noting the tendency within African cinema to reject auteurism; “Our cinema is not fond of singular auteurs. Those who have lifted their heads above water are accused of conniving with the West, of being traitors to their

cause, and of no longer being real Africans" (Barlet 2011, 138). And Imunga Ivanga, from Gabon, proclaims that African filmmakers have just as much of a right to be auteurs as did the New Wave directors who contributed to and were celebrated in the pages of *Cahiers*; "Filmmakers from the so-called South are auteurs who define themselves in the same terms as Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer, Rivette, and Chabrol, all participants in the New Wave. They don't deny the heat that runs through their films, but it is neither essential nor at the crux of the debate" (2005, 176). African filmmakers who work either in Europe or in genres and styles considered to be European have been condemned for not being African enough by critics who see too much success in Europe as their proof. World Cinema, in this model, is a collection of national and continental cinemas rather than a space within which filmmakers draw on a range of global influences and inspirations.

Let us return, then, to Abderrahmane Sissako, whose films trouble the conventional oppositions of a Second Cinema of the "I" and a Third Cinema of the "we," of art cinema and political cinema, and of fiction and documentary. They force us to rethink the perhaps tired notion of the auteur, which in its exhaustion has so rarely made the effort to leave Europe. But before analyzing Sissako's work in some detail, I would like to return to the final words of Bazin's essay; "*Auteur*, yes, but what of?" (1985, 258). Bazin wanted to redirect our critical focus, distracted by directors and their oeuvres, back to individual films. The question "what of?" encourages us to read Sissako's films not as the unified expression of a filmmaker's genius, but instead for a diversity of styles, stories, and concerns. This approach will also allow us to explore shifts within Sissako's engagement with the question of film authorship in both African and global contexts.

*Rostov-Luanda* (1997) was Sissako's first feature-length film and his first to be shot on the African continent.<sup>7</sup> The film records Sissako's return 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. 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 Hassaniya, a Mauritanian dialect of Arabic, 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."

Sissako must first go home in order to continue his travels and make a film which is both an act of honor and an "adventure," one that draws him toward someone else, someone whose life story intersected with and parallels his own in important ways.

Sissako's own voice picks up the voice-over several minutes later as he leaves Kiffa with Touélé; traveling shots shift almost seamlessly from the sands of the desert rushing by outside the window of a car to a snowy Russian landscape outside a train window. Over an Angolan cityscape, Sissako's narration 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 connected to the fate of Angola as a place of symbolic hope for Africa, a hope cruelly dashed by decades of post-independence civil war. Traveling across the country, Sissako conducts a series of interviews 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 the person with whom he has been speaking a photograph, one of the very few pieces of documentary evidence from the past that appear in the film, and asks if they recognize Afonso Baribanga. His search for the long-lost friend in the photograph becomes inseparable from the images he finds along the way, and 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."

Sissako learns that Baribanga now lives in what had been East Germany, and his journey therefore continues and concludes in the landscape of a fourth country. 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 multivocal and multilingual adventure story has been about his own process of finding his old friend by discovering the history of his friend's people. Of filmmaking, Sissako has said, "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" (Barlet 1998). Describing autobiography and biography as inseparable processes, he asserts an individual voice in connection with multiple African communities. In *Rostov-Luanda*, talking about and around himself enables Sissako's approach to Baribanga, Angola, and colonial and postcolonial African history.

*Rostov-Luanda* ends with a very brief scene set in Europe, and *Life on Earth* (1998) begins with one; amid the overflowing shelves of a Super

Monoprix in Paris, we see Sissako riding up an escalator carrying an enormous, stuffed polar bear. These images are replaced by images of Sissako's 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?

As we see Sissako arrive at his father's compound, we hear him quoting Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*; "And arriving, I would say to myself: 'And above all, my body as well as my soul, hold back from 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'" (Césaire 1983, 22). Sissako and Césaire, 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 this second filmic homecoming, to a home town in which he was not born but spent part of his childhood, Sissako's attention is focused on what he may have lost as a result of his time in Europe. Although he had already appeared on screen in *Rostov-Luanda*, here Sissako refuses to be a spectator in his native land; a character instead of an interviewer, he minimizes his narrative voice-overs in order to play 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, and flirting with a young woman as they ride bicycles through the streets of the town. For Sissako, in *Life on Earth* "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'" (Speciale 1998, 29). This everything includes his exile and resulting difference, the fact that he left Sokolo and no longer shares the fate of its residents, but does not prevent him from declaring his allegiance and sense of belonging.

I have described *Life on Earth*, like *Rostov-Luanda*, as a documentary film, yet the film was released two years before the arrival of the new millennium that it ostensibly depicts. Sissako has not recorded New Year's Eve in Sokolo, although all of the actors in this fiction are playing themselves; the credits at the end of the film identify Sissako, his father,

Mohamed Sissako, his uncle, and so on. We see the men of Sokolo 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. Sissako destabilizes the boundaries between fiction and documentary, breaking the basic rules of documentary realism in this documentary fiction, or fictional documentary, 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, in an Africa that exists both in opposition to and intimately connected to the Europe on the radio. The residents of Sokolo listen to at least two radio stations, RFI and the very local Radio Colon, 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*, which was commissioned by the Franco-German television network ARTE as the sole African film in a series about the new millennium, was originally intended to be entirely fictional, but Sissako felt that this would constitute an "abdication of responsibility, an escape to avoid reality," (Anon. 1998, 2) the reality of the relationship between African history and the African present.

Sissako's *Bamako* (2006) was released almost a decade after *Life on Earth*. His most overtly political film, *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 Sissako's earlier films, *Bamako* presents an African perspective on postcolonial and neocolonial realities. This time, 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, another home in which Sissako lived as a child. Professional lawyers and judges act in the trial scenes as do real witnesses, from Aminata Traoré, writer and former minister of culture, to a farmer and *griot* from southern Mali. 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 of the everyday lives of the people (some real, some fictional) who live around the courtyard. These unresolved subplots, filmed in 16mm, pull the film away from its political focus and toward art cinema. Of the story of Chaka, who commits suicide as his marriage dissolves and his wife prepares to return home to Senegal, Sissako 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. These counterpoints had to be understood by Africans as well as others. 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.

(Hurst and Barlet 2006)

Rejecting easy oppositions between Europe and Africa, between solitary individualism and warm collectivity, Sissako also 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 shown on television 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 local citizens at random. One of the black cowboys laughs at the carnage he has wrought, while 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, French actor and filmmaker (and friend of Jean-Luc Godard) Jean-Henri Roger, Congolese actor and filmmaker Zéka Laplaine, and a certain "Dramane Bassaro." Dramane is a nickname for Abderrahmane, one Sissako had already used in *Rostov-Luanda* and *Life on Earth*, 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. At the end of this five-minute sequence, a title credit is followed by "Directed By," but no director's name appears. For Sissako, this absence, like the choice not to join an omniscient voice-over to an on-screen presence in his earlier films, was a moment of resisting the pull of the auteur model; "I did not want to put my name, since I am already the director and the screenwriter" (in Hurst and Barlet 2006).

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 the Second and Third Cinemas meant that American Westerns flooded the African market for decades, and many African filmmakers, including Sissako, 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. 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 little regard for the individual and collective suffering of the continent's inhabitants.

Tsitsi Jaji understands "Death in Timbuktu" to be "an auteur's signature, flagging Sissako's long-running engagement with the Spaghetti Western," and reads the trope of the Western in all of Sissako's films then to propose the term "cassava Western" as a generic category within African cinema (2014, 156). Akin Adesokan has also analyzed Sissako's oeuvre for overarching themes and consistent aesthetics, arguing that "Sissako has been concerned in his films to fashion a narrative style that bears the signature of a distinctive artistic temperament; this means that certain recurrent patterns are discernible in his work" (2010, 146). And thus far, although I have noted strategies employed by Sissako to avoid being cast in the role of auteur, I have read three of his films in chronological order, discussing themes and strategies that link them. In a discussion of the *politique des auteurs* published in *Cahiers* in 1965, Jean-Louis Comolli pointed out (Comolli et al. 1986, 198–9) that there had been a slippage between the idea of the auteur and the thematics of a filmmaker's oeuvre. Since every auteur had a thematic or style, the critic who discovered a unifying thematic or style in the work of a filmmaker could call him/her an auteur. This slippage was the point of the exercise for Peter Wollen, who argued for auteur criticism as a method of reading and not the assertion of an actual authorial figure. Wollen concluded, following Roland Barthes' resurrection of the dead author as scriptor, that both an auteur film and the director as auteur are produced after the fact as a result of the structural analysis of a filmic text (Wollen 1972, 104–5). Creating auteurs is a scholarly industry, not just the job of festival organizers and curators, and a typical study of the work of a single filmmaker traces the coherent and progressive development of an oeuvre over time.

The three films I have discussed share a certain documentary quality and feature Sissako himself as an organizing principle, but I have skipped a film in my chronological order, one that will allow me to interrupt a nascent pattern. In between *Life on Earth* and *Bamako*, Sissako released his first unequivocally fictional feature film, *Heremakono: Waiting for Happiness* (*En attendant le bonheur*, 2002). The film depicts a collection of characters who inhabit a coastal town, many of whom are there only to leave, to undertake a clandestine and dangerous sea voyage to Europe. The film was shot in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, although the specific location is never identified within the narrative, allowing it to resonate with stories of emigration from points all along the northern and upper western coasts of Africa. *Heremakono* is a lyrical and not overtly reflexive film, with none of the explanatory voice-overs of *Rostov-Luanda* and *Life on Earth* nor the political speeches and mise-en-abyme of *Bamako*. When asked if he would describe *Heremakono* as poetic, Sissako responded in the affirmative but denied any opposition between the poetic and the political; “poetry for me is a way to communicate better with the other, to say things that are important, things that are politically important, because when one lives in a country, on a continent where making a film is a very very rare act ... one can only be political ... Poetry is a revolutionary act” (Scarlet 2007).

One of the political choices Sissako made for this film is that none of *Heremakono*'s characters emigrate; their happiness, if found, will not be found in Europe. Maata, the elderly fisherman turned electrician who long ago refused to leave, dies on the beach. His younger friend Makan decides not to leave for Spain but to return home to his village, which is named Heremakono. Makan's friend Michael, whom we see getting his photograph taken in front of a painted backdrop featuring the Eiffel Tower, seems to have left, but after two weeks his dead body washes up on the beach. The young apprentice Khatra, alone after Maata's death, tries to leave but is forcibly removed from an overcrowded train. And at the end of the film, the adolescent Abdallah packs a suitcase and says goodbye to his mother, but his new, European-style shoes make it impossible for him to climb up the dunes. The only character who has successfully emigrated from his home country has come from to Africa from China; he is also waiting, and we watch him sing a Chinese song about a man in jail who asks “When will I be able to return home again?”

As critics have noted, there are similarities between Sissako and Abdallah, who is about the age at which Sissako first left Africa and, like Sissako, speaks Bambara but not Hassaniya.<sup>8</sup> Yet Abdallah, waiting to embark upon the journey that will take him into exile, wears only European clothing whereas Sissako, staging his return after twenty years of exile in *Life on Earth*, wears African clothing while in Sokolo. Sissako shows Abdallah's vision to be limited; he rarely ventures out from the room he shares with his mother, instead observing his neighbors through a low window that

frames their legs and feet as if on a television screen. During a meeting with potential wives, the young women mock him, in both French and Hassaniya, for his inability to master even the few words in Hassaniya that he has learned from Khatra. Abdallah does not join in the large family celebration toward the end of the film, at which a girl of Khatra's age performs the traditional songs we have seen her learning from an older female singer and musician, or *griotte*. In a moment of hope for his African identity and for Africa, however, if one that also highlights the solitude that can be felt in the midst of a community, Abdallah puts down the book he is reading, gets up, and dances alone to the music.

A single sequence of *Heremakono* was shot in Europe, a flashback showing a trip taken by Nana, a prostitute who is Abdallah's neighbor, to inform the white, French father of her young daughter that the girl had died. Sissako shot these scenes with super-8 film, which gives them a dreamlike quality. He did so not only to highlight the personal pain associated with Nana's memories, but also to make a statement about how we perceive travel from Africa to Europe; “I wanted to say that the trip to Europe can also be a voyage of love, not only an economic one. It can also be a voyage of sharing; it is time to consider immigration as an enrichment and as a fundamental freedom inscribed in all of the world's constitutions” (Barlet 2003). In a film that deals with one of Africa's most pressing problems, the exodus of its youth, Sissako stresses the risks of the journey and the richness of home. But he also urges Europe, which considers the influx of African youth to be a pressing problem, to see this instead as an opportunity for individual and cultural exchange. Perhaps because of this message, combined with a focus on the oral tradition and a lack of Second Cinema reflexivity, *Heremakono* is the only of Sissako's films to have won the Etalon de Yennenga, grand prize at FESPACO, the biennial African film festival cofounded by Mahama Traoré.

In Sissako's most recent film, *Timbuktu* (2014), death once again comes to Timbuktu, but without the reflexive irony of *Bamako*. Timbuktu, where he had shot “Death in Timbuktu,” had become too dangerous, so Sissako filmed in Mauritania, with the support of the Mauritanian government. *Timbuktu*, like *Heremakono*, is a fiction based on contemporary African realities; Sissako said of it that “a filmmaker has to be a witness to his times and that is the role I wanted to play with this film” (Guillén 2015, 42). The film was inspired by a specific and terrible story, that of a young couple stoned to death by Ansar Dine fighters in Aguelhok, Mali in 2012, for the crime of having had two children together without being married. Sissako originally planned to make a documentary, but changed his mind for two reasons. Firstly, “free speech was impossible in Timbuktu,” making reliable interviews with anyone but the Ansar Dine jihadis also impossible, and furthermore, “I wondered how to show the stoning of the couple. I had even considered using animation, so as not to have to film it, to create

distance" (Anon. 2015). Seemingly contradictory goals, bearing witness and distancing, come together in a film in which Sissako tells the encounter of a Tuareg family, Kidane, his wife Satima, and their daughter Toya, with Islamist militants from Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Fiction is no longer for Sissako the "abdication of responsibility" it would have been in *Life on Earth*, but a way to approach the truth while respecting the dead.

The city of Timbuktu has long been a symbol of scholarly and open-minded Islam. Sissako's Timbuktu is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic space, and its mix of the traditional and the very modern is demonstrated by the fact that Kidane's most precious cow is named "G.P.S." In *Timbuktu*, the city also shows itself to be a place of resistance, from the woman who sells fish in the market and refuses to wear the gloves mandated by the religious police to the group of young people who risk their lives to play forbidden music to those who, challenging a ban on soccer, play a riveting match without a ball. A mentally ill Haitian dancer attempts to block the jihadis' progress through town, in a global political alliance that evokes Mali's francophone colonial past, another era of resistance against repressive outsiders. And although many of their friends and neighbors have fled, Kidane and Satima refuse to leave, first fearing and eventually knowing that this decision will prove fatal. *Timbuktu* is as directly political an intervention as *Bamako*, a powerful taking of sides in a war that threatens African religious and cultural traditions and freedoms. Ironically, perhaps, the major controversy around *Timbuktu* resulted not from the film's politics but rather the extrafilmic political decisions made by Sissako, who at the time became an unofficial cultural advisor to Mauritanian president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. French journalist Nicolas Beau virulently criticized Sissako for this affiliation, accusing him not just of having a working relationship with a president who stifles political opposition but also of ostensibly making a film about Ansar Dine in order not to make a film about slavery in Mauritania.<sup>9</sup> This most recent of Sissako's homecomings has in some ways been a painful one, negating nativist assumptions about a return to the source.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Catherine Grant was pessimistic about the effects of globalization on Latin American cinema, arguing that even directors of "culturally nationalist popular cinema" seek to be "co-opted by the commerce of auteurism" (2000, 105) in order to gain international funding, distribution, and critical attention. Despite Nollywood, this is still for the most part the case for African cinema. Yet taken as a whole, the popularity of Abderrahmane Sissako's work is evidence that African auteurs can successfully assert African realities on a global cinematic stage. Rather than insist on a *griauteur*, on the separateness of African styles, themes, and traditions, Sissako assumes that the stories he tells can be geographically and historically specific as well as widely interesting and appealing. And despite Grant's pessimism,

Sissako's individual films comment in different ways on the inequities and crimes of globalization, from *Rostov-Luanda's* portrait of post-independence Angola and *Life on Earth's* New Year's Eve in Sokolo to *Bamako's* trial, *Heremakono's* deferred emigrations, and *Timbuktu's* devastated Timbuktu.

We cannot follow Bazin's advice to read Sissako's films as distinct products of a tradition and an industry; trained abroad and working from two continents, his films are all multiply co-produced, none created from within a single tradition or industry. And although sub-Saharan Africa now has its own film traditions, aside from South Africa it has no industry to speak of. Rather than deem Abderrahmane Sissako either a global or an African auteur, we can perhaps heed his words and become "less attached to filmmakers" and more attached to films. Sissako's films, along with those of Haroun, Ivanga, and others, call for a critique that will put the tradition of Vieyra and Sembene in contact with that of *Cahiers du Cinéma* without allowing one to be defined by the other. Only then can we answer Ivanga's call (2005) to focus on something other than the Saharan heat of African cinema, on the very different authorial personae of *Rostov-Luanda*, *Life on Earth*, and *Bamako*, on the transformation from personal and political documentary in *Rostov-Luanda* to political fiction in *Bamako* to poetic fiction in *Heremakono*, on the shift from the reflexivity of *Bamako* to the emotional engagement of *Timbuktu*.

## Notes

- 1 For more details on the role of the Cannes Film Festival, and film festivals more generally, in the promotion of a certain vision of African cinema, see Lindiwe Dovey, *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- 2 All translations from the French are my own.
- 3 Jim Hillier traced this slippage to Andrew Sarris' "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" but also, earlier and in French, to Luc Moullet. See "Introduction," in Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) 15 n.24.
- 4 Peter Wollen (1972, 78) notes that there were two schools of auteur critics, those who focused on thematics and those for whom style or *mise en scène* was crucial.
- 5 See, for example, Samba Gadjigo, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); David Murphy, *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000); Françoise Pfaff, *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene: A Pioneer of African Film* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984).

- 6 For more on Nollywood, see the "Close-Up: Nollywood" dossier in *Black Camera* 5 (2) (2014). See also Noah Tsika, *Nollywood Stars: Media and Migration in West Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).
- 7 Sissako's student film, *Le Jeu* (1989), was shot in Turkmenistan, which doubled for Mauritania in a story about children who play at war in the midst of war. *October* (1993) was both set and shot near Moscow and tells the story of an African student's relationship with a Russian woman.
- 8 See, for example, Allison Murray Levine, "'Provoking Situations': Abderrahmane Sissako's Documentary Fiction," *Journal of African Cinemas* 3 (1) (2011): 97.
- 9 See Beau's website, mondafrique.com (accessed August 31, 2015).

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## 3

## Godard's stereoscopic essay: Thinking in and with *Adieu au langage*

*Rick Warner*

### The auteur as essayist

Speaking to a sold-out audience at the US premiere of Jean-Luc Godard's *Goodbye to Language* (*Adieu au langage*, 2014) at the New York Film Festival, Amy Taubin credited the legendary eighty-three-year-old director with having made "the first film to *think* in 3D." If her estimation chimes in with the mostly enthusiastic critical response that has greeted Godard's stereoscopic feature since its Jury Prize-winning debut at the Cannes International Film Festival, it also accords with recent directions in cinema scholarship that have reintroduced the figure of the auteur, not as a genius creator alone responsible for everything of value in the work, but more as an audiovisual thinker, an enunciatory force that uses the instruments of the medium to conduct a searching and philosophical investigation. In Taubin's comment one hears an echo of Gilles Deleuze's unabashedly auteurist position that "great directors" should be associated "not merely with painters, architects and musicians" but with "thinkers" (1986, x, xiv). Deleuze's statement itself paraphrases one of the arguments that launched the very notion of the auteur filmmaker in post-World War II Europe, Alexandre Astruc's manifesto on the "camera pen." In an oft-quoted passage, Astruc argues that because of favorable aesthetic and technological advances, the cinema can provide the "Descartes of today" with the most capable means of expression (2009 [1948], 32–3).