

Class Notes

for the Film *Bamako*

People:

These brief notes, divided below into six sections, that have been prepared for you on the film *Bamako* should go some way in assisting you to both appreciate and comprehend the film better. Although this is an old film, it is still very relevant even today given the current economic and political circumstances of many African countries—symptomatic of which is the highly perilous attempts to migrate illegally to Europe (and even North America) by young Africans in search of a better life.

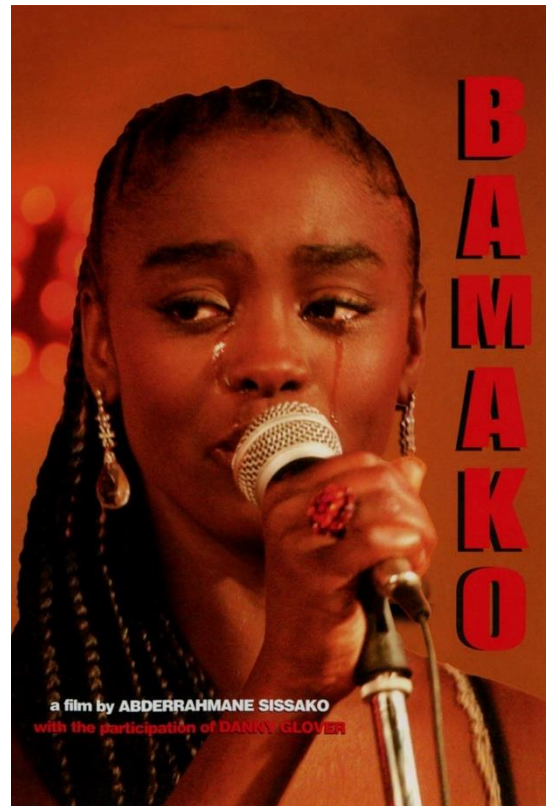
Note: the section titled *glossary*, below, must be read in conjunction with the main glossary, the *course glossary* (available through the *online materials for course assignments* page) or via this link: <http://bit.ly/courseglossary>.

1. Director/Credits/Format of the Film

Visit the website www.imdb.com and do a search for the film to access this information. (When you bring up the relevant page for the film make sure you scroll down the entire page, as well as explore some of the links on the left side of the page.)

2. Structure

This fictional film, with a hint of *magic realism* but made in the style of *direct cinema* (while retaining the essential elements of traditional African cinematic genre, including an unapologetic didacticity as well as the absence of the usual character-driven narrative form—which is often punctuated by pyrotechnical money shots—perfected by Hollywood), is structured on the basis of several main intercut parts:



(1) A human rights trial taking place in an open multifamily courtyard (located in the poorer section of the city of Bamako, the capital of the Francophone country of Mali) that constitutes the principal *raison d'être* of the film.¹

(2) The quotidian details of everyday life in and around the courtyard as the trial unfolds.

(3) The activities of a small backyard textile business (specifically the dyeing of cloth) just outside the courtyard.

(4) A marriage that is breaking up under the stress of economic hardship, because of lack of employment on the part of the husband, that eventually culminates in a suicide.

(5) The activities of the audience listening to the trial proceedings through the PA system.

(6) A short spaghetti western, titled "Death in Timbuktu," within the main film that jarringly splits the film into two main halves.

(7) Flashbacks arising from some of the testimony of the witnesses in the trial.



and fiction, meaning it comprises professional actors as well as real life activists, ordinary villagers, and some well-known personalities.

3. Basic Plot

The trial, which is executed on the basis of the traditional French judicial protocol and on which the entire film rests, involves the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as the defendants and an amorphous "African civil society" as the plaintiffs. The defendants are charged with the crime of economically-driven warfare perpetrated on the human rights of people of Africa. While the trial, as one can quickly guess, is a make-believe trial, it is conducted by racially mixed real life judges and teams of lawyers on *both* sides of the case.² The sentence the prosecution seeks from the court upon handing down the guilty verdict is community service to all mankind. (In actuality, the film ends without the court actually delivering a judgment.) The back

¹ The courtyard is actually owned by the filmmaker's father who normally lives there (although the filmmaker himself lives in Paris).

² It would appear that the intention of the filmmaker is to suggest here that this is not a race issue but a *class* issue, albeit on a world scale.

drop of the trial is the daily life activities of the people—especially the women, who as Gita Sen correctly points out hold up more than half the sky in Africa (and elsewhere for that matter)—as if to suggest that even as “big people” continue with their elaborate shenanigans concocted in the capitals of far off Western countries, life for the ordinary people must go on. As for the spaghetti western interlude we must conclude that it is a metaphor for the economic warfare on African societies perpetrated by Western corporate capitalism represented by the World Bank and the IMF.³

4. **Dramatis Personae**

- A young bar singer, by the name of Melé (Aïssa Maïga).
- The unemployed husband of Melé called Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré)
- An ill and dying man (presumably due to lack of proper healthcare).
- A freelance cameraman by the name of Falai (Habib Dembélé) who makes videos of weddings and funerals for clients, as well as working for the police when they need a cameraman.
- The security guard at the courtyard gate (who is not above turning his head the other way for a small bribe).
- The Judges.
- Lawyers—one team representing the prosecution and the other the defense—which include two white men: William Bourden for the prosecution and Roland Rappoport for the defense.⁴ (Also on the prosecution side is a Malian lawyer, Aissata Tall Sall.)
- Witnesses (not identified by name) who include one who recounts a harrowing tale of being dumped in the Sahara desert as he and his compatriots try and make their way to the north coast of Africa with the objective of getting into Europe, and another (Zegué Bamba) who, it appears, complains bitterly to the court in an untranslated lament.⁵
- The owner of the backyard textile enterprise.
- Racially mixed cowboys who shoot up a village (and who include among them the African American actor Danny Glover and the Palestinian filmmaker, Elia Suleiman)—especially targeting women and children, as well as teachers because there are too many of them.⁶
- A ram (a source of mild comic relief).

³ The filmmaker, Abderrahmane Sissako, explains the significance of this highly odd interlude in the film thusly: “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. 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.” (Quoted by David Walsh and Joanne Laurier in their review titled “A number of new films: *Offside*; *The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair*; *Bamako*; *Daratt (Dry Season)*; *The Lives of Others*” dated April 14, 2007 and available here: <http://wsws.org/articles/2007/apr2007/film-a14.shtml>)

⁴ In real life, Rappoport, a Frenchman, is a human rights lawyer, and Bourdon, also a Frenchman, used to be the secretary-general of the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues.

⁵ Another witness, a former school teacher, is so overcome with emotion and distress that in the end he is unable to speak at all, words proved to be simply too inadequate for the circumstances facing the African people.

⁶ Glover is the executive producer of the film and he also helped to finance it. (The special features part of the DVD also includes his comment on *Bamako*.)

5. Issues

Among the many issues the film raises, these are especially worth considering:

- (1) Undocumented emigration to Western countries by individual young Africans in search of work as the economies of their home countries disintegrate (a problem that continues to the present).
- (2) Domestic economic corruption and mismanagement by African governments against the backdrop of a general lack of democracy.
- (3) The deleterious consequences of corporate capitalist globalization—including the implementation of structural adjustment—on human welfare.
- (4) The current economically malignant role of multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Africa.
- (5) The unjust debt burden that the African people have been forced to carry, even as they heroically grapple with their own poverty, as a result of ill-advised loans made to their often corrupt and/or inefficient governments by Western countries and financial institutions.
- (6) The suffocating and exploitative consequences of living in *patriarchal* societies for African Women.
- (7) The problem of petty corruption that imposes yet another layer of unjustified burden on the masses, the African poor.
- (8) Continental disunity that as long as it remains will always drastically limit Africa's potential for meaningful sustainable economic development, at the minimum.
- (9) The penurious predicament of African cinema; as well as its role in raising (or suffocating) *political consciousness*.
- (10) The imaging of Africa: Hollywood versus the indigenous African filmmaker.
- (11) The responsibility of the Western citizenry, through its obsession with crass and obscene materialism, for fueling the insatiable greed of global corporate *capital*.
- (12) The role of U.S.-based evangelical Christianity today in Africa.

6. Glossary

Knowing the following names/terms is absolutely essential for a full comprehension of this film.

Capital (economics): see the course glossary (link above).

Capitalism: see the course glossary (link above).

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.

Direct Cinema: A style of filmmaking within the genre of documentary films where the filmmaker's approach is to pretend to be simply a "fly on the wall," that is, unobtrusively listening and observing.

Essentialism: See the course glossary (part of online readings) I have prepared for you.

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, and 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: First, see the course glossary. Second, note that when the matter of globalization comes up, the discussion often includes references to the three most important multilateral agencies of globalization today: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization.

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: see the course glossary (link above).

Millennium Development Goals: see the course glossary (link above).

Patriarchy: This term refers to a particular historically-grounded gender-based social arrangement as well as the ideology that legitimates it. At the core of patriarchal societies is male hegemony that seeks to exploitatively control, at once, women's bodies *and* time (expressed through labor power) by means of terror on the basis of an essentialist ideology. Among the many empirical expressions of patriarchy today that women face include: elimination of the right to choose or not to choose to carry a pregnancy through to its conclusion; a partially paid 24-hour work day imposed by a combination of household-chores and wage-earning employment; discrimination in matters of promotion, pay, etc. in the workplace; sexual harassment in the work place and other public places; sexism in the entertainment industry (including the glorification of misogyny); sexist biases in the media; and gender-based terrorism, of which domestic violence, rape, and even murder inflicted on women by males are routine expressions.

Political Consciousness: see the course glossary (link above).

Spaghetti Westerns: Low budget western films—the fictional film genre that glorified the settlement of the frontier in the western part of the U.S., with the cowboy as the quintessential protagonist—made by Italians and Spanish and filmed on location in the geographic locales of Spain and Italy that resembled the U.S. Southwest. These films often featured U.S. Hollywood film stars, who were either in the twilight or in the dawn of their filmic careers, in key roles.

Structural Adjustment: see the course glossary (link above).

World Bank: see the course glossary (link above).

World Trade Organization: see the course glossary (link above).

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