

Festival Film: Friend or Foe?

Speaking to the West and its own, *Bamako* blurs the line

Foreign filmmakers with advanced sensibilities are sometimes accused of making "festival films." Esoteric in content and/or experimental in form, these movies are conceived, so it is said, not for the enlightenment of a local film culture—or indeed, of any civilian audience—but rather to appeal to the specialized apparatus of the institutional cinephile circuit: programmers, festival jurists, academics, editors, critics.

In the abstract, this is hogwash when leveled at a strong work of art because strong art by definition endures, transcending its immediate context. In practice, the concept of the "festival film" is not entirely spurious (especially among filmmakers diluting the style of more innovative artists), although its use may say more about the agenda of those who evoke it than those of the filmmakers. Jia

Zhangke's brainy social study *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) was a critical darling in the West, and though suppressed by Chinese authorities, I would have assumed it made a significant underground impact in China. A friend just home from several years of deep involvement with Chinese filmmakers attests to their reverence of Jia while noting that almost nobody cares for *Unknown Pleasures*. Allowing for a certain amount of unspoken professional jealousy, they object on the grounds that it speaks "elsewhere"—that it is, in effect, a festival film.

So the "festival film" label is not so much a viable way to classify films than it is an expression, insufficiently examined, of the assumptions and ideologies surrounding them. All of which comes to the fore in *Bamako*, the latest by



The People's Court

New Yorker Films

Bamako

Written and directed by Abderrahmane Sissako

New Yorker Films

February 14 through 27, Film Forum

acclaimed African director Abderrahmane Sissako (*Waiting For Happiness*). Co-produced by French euros, it arrives at Film Forum heavily lauded by the usual suspects: festival love galore, including a privileged slot at Cannes and placement in the New York Film Festival; lengthy coverage in the highbrow movie magazines; strong reviews on pointy-headed film blogs. Structurally sophisticated, densely textual, and politically complex, here is, it would seem, the festival film *par excellence*.

And so it is—and that's exactly the point, driven home by Sissako and his impassioned cast by a rarefied rhetorical strategy. Drawing equally from declamatory African traditions and European modernist procedures, *Bamako* stages a kind of Third World Epic Theater. Set in a quiet corner of Bamako, the capital of Mali, events unfold in a hot, hazy, gnat-filled courtyard that serves as a makeshift courtroom. White-wigged African judges preside over the proceedings. Witnesses take the stand and testify. Counsel for the defense and the prosecution (both white men) cross-examine and make statements. The crimes are immense and abstract; the defendant can only be tried in absentia. *Bamako* puts nothing less than economic injustice on trial, arguing the guilt of the World Bank, the IMF, and the entire apparatus of First World economic domination for the crime of African oppression.

One by one, witnesses for the prosecution (a writer, a professor, a farmer) take the stand and eloquently unload woe: the injustice of debt, the consequences of privatization, the crippling effect of structural adjustment policies. If it sounds like a chore it plays out with charm, the didacticism enlivened by persuasive detail, the anger leavened by empathy. Sissako textures these dense, splendidly performed monologues with lyrical interludes and harmonizing mini-narratives, snatches of daily life that supplement and underscore the meta-legal procedural. "As social realities insist," a judge wisely notes, "we should have a short break."

Bamako brings relief from the latest round of Africa chic in the media, reversing "the flood of information that flows one way." It colors the Africa Problem from the inside out. But to whom is it addressed? Blatantly, to people like me: educated urban liberals with an appreciation of aesthetic finesse and a well-developed (if ill-informed) sense of guilt. *Bamako* embraces and upends the concept of the festival film.

I'm stirred by the bluntness of *Bamako*'s address as a formal strategy and emotional effect, yet I'm nagged by the question of how it speaks to Africans. Ultimately, 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. Curious nonetheless, I got in touch with executive producer Joslyn Barnes, to talk about the issue of *Bamako*'s impact—or lack thereof—in Africa. A book could be written from her informative, intelligent, wide-ranging reply,

which covered the film's screening history on the continent (at various festivals), the extensive grassroots campaign to promote its ideas (at conferences, via the Internet, etc.), and the humor African viewers respond to that may get lost in translation (a running motif with a surly goat gets big laughs).

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 Barnes made perfectly clear: The "average" African doesn't have the luxury of forming an opinion about *Bamako* for reasons *Bamako* directly confronts.

February 13th, 2007

by Nathan Lee