

Bamako

Guys, in order to fully appreciate the film Bamako you have to be familiar with some of the terms that recur in the film; toward this end I have defined the following terms for you:

China: this country is mentioned in the film from a negative perspective because many Africans today view its activities in Africa (and in the world) as being no different from the activities of the traditional exploiters of Africa, the Western countries.

G8: Short for *Group of Eight* which refers to the exclusive but informal club of the world's major economies (namely, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States) located in the global North and who meet annually to discuss, plan, coordinate matters of mutual concern. From the perspective of the film, the G8 has relevance in that at their meeting held in July of 2005 at Gleneagles (a luxury hotel) in Scotland they agreed to forgive the foreign debts owed by 18 of the world's most heavily indebted poor countries, all located in Africa.

Globalization: While I have already defined this term for you in the issues glossary, you should note that from the perspective of the film globalization is viewed negatively because of the current economic implications of it for the poor of the world. This is because at the simplest level globalization, in economic terms, has come to mean the relentless drive by corporate capitalism to penetrate every corner of the planet on the much ballyhooed premise—especially in Western countries like the United States—that everyone so effected by this drive will benefit equally via the logic of the so-called “trickle-down economics” (meaning in effect that, most bizarrely, if you allow the rich to get even richer by means of *untethered* capitalist enterprise the poor will also benefit). One does not have to be a rocket scientist to realize that in a world that was made economically unequal over a period of several centuries as a result of Western imperialism (forms of which continue to persist to this day) the push for globalization *on balance* has simply made the rich richer and the poor poorer between *and* within countries. (From an ecological perspective too, globalization has not been healthy for the planet.)

Global North: another name for Western countries, that is, the rich (and it stands in contrast to *global South*, which is roughly the rest of the world, that is, the poor). These terms are of course very broad generalizations but they have their purpose when discussing matters of wealth and power on a world scale.

International Monetary Fund (IMF): Like the World Bank, this is also an international capitalist financial institution (that also excludes communist countries from membership) but whose purpose is different from that of the World Bank in that its main concern is to help maintain the stability of the international financial system—one tool that it uses toward this end is to provide emergency loans to governments that are unable to pay their foreign debts but with strict and often onerous conditions attached to the loans that usually impact the poor and the vulnerable in most egregious ways. The IMF was set up following a conference in July 1944 of non-communist nations in Bretton Woods (in New Hampshire, United States), as the Second World War was about to end, called the Bretton Woods Conference or officially the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference. Note that the IMF was one of the two financial institutions (the other was the **World Bank**) that the conference inaugurated and hence the two together are also often referred to as the Bretton Woods institutions. (Note that the legacy of the Bretton Woods institutions after more than sixty years of existence is that inequality in the world between countries and within countries has grown exponentially—a clear indication of their true purpose: the promotion of *unbridled* corporate capitalism on a world scale.)

Millennium Development Goals: Meeting in September 2000 at the United Nations in New York at the start of the new millennium (in the Gregorian calendar) at what was labeled as the Millenium Summit, the world's leaders pledged to work toward improving the lot of the world's majority, the poor. This pledge, signed on to by the entire membership of the United Nations and a host of international nongovernmental organizations, was embodied in a set of eight specific goals that came to be called the Millennium Development Goals, to be achieved by 2015; they ranged from elimination of extreme poverty and hunger to reducing gender inequality to fighting HIV/AIDS to promoting environmental sustainability. While the agenda was indeed a worthy one, the implementation of its goals, especially by the target date, has always been in doubt and today it is accepted that it won't be met—thanks to a variety of factors ranging from the parsimony of the rich in the global North to devotion of precious resources to “making the world safe for Western corporate capitalism” to inefficiencies, corruption, and armed civil strife among the intended beneficiaries of the agenda in the global South. Question: Under the circumstances, was the Millennium Summit a waste of time? Answer: No, because to dream of a better future is the first step toward that goal (no dream, no future—just the nightmare of the present).

Structural Adjustment: Very simply put this seemingly benign term refers to a policy/program for eliminating the role of government in every human endeavor that has the potential to be “privatized,” meaning capable of being converted into capitalist profit making ventures by big business. So, for example, structural adjustment advocates are against the idea of governments providing even such basic services to their citizenry as water supply, or operating prisons, or providing education because they can all be provided by private entities, that is businesses. The rationale behind this approach is that, supposedly, capitalist enterprises are not only more efficient than the government in providing these services, but that they would also help to reduce the tax burden. The foolishness of this kind of thinking is highlighted by the fact that not all human needs can be adequately provided for on the basis of the profit motive—that is why we have governments in the first place—and that “efficiency” among corporate capitalist monopolies when it comes to *captive* markets is simply measured by, to all intents and purposes, how much they can “steal” through both legal and extra-legal means without getting

caught. Notice also that the current economic policies being pursued by Western countries (such as the United States, one of the foremost champions of structural adjustment) has been, most ironically (or perhaps most hypocritically) an almost complete repudiation, in effect, of this policy as they have moved to dramatically and directly intervene in the economy by means of various “economic stimulus/bail-out-the-crooks” strategies aimed at trying to rescue their economies from going into complete free fall!

World Bank: This is a global capitalist financial institution, whose members today comprise almost the entire membership of the United Nations (with the exception of communist countries such as Cuba), that was founded in 1944 at Bretton Woods (in New Hampshire, United States) with the purpose of eliminating poverty around the world by providing low-cost long-term loans to governments and it comprises two institutional wings: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Development Association. (The World Bank itself is part of a larger entity called the World Bank Group.) Because the United States is the biggest shareholder in the bank it has traditionally reserved the right to appoint the president of the Bank, a prerogative exercised by whoever has been the president of United States when the occasion has arisen. It is important to stress that while it may appear that the Bank has a laudatory mission, in reality its activities have been far from benign given its emphasis on an economic development agenda that protects the interests of the rich over those of the poor—achieved through the enforcement of capitalist economic principles (neo-liberal economics) that favor, though in not so many words, the hegemony of transnational corporations. So, for example, it has been a strong advocate of the policy of structural adjustment (though in recent years it has toned down this emphasis in the face of strident criticism from those countries so affected by this policy).

World Trade Organization (WTO): This capitalist organization was founded in 1995 with the purpose of promoting world trade on the basis of what is usually referred to as free trade (meaning no trade barriers like customs and excise duties). In one sense it is the institutional embodiment of **globalization**; consequently, as with the Bretton Woods institutions, the WTO has really been more concerned with making the world as safe as possible for Western corporate capitalism more than promoting equitable world exchange of goods and services.

Bamako

By David Walsh and Joanne Laurier

14 April 2007

Bamako (named after its setting, the capital city of Mali), directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, takes the form of a trial of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank held in the courtyard of a communal dwelling. One set of lawyers argues for “African society,” another in defense of the financial institutions. The trial of course is invented, but the lawyers and judges are real.

In the courtyard, picking their way around the hearing, people go about their daily activities. Those who work do work—a group of women dyes material, for instance. Those who have no work, look on or listen to a radio broadcast of the proceedings, sit and discuss their difficulties, stare and say nothing, make money as they can, consider leaving.

Individuals, some with names, appear in the foreground from time to time. A young singer, Melé (Aïssa Maïga), is threatening to leave her husband, Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré), and move to Senegal. Falai (Habib Dembélé), a cameraman, makes videos for wedding parties and the police; he prefers filming the dead, he says, because “they’re more real.” A man lies alone in one of the rooms off the courtyard, apparently terminally ill. A couple gets married. Everyday events interrupt the mock trial’s speeches and testimony.

Witnesses, including workers laid off as the result of privatization of public services, provide an angry commentary on the impact of the IMF and World Bank “structural adjustment” policy. They link the relentless foreign debt repayment to the destruction of social services in Africa. “‘Pay or die,’ that’s the West’s lesson,” says one. Another rejects the talk about “free trade” and an “open world.” “We don’t live in an open world, African refugees are returned.”

Along those lines, a witness describes his efforts, along with 30 others, to enter Morocco to look for work. Moroccan forces picked up the group and left them to fend for themselves in the desert. “Then the Algerians shot at us.” The economic refugees walked for a week. One woman from Ghana, who had dressed up as a man, had to be left in the desert. “Only ten survived without difficulty.”

Sissako interrupts his own film to present a brief “spaghetti Western,” starring Danny Glover (who helped finance the film) and Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, among others. A group of cowboys, on a “mission,” shoots up a town, in “Death in Timbuktu.”

Back at the trial, a professor denounces the consequences of 100 years of colonization. He asks, how is it possible that a leading gold-producing country could be poor? In Africa, with malnutrition, undernourishment, chronic unemployment, “We have reached the last threshold of the human heartbeat.” The “corrupt, rotten” administration in Mali is condemned too.

A female witness describes the Malian public railway system as having been “the victim of a conspiracy.” Privatize the rail system or cut the subsidies, ordered the World Bank. A country, she says, without transportation, communication or energy is not truly a sovereign country.

Fifty million African children are expected to die in the next five years, one of the lawyers “for Africa” alleges in his summation. The foreign debt is a millstone around the continent’s neck, amounting to \$220 billion in 2003. The major powers and the World Bank are “bringing Africa to her knees,” on behalf of “predatory capitalism.” Paul Wolfowitz, head of the World Bank, sheds “crocodile

tears” for the world’s poor, but this is the “man behind the war in Iraq.” The final argument ends weakly, however, with a call to “civilize” the IMF and World Bank.

Meanwhile, the singer, Melé, has left for Senegal. Chaka, her husband, is driven to take desperate measures.

The work has many strong and honest moments, and striking images. The filmmaker does not idealize anyone, but neither does he indulge in cynicism or despair. *Bamako* suggests that the economic conditions have strengthened the resolve of some, engendered despair, and even depravity, in others. Many of the facts presented in the testimony are devastating, as are the presence and anger of a number of the witnesses.

Sissako has done well to suggest the various sides of African life, including the humorous and the intimate. This is in keeping with his previous feature films, *Life on Earth* and *Waiting for Happiness*, which managed to be both outraged and delicate, an unusual feat in this day and age. The director’s voice is one of the most articulate in the African cinema.

In a conversation in Toronto, David Walsh of the WSWS asked Sissako how he had arrived at this particular structure for his “trial.” He replied, “I think that the structure is driven by the fact that from the moment when one invents something improbable, one must give it a certain form to make it more accessible, less formal, so one doesn’t fall into a situation that is more or less a caricature.”

The modest house in the film, with a well and a tap in the courtyard, is his family’s. To place the work there, adds the director, “is a way for me to say that what takes place here, the trial, belongs to the people. It belongs to the people because they are the ones who live daily with the consequences [of IMF-World Bank policy]. If they do not normally have the means to express themselves on this, the cinema can give this possibility to them.” He also wanted to show “a society fundamentally and inevitably strong and dignified. I think this dimension is very important.”

Sissako spoke of the general conditions facing the African population and the IMF-World Bank policy of “structural adjustment,” under which money is lent to the various countries with many strings attached. He explained, “This principle of structural adjustment has reduced the capacity of the state to involve itself in education, in health, and thus, to render people poorer and poorer and also place them in an economically precarious situation. That is to say, one can finish one education, but not find work. The common result is the inability to get out of a crisis, to find work, to take care of one’s health, and in some cases, even to mobilize oneself.”

The filmmaker argued that “those who believe in solidarity, cultural, family, with their fellow creatures—they have less despair.” If one, however, believes the government and social system cannot be altered, “one despairs, because one does not see the real possibility of a change.”

He spoke of the terrible struggles of the young to survive and have a future. Those who try to emigrate, without documents, take “incredible risks, risks that human beings should not take. Because how does a youth of 20 or 22, who doesn’t even know how to swim, agree to get into a little boat and cross the ocean for days. This form of collective suicide shows to what point the despair has reached.”

Walsh asked about the brief Western, starring Danny Glover, in the middle of his film. “The Western is something that has two meanings for me. The first is that I was making a film, not recording a trial. Thus it was necessary to assist the audience in accepting this form. The Western is a moment where we travel in an easier, more cinematic universe, but it was necessary that it had a meaning as well, a relationship to the situation. The meaning for me of the Western is that it is a mission ... the supposedly civilizing, pacifying, tranquil mission. [The ‘cowboys,’ black and white, in fact, shoot up the town.] Not simply white, but black too. We in Africa too have a share of the blame. This shows the co-responsibility, of those who accept.”

What role can cinema play in the social process?

“When a person is confronted by himself,” Sissako stated, “according to the principle of looking into a mirror, he asks questions of himself more readily. And, unhappily, the cinema doesn’t exist very much in Africa. Every day people are confronted by images that are not their own, that do not reflect their lives. When that is the case, there is a process of acculturation. I think the cinema is very important. Because I can see that I am weak, but I can also see that I am strong. Thus, this conscious grasp of one’s reality is so critical.

“The state of African cinema in general is catastrophic. Because there is already hardly an industry that exists, except perhaps in North Africa a little, or South Africa. When there is no industry it is very, very difficult to make films. It becomes very costly. I think perhaps the most difficult, the most regrettable, is the lack of vision—political vision on the part of the state. The state does not see culture as a part of development. And the fact that the state is not conscious of that is proven by the cuts in funds for culture and arts. Culture is not financed. And so you have countries that in the course of 10 years make one film, or every 20 years, or that have not yet made a film. And that is a difficult situation.”

Bamako contains both documentary and fiction elements. Walsh asked, “Does that come from the urgency of the situation or from an artistic choice?”

The filmmaker said, “I think that it’s both. It’s an important question. But I have the impression that it’s more a matter of the urgency. I had the desire to make a more direct film. It’s as though the somewhat roundabout, poetic forms are a little complacent. Today one must dare, one must stick one’s neck out. A film will not change the situation, but it’s important that the West realizes that Africa is conscious of its situation. We can’t change it perhaps, in the short-term.”

Walsh noted that one of the lawyers in the film, who spoke very passionately, very forcefully, called for the humanization of the IMF and the World Bank. He expressed his disagreement with this conception. "This will never happen," Walsh said. "Capitalism is impossible for the world's population."

Sissako nodded in agreement, "This is clear. I believe in that. Humanity needs to take a real leap, because it's not right that two institutions [the IMF and the World Bank] direct the world, and direct the world on the basis of a failed vision—for the people, not for the banks of course, with the most terrible consequences for everyone. The world is not just, the world is not harmonious. There is not one world, there are at least two: the world of those who are rich and the world of those who are poor. And the reflex of these institutions is to defend their interests."

"I think a new international perspective is indispensable, and possible. We are trying to do something with this film, *Bamako*, in France, to make people sensitive and conscious of the situation. People begin to react because the questions are not African ones. I use Africa, because the consequences are more visible, but it is a global reality."

<http://wsws.org/articles/2007/apr2007/film-a14.shtml>

Bamako

By Philip French

The Observer, Sunday 25 February 2007

There has recently been a deal of high-minded criticism directed at American and European films, such as *Blood Diamond* and *The Last King of Scotland*, that look at Africa from the point of view of white foreigners; most of this criticism is, I think, misplaced. Anyway, those needing an antidote should see *Bamako*, the new film by Abderrahmane Sissako, the Mauritanian-born, Malian director best known for his meditative film about immigration, *Waiting for Happiness*

Bamako is the capital of Mali, and this bold movie centres on an alfresco tribunal taking place in a courtyard there (apparently the very place where the director grew up). The plaintiff in this symbolic trial is Africa itself, and the judges and counsel in full legal regalia cross-examine witnesses, most of them real people, and very articulate, about imperial exploitation, neocolonialism and globalisation. The defendants are the World Bank, the IMF and their associates.

It's a clever concept. Around the tribunal, which is semi-improvised, life goes on, as the proceedings are relayed around the town by loudspeakers to an audience, not all of them eagerly attentive. In the houses adjoining the courtyard, a marriage between a nightclub singer and her unemployed husband is breaking up and a man is dying. A photographer, who works part-time for the police, records marriages and funerals, preferring the latter as 'more real'. Suddenly, but not arbitrarily, Sissako slips in a spaghetti western called *Death in Timbuktu*, starring Danny Glover and the Palestinian satirical film-maker Elia Suleiman. It's like one of those Italian Marxist westerns that proved so popular in the Third World in the Sixties and Seventies and shows a racially mixed party of gunfighters shooting up a dusty African town. They represent the exploitation of the continent by foreigners and their local allies. This sophisticated picture about a desperate situation expresses its optimism through its style and its respect for the people who appear in it.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/feb/25/drama.worldcinema>

Bamako

World Bank in the Docket, Charged With Africa's Woes

By A. O. SCOTT

Published: February 14, 2007

I have never seen a film quite like "Bamako," Abderrahmane Sissako's seething, complicated and disarmingly beautiful investigation of Africa's social, economic and human crises. The agony of Africa has been explored, and exploited, in several high-profile recent documentaries and fictional features, from "God Grew Tired of Us," about the "lost boys" of Sudan, to "Blood Diamond" and "The Constant Gardener." "Bamako" is something different: a work of cool intelligence and profound anger, a long, dense, argument that is also a haunting visual poem.

Danny Glover, executive producer of "BAMAKO," makes a cameo in the film.

Mr. Sissako, a Malian director whose previous films include "Life on Earth" and "Waiting for Happiness," does not try to engage the pity of the audience through sad stories or terrible images. Rather, he tackles the central question of the film — have the ostensible good intentions of the West, in particular the World Bank and similar institutions, contributed to the impoverishment and demoralization of the continent? — calmly and systematically, though with evident passion.

His conceit is at once simple and daring, straightforward and more than a little surreal. In a courtyard in a poor section of Bamako, Mali's capital, magistrates in robes sit at a table, taking notes and shuffling through files as they listen to testimony from witnesses and advocates. On trial is not a person but the World Bank — which is to say, global capitalism — itself.

Since Mali, a former French colony, follows French judicial customs, and since the French language is well suited to abstraction, the arguments are not always strictly empirical. Allegations of conspiracy are challenged with demands for proof, but the most eloquent testimony comes in the patient, angry speeches of ordinary Africans who step forward to lament what they see as the cruel consequences of debt servicing and privatization: emigration, loss of control over infrastructure and natural resources, rampant political corruption and a precipitously declining standard of living.

Some of the judges are black, some white, and the two teams of lawyers are also mixed, perhaps to suggest that the stakes in the trial cannot simply be reduced to Africa versus the West. Much of the prosecution's oratory may be provocative to Western ears, and may call forth counterarguments. Surely the misrule and war that menace so much of the continent are not solely the fault of foreign powers and institutions.

But such provocation seems to be part of Mr. Sissako's project. He wants the discussion of Africa, which has frequently been conducted in terms established in Washington, London, Paris and Brussels, to include African voices, and not only those of the local elite. He also insists — by means of his visual techniques as much as through the words of his characters — that the central human facts of the situation cannot be ignored.

"Bamako" can be described as didactic, which simply means that it overtly tries to use film to teach. But there is also another dimension to the movie, an attention to the details of daily life in Bamako that lends it extraordinary richness and gravity. As the lawyers press forward with their eloquence — occasionally showboating or lapsing into procedural pettifoggery — the camera wanders through the courtyard and beyond, taking note of the small interactions between men and women, the old and the young, the busy and the idle. People work, read, chat and doze. They listen intently to the trial, which is broadcast over loudspeakers, or else they go about their routines as the speeches play like background music.

An oblique, delicate and sad story also threads its way quietly through "Bamako," concerning a singer named Melé (Aïssa Maïga); her husband, Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré); and their young daughter. While their destinies are linked with the themes under consideration in the trial, these characters are not so much symbols or ciphers as reminders of the almost incomprehensible gulf between the general and the particular.

A less confident, more facile director might have tried to force a connection between macroeconomics and a single family's plight, but Mr. Sissako's sensibility is too subtle for such shortcuts. Melé and Chaka are beautiful and dignified; Ms. Maïga's face and carriage make you grateful for the existence of cinema. But they are hardly the noble, suffering Africans of well-intentioned Hollywood caricature.

Not that subtlety is everything. Mr. Sissako is trying to make a point, and to use whatever cinematic means he has at hand to bring it home. The most striking of these is a film within the film, a mock-spaghetti western starring Danny Glover and the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman that turns the prosecution's brief into a bloody allegory. If you saw gunmen killing women and children on the street, or executing schoolteachers because there were too many, you would be appalled and enraged.

Those are Mr. Sissako's sentiments exactly, and his ability to channel them into a fierce and unforgettable piece of political art makes "Bamako" necessary viewing.

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One Angry African Puts Big Money on Trial

By DENNIS LIM

Published: February 11, 2007 *New York Times*

ROTTERDAM, the Netherlands

A RARITY among contemporary filmmakers, Abderrahmane Sissako is doing his best to uphold the tradition of "J'accuse" and the outraged polemic. For his latest movie Mr. Sissako, who lives in Paris, returned to his family courtyard in Bamako, the capital of Mali, and staged an act of symbolic justice.

"Bamako," which opens Wednesday at Film Forum in Manhattan, is a courtroom drama that takes place within a mud-walled compound. It revolves around an unlikely cast of characters: the plaintiffs are the people of Africa; the defendants, charged with worsening the economic plight of the continent, are the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

"Through art you can invent the impossible." Mr. Sissako, 45, said in an interview here at the Rotterdam International Film Festival,

where he was the subject of a retrospective. "It's obviously an improbable scenario: to put on trial these two institutions that nobody can hold accountable. But that's the point. In this little courtyard we make the impossible possible."

To staff the tribunal in "Bamako," Mr. Sissako sought out real judges and lawyers, whom he armed with extensive research material. He also assembled a cross section of witnesses, from childhood friends to a former minister of culture, all appearing as themselves. Once the cameras were rolling, he allowed the improvised arguments to unfold without interruption. Witness after witness lands blow after blow against the economic policies of the international financial bodies, contending that they have contributed to the impoverishment of Africa and led to cuts in health care and education.

But "Bamako," despite its equation of globalized capitalism and neocolonialism, is not purely a diatribe. To an almost surreal degree it emphasizes the drift of daily life. In the very space where the court is in session, residents come and go, women dye fabric, a wedding party passes by. "The idea of the trial was born together with the idea of showing life adjacent to it," Mr. Sissako said.

He also fleshes out the film with a few scripted story lines, which he called "attempts to maintain the viewers' attention." In the most flamboyant divertissement he cuts to a mock spaghetti western that the neighborhood children are watching on television — a nod to the first movies he saw and a pointed comment on the dominance of Western culture and ideology. The cowboys in the film-within-the-film are played by friends of Mr. Sissako, including the American actor Danny Glover, who is an executive producer of "Bamako," and the Palestinian director Elia Suleiman.

The primary setting of "Bamako" holds great significance for Mr. Sissako, whose work often incorporates elements of autobiography. "I couldn't have made a film like this in just any courtyard," he said. "It had to be this one, where I grew up. Shooting there I felt protected. I felt I was allowed to make mistakes."

Thanks to Mr. Sissako's father, an engineer, there was always a bustling communal atmosphere at the compound. "My father was the only one in his family who went to school," he said. "He felt a responsibility to take in the children of relatives and friends who were less well off. Usually there would be about 30 people in the house." The courtyard, he said, "is Malian society in miniature."

Mr. Sissako was born in Mauritania but grew up in Mali, his father's home country. As a teenager he bristled against the oppressive school system. "I was never a good student, and I started to get militant ideas because I wanted to overthrow the school," he said.

His revolutionary views grew more focused when he encountered the writings of Che Guevara, African-American civil rights activists like W. E. B. Dubois, and anticolonialist authors like Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. He was also galvanized by the global anti-apartheid movement and caught up in a growing resentment toward the military dictatorship in Mali. By his late teens he was organizing student strikes. "It was a dangerous time," he said. "Friends of mine were in prison. One was dead."

At 19, he moved to Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, where his mother was living. Homesick for Mali, unfamiliar with the local dialect, he found unexpected solace at the Soviet cultural center, where he spent his days playing table tennis, learning Russian and reading Dostoevsky. He ended up at the prestigious film academy in Moscow. After nearly a decade there he moved to Paris in the early 1990s. His nomadic existence strongly informed his worldview. He found his voice as a poet of displacement, forever grappling with the bafflement of exile and the sorrow of the impossible return.

In "Waiting for Happiness" (2002), set in a Mauritanian coastal town that functions as a way station between Africa and the West, one of the characters is an alienated young man visiting his mother before he leaves for Europe. In "Life on Earth" (1998) Mr. Sissako plays a version of himself, an expatriate returning from Paris to Mali on the eve of the millennium. One line in that film, from a letter that the young man writes to his father, sums up the ambivalent yearning at the heart of his work: "Is what I learn far from you worth what I forget about us?" (Both films were shown at the New York Film Festival. New Yorker Films will release "Waiting for Happiness" on DVD later this year.)

The overtly political "Bamako" represents a move away from autobiography. "I was getting tired of drawing on my own life," Mr. Sissako said. "There's a natural end to that process."

But the explicit subject of "Bamako" had been the implicit themes of his other films: the legacy of colonialism and the lopsided relationship between the first and third worlds. Even more than the average courtroom procedural, it is a film about the power of the spoken word, giving voice to those normally denied that privilege.

It also, however, demonstrates the limits of language. Called to the stand, one of the witnesses finds himself unable to speak. "Truth cannot always be expressed in words," Mr. Sissako said. "It can also be silent, and you cannot say no to those who are silent."

In the movie's emotional climax, another witness forgoes conventional testimony and sings a full-throated lament. The scene is left unsubtitled, but the sentiments could not be clearer. "He was singing in a dialect from the south of Mali," Mr. Sissako said. "Even most of the people in the courtyard didn't understand it, but we were all very moved."

As for the film's economic arguments, they are probably too simplified to withstand the scrutiny of experts. Christopher Udry, a professor of economics at Yale University who teaches and writes about rural economic organization in Africa, said that while

"Bamako" addressed the "fundamental power asymmetry" of the situation, he thought the film was compromised by its stridency.

"The World Bank actually puts an enormous amount of energy in trying to listen," Professor Udry said. "There is broad recognition that structural adjustment was not successful, though there is disagreement as to why."

Mr. Glover, who studied economics in college and has been involved in human rights issues for decades, said by telephone that he hoped the film "does more than preach to the choir." He added, "It's a statement that opens up a space for dialogue."

The African group of the International Monetary Fund has seen it, Mr. Sissako said, but he has yet to receive any feedback. Last month he showed his film in Bamako, in front of the courtyard where it was shot. Thousands turned up. Still, insofar as the movie is a broadside, its designated audience is a Western one. Mr. Sissako recalled the advice of an old friend, a Malian judge: "He told me, 'Don't think this film will change anything. But you have to make it. Perhaps then they will know that we know.'"

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/movies/11denn.html?_r=1

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Beyond the Multiplex

How guilty is the Western world? The film "Bamako" reaches a verdict

By Andrew O'Hehir

"Bamako": The Western world goes on trial -- and Africa finds itself guilty

You can criticize "Bamako" for all sorts of reasons, but good luck finding any that it doesn't cover itself. Do you find this movie's central premise -- a trial in which African civil society accuses the Western world's major financial institutions of impoverishing and enslaving millions of Africans to pointless, dead-weight debt and disastrous neoliberal reforms -- boring and dogmatic? So do the guys playing dominoes in the square outside the Bamako, Mali, courtyard where the trial takes place. "How long is this going to last?" they groan, disconnecting the loudspeakers so they don't have to listen to their fellow Africans complain.

Do you think films should be entertaining, and avoid theoretical economic and political discussions? Well, "Bamako" also features a corrupt cop, a stolen gun and a mysterious murder. Then there's the sudden interruption of a violent mock-western called "Death in Timbuktu," starring Danny Glover (and several of Sissako's filmmaker friends), which is shown on Malian television, after a botched newscast, and briefly takes over "Bamako." Do you find the Africans' argument against market-based economic reforms simplistic, sentimental and anecdotal? So does the defense lawyer representing the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (played by real-life French attorney Roland Rappaport), who makes an eloquent closing argument.

One stream of "Bamako," without question, is a defiant and angry political screed. Sissako's parade of witnesses, who range from peasants and refugees to prominent African intellectuals, accuse the late capitalist world order of enforcing a deadly new form of colonialism on their continent. Public services have been destroyed, infant mortality has soared, and healthcare and education have all but evaporated, they tell us, all in the name of servicing an enormous debt that was squandered on counterproductive development projects or embezzled by corrupt local officials.

But this "trial," while conducted in deadly earnest -- and largely improvised by "actors" who are genuine lawyers and judges -- is at the same time an intentionally ludicrous spectacle. It's not happening in a courtroom but in a courtyard (a little joke, perhaps) of an ordinary house in Bamako, probably a middle-class dwelling by African standards. People who live there come and go, doing their best to ignore the robed judges and attorneys, the rows of somber-faced witnesses in folding chairs. Chickens and goats wander through. Children fetch water from the pump and women do laundry. The court must recess when a wedding party enters, complete with video cameraman and a woman in traditional dress who is paid to ululate a song of praise to the newlyweds.

At the beginning of each day's proceedings, Sissako's cameras, mikes and other equipment are clearly visible. Yet even as "Bamako" exposes its own artifice in classic Brechtian fashion, it also encloses this theatrical show-trial -- as the IMF/World Bank attorney laments, the deck is surely stacked against him -- in a low-key, naturalistic portrait of African life. Sissako captures numerous incidental scenes on the fringes of the trial, and there's also a kind of bracketing narrative about Melé (Aïssa Maïga), a beautiful, vain and hedonistic nightclub singer who lives in the compound and is drifting away from her long-suffering husband, Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré), for reasons we never completely understand.

By any logical assessment, this mixture of apparently incompatible ingredients should collapse into an incoherent hash. But "Bamako" is so ferociously intelligent and cannily constructed that its warring elements all support each other. As we watch Melé singing an infectious Afro-pop number in a half-empty nightclub, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she's not weeping just for the husband and child she may be abandoning. She's crying for the eviscerated society described by witness after witness at the near-comical trial. She's weeping along with the elderly peasant whose testimony is a chant of lament in a language no one in court can understand.

Everywhere "Bamako" has been shown, it has provoked panel discussions and debates, both formal and otherwise. I don't think one viewing is sufficient to appreciate the complexities of its argument, or the extent to which Sissako and his witnesses are judging African society for its corruption and amorality, its internalized racism and self-hatred. If there can be little doubt about the verdict

Sissako expects in his court case, no viewer -- Western, African or otherwise -- will come out of "Bamako" unindicted. A barrel of laughs, this ain't. But it's a fearless high-wire act, grim and witty, confrontational and self-mocking. Its message may be dire, but "Bamako" is a feat of intellectual and cinematic daring that will leave your brain buzzing.

<http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2007/02/08/btm/index.html?CP=IMD&DN=110>

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PFS Film Review

Bamako

Bamako, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, is filmed in a residential neighborhood within Mali's capital, Bamako. The principal scene is that of a trial in which residents are the plaintiff and world capitalism (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, G8, the United States, and "their accomplices") is the defendant. The scene shifts back and forth between the trial and the actual conditions of poor Bamako residents. Haggard men testify that they are unemployed, while most women are busily making textiles, washing clothes, feeding infants, and providing entertainment; conspicuously absent are virile young men. The case for the plaintiff is that Africa has declined economically after 25 years of "structural adjustment." Statistics of increased disease, significant infant mortality (10 million children die yearly), and shortened life expectancy are validated when the camera films conditions in the neighborhood. Several factors are cited to explain the decline on a continent that was once economically self-sufficient and prosperous: (1) colonialism, (2) unpaid loans on aid projects that did not benefit the people, (3) interest on the loan, (4) privatization of education, health care, railways, and other government functions to pay the interest, (5) unemployment after multinational corporations bought privatized companies and laid off "excess" employees, and (6) unaffordable rates charged by privatized education and health enterprises. The principal witness for the defense argues that the World Bank has to deal with many issues, but the African problem is mostly corrupt governments, such as purchases of pens at three times the normal cost. Former World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz is specifically cited as the one leading the anti-corruption campaign as well as his role as an architect of the Iraq War, on which the United States has spent more than enough that could be used to eliminate all the problems of Africa's debt, disease, and unemployment. In the middle of the film there is a brief "film within a film" entitled "Death in Timbuktu," in which various non-African gunslingers enter town and kill innocent people, perhaps a reminder that wars in Africa have also sapped the energy of the survivors. After the court hears the pleadings, the film allows filmviewers to decide upon a verdict. As an extraordinarily eloquent forum in which African democracy at the local level exposes the tragedy of globalization, the Political Film Society has nominated Bamako for awards as best film exposé and best film on human rights of 2007. MH

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Bamako

by Cynthia Fuchs

PopMatters Film and TV Editor

I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all.

—Aimé Césaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez"

"Words are something they can seize you in your heart. It's bad if you keep them inside." Turned away from the mock trial that forms the center of Bamako, an elderly would-be witness insists that words might not only express ideas and feelings, but also, that they must be released. Just so, the film is full of words—in testimony, in song lyrics, in comments made by weary trial observers. "The goat has its ideas and so does the hen," says the old man as he does as he sits down.

cover art

Amazon

At a time when Michael Moore's *Sicko* is challenging the corruptions of the US health insurance system, Abderrahmane Sissako's beautiful, evocative film reminds you that similar abuses are worldwide. Set in the Hamdallaye neighborhood in Mali, the movie stages a harangue against the West's diverse abuses of Africa, naming the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and G8 as perpetrators. Africans suffer from lack of education, health care, and basic human services, asserts Bamako, leading to a population that feels "alienated and deprived."

The speeches—heartfelt and specific—are intercut with scenes of daily life (the videotaping of a wedding procession, children bathing children, women workers creating and dyeing cotton fabrics) and symbolic melodrama. Melé (Aïssa Maïga) is a bar singer whose husband Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré) is out of work. Each night he stays home with their young daughter, and each day he watches his wife as she leaves for work. This week, as he is also watching the trial, Melé passes through the courtyard, pausing each morning to have her colorful dress tied up by the guard who happens to be standing close to her. Chaka says nothing, but his fatigue and disappointment are abundantly visible.

Chaka's muted pain alludes obliquely to the silencing of African nations by the "world" bodies who decide for them what is best, using their inability to pay off impossible debts as emblems of their "unreliability." As everyone can see the trouble between Melé and Chaka, so everyone views the dysfunctions of African economies, social and financial. Disturbingly intimate, the morning ritual simultaneously exposes and laments Chaka's sense of loss (also underlined in the couple's wedding portrait, poignant evocation of a long-gone past happiness). It also demonstrates Bamako's primary narrative method, contrasting and connecting the diurnal and the spectacular, the private and public means by which life is lived.

As Chaka, unable to communicate with his wife, listens to court testimonies, the focus returns repeatedly to "communication" in its many forms—collective and individual, direct and indirect, truthful and misleading. Witnesses decry the dishonesty that underlies the formation of African debts and privatization. While one avocat for the prosecution lays out the crisis inherent in African national budgets—the imbalance between the single digit percentages allowed for social services as opposed to the huge numbers needed to pay down the national debts—Chaka and the photographer Faläi (Habib Dembélé) carry on their own conversation. Faläi explains the imbalances of his own work, that he makes money by shooting weddings, crime scenes, and funerals, and prefers the latter: "The faces of people who talk don't interest me," he sighs, "There's no truth in them. I prefer the dead. They're truer."

The camera cuts from his dismal assessment to a statement on the witness stand by Madame Traoré (Aminata Traoré), opposing the "idea that Africa's key characteristic is her poverty. She is the victim of her riches." The continent's exploitation by the West, she says, results in an ongoing process of "pauperization." In this, she continues, "You pinpoint the mechanisms and Bush is at the heart of them... I say that the West has created and imposed two fears on itself, terrorism and immigration. Let's stay calm. We must stop presenting the problems' causes as the solution."

Much as Faläi has commended the sad truth of death, Madame Traoré's appraisal of the G8's "structural adjustment" illustrates the lack of options presented by the self-interested West. If the argument sounds broad and abstract, the effects are excruciatingly particular and material. During one break in the proceedings, villagers watch a film on TV, a Western starring Danny Glover as a cowboy who rides into town and takes out the marauders who are killing women and children. Titled "Death in Timbuktu," the cinematic interlude offers bleak, if obvious, commentary on the machinations of the West. Though the World Bank is supposed to be "humane," its decisions have been consistently "inhumane"—death again and again.

Asking for independence, presenting themselves as humble and dignified, the representatives for Mali condemn the "Trojan horse of financial capitalism" that has granted Western institutions apparently perpetual access to African riches. (Even water has been privatized, notes one prosecutor.) As the witnesses and attorneys speak, they make clear the power of words. When at last the old man from the film's start stands to sing near the end, his anguish and hope are both undeniable.

Bamako - Trailer

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2007 SFIFF50—Festival Crossover: Bamako

By Michael Guillen

San Francisco, California, United States

I first saw Abderrahmane Sissako's Bamako at Toronto's Paramount Theater during the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival and was quite impressed. I'm delighted that SFIFF50—in collaboration with the Museum of the African Diaspora and the San Francisco Black Film Festival—have brought Bamako to the Bay Area for a festival run before its official distribution later this year by New Yorker Films. I've reworked my notes from TIFF and amplified them with some of the film's critical wake since then.

Bamako initially reminded me why I chose The Evening Class as the name for this site. I took the title from Ousmane Sembene's assertion that African cinemas are the evening class for adults who approach cinema as a means to focus on the issues of their lives. In the West we are accustomed to such issues being diluted by fictional dramatizations that cater to our short attention spans and whatever appetite for narrative entertainment or visual spectacle is currently in vogue. Bamako will disappoint such expectations and will not likely find favor among most Western audiences who will undoubtedly find its approach didactic and polemical, which is unfortunate, because it is near brilliant, particularly in its indigenous allegiance to now-outmoded styles of oratory that any armchair anthropologist will recognize from various African groups, as well as the Algonquin, the Maya, who encircle an issue with eloquence in hopes of sifting out a solution.

In Bamako the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the G8, the World Trade Organization, and other forces of globalization and privatization are put on trial ("really more of an inquiry" Stanley Kauffmann qualifies in The New Republic) in a small courtyard where the rituals of justice co-mingle with the rituals of everyday life. But justice—ever a relative term too frequently mistaken for law enforcement—is not only blind with dispassionate eyes wide open but as hobbled as the metaphorical ram that provides moments of comic relief for being a thinly-veiled critique of the judicial process. I am reminded of the historical accounts of Amerindian oration subverted by the treaty-speak of the invading Europeans, how all that eloquence pleading for fair treatment was reduced to signed treaties that were easily broken, and self-serving laws that ignored existing systems of resolution.

What is spoken of in Bamako is readily apparent and that might draw criticism from those wanting to hear something "new." But how can eloquence move on to something "new" when it is still encircling the unresolved issues of the past?

What deserves attention in Bamako is how urgently complaints are voiced, as well as the countenances of those addressing the court or listening nearby. Their faces tell everything. They are powerful and beautiful and diverse. Some complain to the court in anger, others in heated debate, others through silence and a refusal to acknowledge the court's sovereignty; but, the movie's sterling moment is when an elder griot (Zegue Bamba)—who has been refused audience early in the film—can no longer hold the words in his heart, and interrupts the proceedings with a song that doesn't require subtitles or translation to be understood. His is one of the most powerful songs of heart I have ever heard and its plea for compassion silences everyone into rapt attention. My breath caught in my throat. Kauffmann considers this subtitled emotional outburst as the seeming demonstration of "the unheard protests of the continent."

Bamako asserts that it is not enough to find blame and it is not enough to find those on trial guilty. Suffering demands immediate recompense and the shame of modern life is its calculated deliberations.

Abderrahmane Sissako, who attended the TIFF06 screening, was grateful for Bamako being shown at the festival and hoped audiences would intuit that Africa's lament might all too soon be inherited by the West.

Doug Cummings reacted to Bamako at Film Journey, emphasizing "Sissako's satire of transnational entertainments that use third world countries as exotic backdrops: the imagined Death in Timbuktu clip (starring Danny Glover and Elia Suleiman) is a hilarious rebuke of Hollywood hegemony."

"This Western film caricatures popular attitudes," Kauffmann simplifies. Acquarello isn't content with that simplification at Strictly Film School and expands the image rather than reduces it, noting that the Death in Timbuktu clip "incisively channels the spirit of Nigerian film pioneer, Moustapha Alassane's *Le Retour d'un Aventurier*, the first native African film ever made that, ironically, depicted all the conventions of a Hollywood Western plot (albeit with African cowboys chasing zebras instead of wild horses). In evoking the specter of Alassane's seminal, but intrinsically derivative film, Sissako traces the inequitable history of western subservience and imitation to the figurative beginning, a sobering imputation that the socio-economic problems of post-colonial Africa are not only the residual legacy of economic imperialism and unfair trade, but also culturally self-inflicted in the naïve imitation of an unattainable western ideal."

In an interview David Pellecier conducted with actor Leo Castel for *Senses of Cinema*, he brought up Castel's participation in genre films, including Italian westerns. Castel commented upon the nature of those "leftist Westerns" and his comment reminded me of Bamako: "[T]he Manichean side of those Westerns, their escapism and identification—this annihilates the reality of class conflict. And at the same time, it's a reflection of this conflict, in the sense that tensions really existed; this may be the reason why the Western genre came into being. Still, the ideas remain hidden. Somebody wrote in *Cinématique* that the Western was a 'hypostasis of the class struggle'. Yes, but it's like the Bible: invent a popular language in order to screw the masses even more, meanwhile obscuring the real conflicts of alienated work."

Discussing this with Acquarello at his site, he agreed that the idea of a "flattened" class structure "fit in well with the inclusion of the Western in Bamako, particularly in the context that Danny Glover is also one of the first ones (if not the first one) to fire a shot at the village. It makes it a kind of dysfunctional equality, much like the way Africa's 'equal access' to the global economy is really something that is undercutting its own long term viability and sustainability."

Contrary to my naïve adoption of Sembene's philosophy about adult African moviegoers, Nathan Lee's review for *The Village Voice* stages his concern of how the film speaks to contemporary Africans. "Ultimately," he writes, "that's beside the point, given that the populace of Mali hardly needs a lecture, no matter how entertaining, on the impact of the IMF on their daily lives. . . . When you factor in the linguistic and literacy challenges that arise when screening films for the general African public, to say nothing of the exhibition infrastructure, the issue of domestic impact grows more complex. And as [Bamako's executive producer Joslyn] Barnes made perfectly clear: The 'average' African doesn't have the luxury of forming an opinion about Bamako for reasons Bamako directly confronts."

In her interview with Danny Glover and Abderrahmane Sissako for *The New Statesman*, Vanessa Walters underscores this thread and reveals the serious damage done to the African film industry in the 1980s in the wake of the economic ruin that followed IMF policies. "But even while interest in African film is growing in Europe," Walters writes, "the industry at home still struggles. Sadly, although Bamako has got a general release in both France and Britain, it is less likely to be seen in Mali itself, where the number of cinemas has fallen from 40 to three since international financial institutions forced the state to sell cultural assets in the 1990s."

Film

African dreams

Vanessa Walters

Published 26 February 2007

The continent must express itself on film, Danny Glover and Abderrahmane Sissako tell Vanessa Walters

"I choose roles that I think will be important. I am a cultural worker as well as an artist. I try to pick those stories that have importance to the world. My politics came long before my work." It may come as a surprise that the man who utters these sentiments is none other than Danny Glover, best known as the star of the *Lethal Weapon* series. But besides his current role in the Beyoncé vehicle *Dreamgirls*, Glover will shortly be appearing in British cinemas in a much more interesting proposition: *Bamako*, an angry and affecting film by the Malian director Abderrahmane Sissako.

Glover is a passionate advocate of African and African-American cinema, a cause he has taken up in addition to other political activities. (He is a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Development Programme, and has lobbied US policy-makers on behalf of Africa and the Caribbean. He also sits on the board of the pan-Latin American TV network Telesur, founded by the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez.) Glover is involved in Fespaco, the biennial festival of pan-African film in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and has previously backed or appeared in several African projects. For *Bamako*, he acted as an executive producer and also appears briefly in a surreal Wild West sequence; but it is clear that, most importantly, he has lent his considerable clout to getting it financed and released.

"Man, wherever he comes from, has the right to express himself," he mutters in his friendly, slightly shambolic fashion. At 60, he is grizzled but still every inch the Hollywood legend. "People in the west talk of Africa, of poverty, of war and of sickness, but never of people who are conscious of what is happening. These issues resonate far beyond Africa. The structural violence that happens to people when they have no input in what happens to their lives resonates with people around the world."

Bamako is an unusual film: shot in the courtyard of a family home in the Malian capital, it uses a combination of professional and non-professional actors to conduct a court hearing in which ordinary Malians put the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on trial. As one witness after another takes the stand to testify to the everyday effects of international policy, ordinary life goes on in the background - women clean clothes in the yard, men chat lazily and a wife conducts an illicit affair.

The pace is slow, and the film can seem didactic. Yet, in contrast to the African-inspired films that have done so well around the world recently - *The Last King of Scotland*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Blood Diamond* - this is a genuinely African vision of the continent. The Africans we see in *Bamako* are active agents in their own lives. They may be poor, but they are acutely aware of their position in the world and the powers that perpetuate injustice.

"My objective in making this film was not necessarily to change things, but rather to bear witness to reality," says Sissako, an elegant man with a flash of silver in his short afro. "The people coming into the courtyard to be witnesses knew that they would not change their lives that day, but they got to say what they had to say."

"There is a perception in the west that African people are not aware of international politics. When the west talks of Africa, it talks of poverty, sickness, wars, but never talks of the people themselves having a view on what is happening. I wanted to show that African society may not be organised, but it is conscious."

Sissako is one of new African cinema's most significant talents. Trained in Moscow during the 1980s, he made his feature-film debut in 1998 with *Life on Earth*, a semi-autobiographical tale of an African who migrates from Mali to Paris. His second feature, *Heremakono* (*Waiting for Happiness*, 2002), was a similarly personal story. In *Bamako*, he takes on political issues for the first time. "There are many reasons why I chose to become a film-maker, but mainly I have always had this desire to tell the story of my environment," he says. "Gradually, what I've noticed is more and more injustice, so that is what I have addressed in *Bamako*."

This does not mean that the film, or, indeed, its director, buys in to western liberal ideas about what would be best for Africa. Rather, Sissako emphasises that Africans themselves should be put at the heart of thinking and decision-making about their continent. "This film will get a lot of attention from liberals, but liberalism sometimes gets it wrong despite its good intentions," he says. "For me, Europe, whether left-wing or right-wing, is united in its unfairness towards Africa. There has never been a policy of really sharing the wealth, and that goes beyond left and right. Europe is richer, stronger and has different politics. At times, it seems that Europeans feel a disdain towards the rest of the world."

When African cinema first began to flourish in the 1960s and 1970s, it was dominated by stridently political film-makers such as Senegal's Ousmane Sembène and the Egyptian Youssef Chahine. However, the economic ruin that followed the IMF policies of the 1980s seriously damaged the emerging film industry. *Bamako* marks a return of sorts to that original spirit; interestingly, Sembène and Chahine both had films shown at Cannes in 2004.

But even while interest in African film is growing in Europe, the industry at home still struggles. Sadly, although *Bamako* has got a general release in both France and Britain, it is less likely to be seen in Mali itself, where the number of cinemas has fallen from 40 to three since international financial institutions forced the state to sell cultural assets in the 1990s.

"There is no African cinema industry as such," says Sissako. "Films are rare and are made in only a few countries."

Inevitably, this factor influences the audience the director envisages for *Bamako*. However, he insists that it does not simply cater to a European audience. "I'd say that I make films both to be heard in the outside world, and to share experiences within Africa. I am telling Africa that it must express itself."

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<http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2007/02/african-sissako-bamako-glover>
