

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, *PHD*

Abderrahmane Sissako (1961-)



LIFE

Abderrahmane Sissako is a Malian-Mauritanian film director and producer. His father is from Mali and his mother from Mauritania. Sissako was born in 1961 in Kiffa, Mauritania, and grew up in Mali, where he completed his primary and secondary education. Sissako returned to Mauritania at age 19, and, thanks to a study grant, flew to the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography of Moscow to study film between 1983 and 1989. In 2023, along with fifty other activists from around the world, Sissako signed a letter calling for an end to hostilities in the war between Israeli forces and Hamas and for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. Sissako has been living in France since the early 1990s. He is married to Ethiopian filmmaker Majida Abdi.

ACHIEVEMENT

Sissako has produced a handful of shorts and documentaries, and a number of feature films, including *Life on Earth* (1998), *Waiting for Happiness* (2002), *Abouna* (2002), *Bamako* (2006), *Timbuktu* (2014), which garnered a dozen awards, and *Black Tea* (2024).

FILMOGRAPHY

Life on Earth (1998)
Waiting for Happiness (2002)
Abouna (2002)
Bamako (2006)
Timbuktu (2014)
Black Tea (2024)

THEMES

SOCIETY

Sissako critiques Africa's technological lag while also highlighting the romanticized yearning for home felt by Africans exiled in Europe. He delves into the themes of love, focusing on the human quest for intimacy and connection. Additionally, Sissako examines religion as both a sanctuary for the oppressed and a tool for ideological control.

Gender (*Timbuktu*) In *Timbuktu*, Sissako exposes the disturbing fixation of religious extremists on controlling sexuality, revealing it as a central obsession of their oppressive rule. Women become the primary targets of this brutality, subjected to public lashings for listening to music with men, imprisonment for suspected phone calls with boyfriends, and arrests for minor infractions like refusing to wear mittens. Even Satima, washing her hair in the privacy of her desert home, is ordered to veil herself, while a jihadist leader disturbingly equates a bush in the dunes with a woman's pubic hair, attempting to erase the image with gunfire. These actions underscore the extremists' relentless efforts to police and erase women's bodies, perceiving them as sinful and dangerous. This obsession with erasure extends to demands for complete bodily coverage, as seen in Abdelkrim's insistence that Satima veil her hair and the fish-seller cover her hands. Women are punished for their mere existence, their bodies viewed as catalysts for man's repressed desires. Yet, the town's madwoman, already a "fractured body" in her own words, escapes this violence, deemed harmless by the jihadists. Through these harrowing depictions, Sissako critiques the extremists' delusion, exposing their fixation on sexuality as a destructive force that dehumanizes and brutalizes women under the guise of faith.

Religion (*Timbuktu*) *Timbuktu* opens with a haunting scene of Islamic State militants chasing a deer through the desert, a metaphor for their oppressive rule. This pursuit mirrors the film's conclusion, where the fleeing deer is juxtaposed with desperate human chases: a water vendor on his motorcycle, Toya stumbling through the dunes, and Issan running after her. These sequences symbolize the militants' strategy of relentless harassment—not to exterminate, but to exhaust and break the will of the masses, forcing them into dependency on the very system that oppresses them. The fish seller's plight exemplifies this, as she must either submit to the terrorists' protection or leave Timbuktu, while young Safia is forced to seek safety under Abu Jafaar, her former captor. The jihadists, led by Abu Hassan, Abdelkrim, and another militant, are the social engineers of an oppressive system. They manipulate the people through claims of linguistic and scholarly superiority. Outsiders from Libya, they emphasize their "pure" Arabic to assert dominance, belittling locals like Omar for their dialects. This linguistic elitism reinforces their psychological control, presenting themselves as divinely guided know-it-alls whose edicts must be obeyed. Yet their detachment from reality fosters absolutism and violence, leading to mutilation and death. Sissako critiques this delusion, exposing how their self-imposed superiority and oppressive tactics devastate the community they claim to lead.

Values (*Life on Earth*) The protagonist adopts Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, reflecting on alienation and objectification abroad. This realization compels his return, not to an idealized homeland, but to Africa as it truly is, with all its hardships. Yet, beneath the surface struggles lies a resilient, vibrant community defined by solidarity and cultural depth, where even the smallest acts—like a barefoot boy playing soccer—carry profound significance. Dramane's rediscovery of Sokolo's essence mirrors the filmmaker's celebration of Africa's inherent beauty, which transcends physical allure. Nana personifies this charm—resilient, modest, and captivating—but Sokolo's beauty truly resides in its collectivism. From safeguarding rice fields to mourning losses as a community, the people of Sokolo embody compassion and unity. Dramane reconnects with these values, shedding Western attire for traditional garments and embracing a simpler, harmonious lifestyle. In this way, Sissako challenges perceptions of ugliness, framing it as a product of prejudiced vision. He invites viewers to see Africa with clarity, untainted by Western bias, and rediscover its richness, worth, and promise.

Religion (*Bamako*) Cautiously introduced into predominantly Muslim Mali in the mid-1990s, Pentecostal churches quickly proliferated, drawing in a number of Muslim adherents while gradually diminishing the influence of Catholicism—a faith that had been embraced by only 1.7% of the population. Following his

critique of the Westernization of African economies via structural adjustment, Sissako brings the narrative full circle: as these policies failed and unemployed Malians began seeking solace in Pentecostalism, an American import, a new form of dependency emerged. Sissako suggests that with the Americanization of its spiritual practices, Mali has come under total Western control, now besieged economically, culturally, and spiritually. It is especially striking given that Islam, introduced to animist Mali in the 11th century by the Moroccan Almoravids, is regarded by Malians as a core element of their cultural identity and civilization. Thus, the incursion of American Pentecostalism is depicted by the filmmaker as a hostile takeover—a systematic erosion of Malian culture and tradition at the hands of Western forces.

(*Timbuktu*) The stark contrast between the imam and the head jihadist in Timbuktu lies in their fundamentally opposing approaches to Islam and its role in society. The imam, a moderate, embodies a vision of Islam rooted in gentle persuasion and coexistence. He has never sought to assert Islam's exclusivity over other religions or to impose extreme austerity on the cultural and social life of Timbuktu's inhabitants. Historically, Islam in Timbuktu has harmonized with Mali's animist traditions, embracing practices such as music, dance, the choice to wear the veil, and even the consumption of alcohol as part of the region's cultural fabric. In contrast, the jihadists, represented by the militants of Ansar Dine, impose a rigid, extremist interpretation of Islam, wielding Kalashnikovs, whips, and stoning as tools of enforcement. They label as sins the very practices that once coexisted peacefully with Islam in Timbuktu. Sissako uses this dichotomy to highlight the destructive nature of extremist ideologies, which disrupt the syncretic and tolerant Islam that has been integral to Mali's culture since the 11th century. Through this lens, the film critiques the imposition of violence and dogma over a historically harmonious way of life.

Economy

Globalization is a central theme in Sissako's work—a subject he began exploring with his debut feature *Life on Earth* (1998) and continued to interrogate in later films like *Bamako* (2006) and *Timbuktu* (2014). Sissako critiques globalization for failing to deliver on its promise of inclusivity, exposing it as a system that privileges the West while marginalizing the most vulnerable. Sissako also blames the widening technological gap between the West and the Third World and its repercussions on the labor market on globalization. Sissako also criticizes dictatorship and the local social engineers who craft and rationalize it.

(*Life on Earth*) In the opening moments of *Life on Earth*, the film's protagonist Dramane writes a letter to his father, announcing his impending return to his native village of Sokolo. In his letter, he expresses a desire to spend the new millennium with his father—seizing the chance to film Sokolo—while casting doubt on whether the new century will bring any substantial change to Africa. Dramane's bleak outlook for the 21st century is built on a striking juxtaposition: the frantic, consumer-driven pace of the West versus the measured, languid rhythm of African life. It is during a visit to a Parisian supermarket—where Western consumerism unfolds in the endless, carefully arranged displays of goods—that he becomes acutely aware of the West's excesses, a reality that stands in stark contrast to the hardship endured in Africa. This realization compels him to return to his native land. Back in Sokolo, the signs of modern progress promised by globalization are conspicuously absent. People still travel by donkey or bicycle, roads remain overgrown and unpaved, and communications like the telephone, as well as institutions such as the post office, radio, and public library, are in a state of decay. Famine, pervasive and deadly, casts a long shadow over the community. Yet even amidst these challenges, the locals continue to dream of a better life elsewhere—often in the West—even as they remain tethered to a homeland that seems to have been left behind.

(*Bamako*) Sissako's *Bamako* critiques Africa's premature entry into the liberalization market advocated by the Bretton Woods institutions, arguing that the continent should have first cultivated a financially strong elite trained in governance. Without this foundation, Africa has lost sovereignty over strategic sectors, becoming a supplier of raw materials to the West, which returns them as overpriced manufactured goods under unequal trade terms. Sissako suggests Africa could learn from China's example, resisting external pressures to liberalize prematurely and instead fostering a middle class through improved agricultural conditions and decentralized development that retains educated youth in rural areas. The film also exposes the hypocrisy of globalization's architects, particularly in their relationship with China. While Europe warns Africa against Chinese intentions, it simultaneously imports vast quantities of Chinese goods, revealing a double standard. Sissako uses allegory to underscore these critiques, weaving in a spaghetti Western segment titled *Death in Timbuktu*, where cowboys violently overtake a village—a metaphor for the

destructive policies imposed by financial institutions. Malian children cheer for the cowboys, reflecting the deep influence of Western media propaganda that glorifies oppressors. The narrative shifts as Danny Glover's lone ranger heroically confronts the villains, symbolizing the need for Africa to reclaim its narrative and educate its youth to discern between oppression and liberation.

(Bamako) Here, Sissako critiques the World Bank and IMF's Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which were introduced in the 1980s as a supposed solution to African nations' mounting debt and economic difficulties. SAPs aimed to restructure African economies, supposedly to break the cycle of poverty and debt. They imposed measures such as privatizing state-owned enterprises, lifting government-imposed price controls on agricultural goods, devaluing currencies, cutting subsidies for domestic consumption, reducing government control over investments and trade, attracting foreign investors, and eliminating protectionist policies. The rationale behind these measures was that privatization and free-market policies would drive efficiency and stimulate economic growth. However, these programs often failed to deliver the promised benefits. Instead, they undermined the political and economic sovereignty of the indebted countries, deepening poverty and fostering social and psychological alienation. Far from offering relief, Structural Adjustment Programs exacerbated inequality and hindered sustainable development across Africa. Sissako's work poignantly illustrates these struggles, amplifying the voices of those affected by these policies. In 'Death in Timbuktu', a short spaghetti western that Sissako inserted into *Bamako* as a parallel story, four cowboys on their horses enter the Malian town of Timbuktu. They ask all the teachers and their students to line up against one of the city's mud walls. One of the cowboys declares that the city does not need four teachers. Then, one of the cowboys points his guns at the students and their teachers, turns his face away, and randomly shoots. One of the teachers falls on the ground and dies. This scene allegorizes not only the blindness with which the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have deployed their structural adjustment programs, but also the murderous nature of these programs. It is as if these financial institutions were blindly shooting at the African populations and killing Africa's future.

Communication (*Life on Earth*) In this film, Sissako explores the duality of Africa's struggle and beauty, highlighting the continent's digital divide as emblematic of broader challenges. In the village of Sokolo, communication remains agonizingly slow, with internet access still a distant dream, an emblem of Africa's isolation from global progress and development. While Western farmers use satellite-connected tractors to achieve expansive yields, Sokolo's farmers contend with drought and bird attacks, often losing their modest harvests and facing starvation. This disparity mirrors the contrast between seamless communication in the West and its rarity in Sokolo, where delays and inefficiencies are the norm. Sissako juxtaposes these challenges with the exilic African's experience of "otherness" in Europe.

JUSTICE (*violence/injustice*)

Sissako boldly confronts the controversial notion that the World Bank and its affiliate institutions operate as criminal entities—a perspective shared by many activists and African academics. Through the voices of his characters in *Bamako*, he amplifies this critique. Sissako draws a parallel between the structural violence of economic policies that devastate African societies and the overt brutality of armed extremists, challenging viewers to reconsider the far-reaching consequences of both.

(Bamako) Sissako uses the short Western film *Death in Timbuktu* as a powerful allegory for the violence and injustice inflicted on Africans by the agents of international financial institutions. The film's setting and characters are deliberately symbolic: four cowboys—quintessentially American figures—ride into the Malian town of Timbuktu, a place emblematic of remoteness and the so-called Third World. These horsemen, played by Sissako himself, alongside Palestinian Elia Suleiman, Congolese Zeka Laplaine, and Frenchman Jean-Henri Roger, represent the diverse yet complicit agents of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Despite their varied backgrounds, they share a common disdain for the people of Timbuktu, indiscriminately shooting and laughing at their victims. The allegory deepens with the reaction of the Malian children watching the film on television. They laugh and cheer for the cowboys, a chilling critique of the subtle and insidious nature of the violence perpetrated by financial institutions. Sissako suggests that this brutality is so deeply embedded and normalized that even its victims are conditioned to applaud their oppressors, rather than those who strive to liberate them. Through this layered narrative, Sissako

underscores the pervasive harm caused by these institutions, as well as the psychological toll it takes on those who suffer under their policies.

(Timbuktu) The Salafists' raid on Timbuktu unfolds as a chilling display of armed dominance. Equipped with Kalashnikovs, the jihadists exploit their military superiority to intimidate and control the frightened, defenseless population. Abdelkrim, one of the jihadists, develops an unsettling obsession with Satima, Kidane's wife. He makes unwelcome visits to her, pressing his advances, which she firmly rejects. Yet, Satima hesitates to inform her husband, fearing that doing so might provoke Abdelkrim and place Kidane in danger. Meanwhile, Nigerian terrorist Abu Jafaar targets Safia, a young woman he arrested for allegedly telephoning her boyfriend, with the intent to marry her. When Safia's mother refuses to consent to the marriage, Abu Jafaar dismisses her objections, declaring that he does not need her permission and will proceed "the bad way"—by force. True to his threat, Abu Jafaar, backed by the jihadist leader, forcibly marries Safia, ignoring her protests and her mother's anguish. This harrowing sequence underscores the jihadists' reliance on brute force and their disregard for personal agency, as they impose their will on the vulnerable inhabitants of Timbuktu. It paints a stark picture of the terror and oppression that grips the town under their rule.

POLITICS

Leaders *(Bamako)* In *Bamako*, Sissako portrays the reclaiming of speech through moments of raw expression, such as a farmer singing in Bambara about the destruction wrought by Structural Adjustment policies and a young man recounting his failed migration journey and its associated suffering. This is amplified by the frustration of a textile dyer who condemns African leaders' complicity in neo-colonial exploitation. Meanwhile, Chaka's silence and unemployment underscore the disempowerment of Malian men, while his wife, Melé, and other women resiliently step into the role of providers, revealing the social and gender upheavals caused by these policies.

PSYCHOLOGY

As the world buzzes with activity at the arrival of the new millennium, Sissako shows how Africa's remains unphased by it, far from the Y2K menace that shakes the world, a metaphor of Africa's isolation. The filmmaker also depicts how the individual, yearning for a life in Europe, retreats into a state of physical and psychological isolation and melancholy.

Isolation *(Life on Earth)* Sokolo represents an Africa disconnected from the rest of the world, where daily life unfolds untouched by modern technological advancements. Farmers collaborate to cultivate small rice fields, tirelessly battling flocks of birds to protect their modest harvests. The village photographer relies on an antique camera from a bygone era, while the tailor spends his days working on an old Singer foot-powered sewing machine. The village's sole telephone, an outdated relic, sits in a crumbling post office, making successful communication a rare stroke of luck. Sokolo remains a community of mules and carts, thus encapsulating an Africa isolated and suspended in time, as the rest of the world surges ahead into the digital age.

Sadness *(Waiting for Happiness)* In *Waiting for Happiness*, the longing for deferred happiness isolates individuals morally and physically, as they neglect the present to fixate on an uncertain future. Many characters, such as Abdallah and the migrants at the beach in Nouadhibou, await improbable departures, consumed by dreams of distant Europe—a place that exists only in absentia—while failing to appreciate the present or integrate into Mauritanian society. Abdallah, a restless young man, observes Mauritanian customs with superficial curiosity but perceives himself as a transient figure and gains nothing meaningful from his mother's culture. Similarly, Makan exists in a liminal space, no longer rooted in Mali, not fully present in Mauritania, and still far from reaching Europe, caught between longing for his past and aspirations for his future. Meanwhile, the Chinese watch dealer mourns his distant homeland and the lost affection of his mother, seeking solace in karaoke bars, while Abdallah, though near his mother, struggles to connect with her and instead looks to Nana, the Malian prostitute, as a representation of his father's homeland. Nana, in contrast, grounds herself in the present, experiencing no solitude among the men drawn to her, including Abdallah himself. The film explores the psychological state of the exilic subject, portraying melancholy, rootlessness, and nostalgia as defining forces that haunt characters like Abdallah and Makan, capturing their emotional struggles in the quest for identity and belonging.

QUEST

The notion of happiness, as presented by Sissako is an individual quest. Sissako shows that happiness is a notion always deferred, rarely achieved. Happiness, then, becomes a perpetual struggle to reach a goal that eludes the subject, a goal that he always expects, but which remains elusive.

(Life on Earth) On the eve of global New Millennium celebrations, the people of Sokolo seem more captivated by events in France—such as the preparation for festivities reported on French radio—than by their own village life. This focus reflects a widespread belief that the ideal of life lies elsewhere, beyond the Sahelian desert and the Atlantic Ocean, in Europe, where it must be pursued. The village postmaster illustrates this sentiment when speaking to Marie, Dramane's girlfriend, who calls from France expressing frustration with the cold winter and envy for Africa's warmth. He explains that for Africans, the sun is far from exotic; rather, it is a source of hardship. Its scorching rays bring drought, which burdens farmers with famine and death. This struggle is exemplified by the village tailor, who asks Dramane to help him draft a letter to his brother in France, pleading for money to save his family from starvation. As he explains, even in difficult times, life in France is never as severe as in Sokolo. This theme of seeking something beyond one's current reality, whether material or intellectual, emerges as a defining trait of the protagonists in Sissako's films, highlighting their pursuit of wellbeing or escape in unfamiliar realms.

(Waiting for Happiness) In his mother's homeland, Abdallah becomes consumed by thoughts of elsewhere, neglecting to live in the present despite his mother's efforts to ground him. She encourages him to visit his uncle, learn his native language, adopt Mauritanian clothing, and meet young Mauritanian women, but her efforts prove futile as Abdallah remains fixated on the prospect of life in Europe, disengaged from his reality. When the time comes for his departure, he makes a critical mistake, jeopardizing his journey by wearing closed shoes ill-suited for climbing the dunes. Sissako uses Abdallah's struggles and those of other characters to illustrate the desperation of their quest for happiness, as they confront insurmountable cultural barriers. Maata feels trapped as migrant smuggling overtakes traditional fishing, while the Chinese watch salesman mourns his distant mother's love. Makan loses his connection to the world when his radio becomes stranded in the desert sands. Nana, ensnared by her circumstances, resolves to survive by becoming a prostitute. Michael, the only character to pursue Europe by attempting to cross the Atlantic Ocean, tragically meets his end, his lifeless body returned to Nouadhibou by the waves, a reminder of the cost of unfulfilled dreams and unmet aspirations. Through these stories, Sissako delves into the emotional turbulence and rootlessness of his characters, capturing their longing for belonging and identity.

(Waiting for Happiness) Sissako's films do more than depict young Africans longing to reach Europe—they explore the very allure of the West's economic promise that fuels these dreams. For Michael, whose body is later found washed ashore after a harrowing attempt to cross the Atlantic, the shining Eiffel Tower stands as an emblem of Western success. With this iconic structure in view, Michael has his farewell photos taken with friends before boarding a rickety boat for his ocean crossing. His dream, like Abdallah's, is shaped by the Western media; Abdallah, for instance, leaves his mother's backyard only to watch French TV programs in the bars of Nouadhibou. The more he watches, the more his feelings of bitterness, inadequacy, and intense longing to escape intensify. Then there's Maata, a figure for whom leaving is no longer an option. His traditional fishing trade has been decimated by the exodus mindset and the rise of smugglers, leaving him no choice but to change professions in order to survive. Maata becomes an electrician, yet he lacks the expertise to secure a well-paying or even respectable position in this new field. This forced transition—from one low-paying job to another even less fulfilling one—leaves him increasingly bitter, as if he is gradually withering away. Maata's fate serves as a metaphor for Africa itself, slowly dying under the immense weight of the technological divide and systemic inequality that globalization has imposed.

Survival Africa, a land of immense resources, faces numerous challenges hindering its progress. The continent battles extreme droughts, destructive floods, soil degradation, tropical diseases, and invasive species, compounded by the indifference of its ruling elite. Sissako subtly highlights these issues through his films, portraying Africa's resilience and the unwavering determination of its people to endure and overcome adversity.

(Life on Earth) At the microphone of the local radio station hosted by Maïga, a farmer shares the hardships of working the fields and the relentless fight against natural disasters and flocks of birds that ravage their

crops. The farmers express frustration with the government, condemning its inaction and empty promises that leave them waiting in vain for support. Through Sissako's lens, the resilience of Sokolo's people shines amid their struggle to endure with limited infrastructure. The postal workers navigate customers through the challenges of an outdated and unreliable communication system. Women and children labor tirelessly to draw water manually from deep wells, while the photographer, tailor, and barber extract the maximum utility from their basic tools. Despite their tenacity, these efforts are often overshadowed by the harsh realities of famine and death—a poignant example being the men of the village returning from the cemetery after burying the tailor's child.

(Waiting for Happiness) Insofar as the desert is a place that tests human resilience, it is illustrative of the daily struggle for survival between hope and despair, beauty and horror. Sissako shows how the beautiful expanse of the desert presents daily perilous exercises for the men who live there: when they wake up to find their homes sunken under the sand, they must dig them out with shovels; or when something left at a precise spot marked with stakes cannot be found the next day. The desert's heat and sand test not only men; they also test machines, breaking them and stopping them in their tracks, like the cab at the beginning of the film. However, these various challenges have hardened the desert dwellers, sharpening their creativity, strengthening their resolve, infusing them with patience. Here, the driver has to be a handyman, unless he wants to be trapped in the desert. Here, sandals are the order of the day, to conquer the sandy dunes. And turbans and hot tea are necessary to soften the scorching rays of the sky. To survive, the outsider in the desert must be a seasoned observer and a champion at adaptability. These qualities lack in Abdallah, the main character of *Waiting for Happiness*.

RELATIONSHIP

Sissako seeks to amplify the voices of those historically silenced, particularly the rural African masses who bear the consequences of decisions made by international financial institutions. These institutions operate in dominant languages, disregarding the languages of affected communities, effectively erasing their perspectives.

(Waiting for Happiness) Abdallah's return to his homeland is driven in part by his yearning for maternal love and the ideal emotional connection it symbolizes—a bond where mother and child exist as one, both physically and emotionally. Unfortunately, this ideal is no longer attainable for Abdallah. His mother's love, once unblemished in his eyes, is now laden with reproaches, criticizing the new habits he adopted in Mali, such as smoking, neglecting his native language, and his manner of dressing. This disconnect extends beyond his mother to the motherland itself and even the Mauritanian women he encounters. Abdallah's quest for love shifts back to Mali, where his fragmented connection with Nana, the Malian prostitute, offers him hope. On his final night in Nouadhibou, Abdallah lies in Nana's bed, curling up beside her like a child seeking comfort in a mother's embrace. Yet Abdallah is not alone in this longing. The men who visit Nana's room also search for intimacy and connection, but what they find is fleeting—a transactional love exchanged for money, devoid of sincerity. In *Waiting for Happiness*, the most authentic connection might be the bond between old Maata and his young apprentice Kathra. However, this relationship is tragically cut short for Kathra when Maata passes away on the beach of Nouadhibou, leaving the child to face the loss of the only genuine love in his life.

(Timbuktu) At some point in this story, siblings from the same nation, torn apart by violent conflict, must come together to address their internal struggles and find reconciliation. Preparing for this crucial moment requires avoiding language that strips the other of their humanity, making dialogue and understanding impossible. Sissako portrays jihadists as ordinary men, no different from others. Despite their ban on worldly pleasures, they are drawn to desires like sex. Abdelkrim, the feared jihadist leader, faces admonishment from Satima, the woman he loves, while Abu Jafaar is rejected by Safia's mother—both using every possible tactic to win over the women they long for. These men, like anyone else, wrestle with doubts about the fate of their souls, as seen when one willingly accepts a good-luck talisman from Zabou, the village madwoman. Beneath their fanaticism, they harbor passions for dancing, with one secretly expressing his love for it in Zabou's backyard. They share a fondness for soccer, discussing it in hushed tones away from their leaders' ears. Ultimately, Sissako reveals them as ordinary men, manipulated into irrational and dangerous behaviors. He envisions a future where society must confront them, but until then, he resists the temptation to reduce them to mere monsters.

APPEARANCE

Sissako boldly exposes the pervasive corruption infecting not only the populace but also the political class and international financial institutions. At the heart of his critique lies the most insidious form of corruption, the intellectual and moral compromise of Africa's ruling elites.

Hypocrisy

(*Bamako*) This film points the finger at one of the greatest hypocrisies of the engineers of the new globalization: the relationship with China. The new African generation will consume more Chinese goods than did their elders, whom have been sold on the thesis of the superiority of European products. In *Bamako*, the toddler in the courtyard of Bamako, in his misspelled "Heppiness University" shirt and his shoes that squeak at every step, is an illustrative allegory of it. China has a strong presence in Africa, and China's ubiquity in Africa has never had good press from the ex-colonizers' point of view. "Avoid any rapprochement with China, for its intentions are destructive," Africans keep hearing. Europe, and to a certain extent America, shaken by the Chinese competition in Africa, spend no single day without warning Africa against the Chinese boogeyman. However, all this is a great hypocrisy, for while it demonizes China in Africa, Europe buys from China and even borrows from China's impressive \$3.3 trillion reserve. So, for example, while France is urging its former African colonies not to trust Chinese solar panels, France and Germany are massively importing cheaper Chinese products. According to EUROSTAT, the statistical office of the European Union, based in Luxembourg (LU), in 2023, France imported 96% of its solar panels from China.

(*Timbuktu*) Sissako masterfully exposes the hypocrisy of the jihadists in *Timbuktu*, revealing the stark contrast between their oppressive rules and their own actions. While they enforce brutal punishments, such as stoning a young couple to death for premarital sex, their leader Abdelkrim relentlessly pursues Satima, a married woman, ignoring her pleas for respect. Abdelkrim's duplicity extends further as he secretly smokes behind desert dunes, defying the very ban on smoking that he and his companions imposed on the town. The hypocrisy does not stop there. The jihadists forbid the townspeople from playing soccer, yet they themselves engage in fervent discussions about the European soccer league. This irony is not lost on the village madwoman, who overhears their chatter and bluntly calls them "assholes." Her sharp observation underscores the absurdity of their actions, as one jihadist even retreats to her courtyard to indulge his passion for dancing—hidden from the judgmental gaze of his peers. Through these contradictions, Sissako critiques the jihadists' moral inconsistency, exposing their oppressive regime as one built on double standards and self-serving agendas. Sissako makes a mockery of Timbuktu's alleged new masters. The jihadists are confused by their own rules because they did not think them through logically. In *Timbuktu*, the jihadists want to ban not only all vestiges of animist Mali, but also any invention of the West, considered the great devil. And yet, it is with the tools of the West - its means of communication, its vehicles and its weapons - that they are waging their "holy war" and terrorizing the inhabitants of Timbuktu. This is the great theater of the absurd, especially when the jihadists, who have banned music in Timbuktu, no longer know what to do when they hear music glorifying the Prophet; especially when the jihadist, who have banned dancing, catch one of their own dancing on the sly in the courtyard of the town's madwoman, and especially when this dancing jihadist, who used to destroy animist statues in Timbuktu with Kalashnikovs, gladly accepts an animist talisman from the woman for his protection; especially when, far from the eyes of their leaders, the jihadists, who have banned soccer, passionately discuss the European soccer they are so fond of. The jihadists' own edits make a mockery of them.

CHARACTERS

Life on Earth/La Vie sur terre (1998)

DRAMANE Dramane, the film's protagonist, embodies the spirit of the renowned poet Aimé Césaire, whose work he frequently references. His pride in his African heritage and deep appreciation for its cultural richness shine through. Dramane's character rejects the notion of passivity. Self-conscious, he chooses instead to actively engage in the progress and development of the continent, aligning his actions with a vision of empowerment and change on behalf of Africans.

Proud Dramane embodies pride in his heritage and cherishes the wisdom passed down by his father—cultural treasures he is committed to preserving. Choosing to honor these values, Dramane returns to his native village to celebrate the dawn of the new millennium among his people. Upon arriving in Sokolo, he symbolically sheds his Western attire for traditional garments, seamlessly immersing himself in the vibrant tapestry of his village's community life.

Self-conscious In the bustling supermarkets of Paris, surrounded by an overwhelming abundance of consumer goods, Dramane comes to a striking realization: his role as a consumer inadvertently sustains the economic disparity between the global North and South. He recognizes that the costly manufactured products he sees likely originate from raw materials purchased at unfairly low prices from his own people. Determined to address this injustice, Dramane returns to Sokolo and actively engages in his village's economic life—paying the boat-boy for his crossing, hiring a mechanic to fix his bicycle, gifting books to Maïga, commissioning the village tailor to sew him traditional attire, and supporting the local shop through his purchases.

Empathetic Dramane deeply connects with the struggles of his people and carries a profound sense of pride in their resilience. Drawing inspiration from the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, whose passages he references abundantly in a heartfelt letter to his father, Dramane gifts copies of Césaire's works to Maïga for the village radio library. Through these actions, he challenges the West's patronizing and biased perspective on Africa, echoing Césaire's critical stance. Following in the poet's footsteps, Dramane chooses to return and “embrace the hideousness” of his people—a community he holds in unwavering esteem.

Conscientious A conscientious individual demonstrates meticulousness, reliability, and organization, approaching tasks with exceptional care and diligence. Dramane exemplifies this quality through his unwavering moral integrity and his consistent dedication to supporting his fellow citizens in their daily lives.

DRAMANE'S FATHER Dramane's father embodies a quiet strength, speaking volumes through his composed demeanor despite his silence throughout the film. His unwavering wisdom and serene presence resonate deeply with his son, serving as a profound source of inspiration and guidance for Dramane.

Wise Dramane's letter reveals that his return to Mali is driven by a desire to preserve his father's teachings and wisdom. Though the father remains silent throughout the film, his presence speaks volumes. His actions subtly convey his depth: the rosary he beads while seated on his bed reflects his devout piety; the books he reads alongside his son hint at his intellectual curiosity and knowledge; and his Roman patrician-like posture, reclining on his bed in the courtyard, exudes an air of discernment and quiet authority. These nuances establish him as a pillar of guidance and inspiration for Dramane.

Serene Dramane's father is a figure of serene wisdom, depicted as either sitting on the edge of his bed with a rosary in hand or reclining with a book, embodying the contemplative posture of a philosopher. Throughout the film, he remains motionless and silent, an unmoving presence amidst the vibrant activity of the village. It is only at the end, when Dramane is likely preparing to return to France, that we see the father with his son in the lush greenery of a rice field. Though their conversation is inaudible, the father's calm demeanor suggests he is imparting guidance, urging Dramane to engage with the energy of Sokolo and Africa itself. This sentiment is beautifully echoed in the voiceover, quoting Césaire's poem: “We are standing now, my country and me, our hair in the wind, my tiny hand now in its enormous fist...”

Open-minded Being open-minded means recognizing that our personal experiences and perceptions are not the only ones out there, which in turn opens us up to fresh insights and learning. Dramane's father embodies this quality: his ever-present books and his thoughtful, philosopher-like demeanor reveal an enduring hunger for knowledge and a commitment to continual learning.

NANA Nana is a jovial young woman whose smile conceals a certain sadness. She takes pleasure in flirting with Dramane, but in fact she is waiting for a phone call from a man, which never arrives, and which fills her with disillusionment.

Jovial Nana is a jovial, friendly young woman with a perennial smile. She is easy to talk to and jokes with Dramane from the first moment she meets him. However, beneath Nana's cheerful exterior lies a sorrowful soul. This other side of Nana's personality appears in the photo she took on New Year's Eve, and a man in the village, who saw this image of Nana, exclaims that he never thought Nana could be so sad.

Flirtatious Nana is a flirtatious young woman. She knows that Dramane is attracted to her, and she gives him a run for his money. She offers him suggestive smiles, lingers to talk to him over his shower wall, and promises to tell him one day where she lives, keeping him on the embers of desire. But this is just a game, because Baï, not Dramane, is the one Nana is desperately seeking.

Disillusioned Determined to get back in touch with her friend Baï, Nana made repeated visits to the post office. The poor telephone connection proved to be a formidable obstacle in her quest. On top of this, Baï, for whom she had left a message asking him to call her back, never did. Betrayed by the communication system and by her friend who never bothered to make an effort towards her, Nana leaves Sokolo, disillusioned.

Agreeable An agreeable individual is friendly and sociable; someone whose company brings joy and whose conversations are a true delight. Nana's ever-present smile is both inviting and enchanting, immediately attracting Dramane from the moment he first lays eyes on her. Whenever they meet, they take their time, savoring lengthy and casual conversations.

THE UNEMPLOYED YOUTH These idle young men represent an Africa that has given up. Fascinated by the West, they forget to get involved in village life and spend their days passively dreaming of Europe. The bustling life going on around them does little to engage them.

Westernized The unemployed youth are all dressed in Western fashion. They wear jeans, button-down shirts, polo shirts and, for some, baseball hats. Their favorite channel is Radio France Inter (the most listened-to French radio station in French-speaking Africa). Their favorite program is the broadcast of the new millennium festivities in Paris. Although they are physically in Sokolo, psychologically they are in Paris, the city of their dreams.

Passive Sokolo is a busy town. In front of these unemployed young men, men and women pass by, on their way to the market or back from the fields. These young people watch life happen in Sokolo without playing a part. They spend their days drinking tea and dreaming of France. Their contribution to the social, economic and cultural life of Sokolo is nothing. They voluntarily cast themselves as outsiders to the community.

Neurotic A neurotic individual often exhibits mental instability, persistent dissatisfaction with their circumstances, and internal conflict. This personality struggle is reflected in the youth of Sokolo, who have disconnected from their environment and, with their attention fixed on the radio, feverishly track events in France while yearning for a life beyond their homeland.

Waiting for Happiness/Heremakono (2002)

MAATA Maata is an irritable old man, disillusioned by his new profession. However, Maata is full of affection for the little orphan he has taken under his wing as an apprentice electrician. Maata's depression drives him to death

Irritable Maata is a character irritated very easily. He scolds Khatra because the child sings a French song that he cannot understand. He gets irritated because Khatra plays on the rooftops when he has forbidden him to do so. He scolds Khatra because the little apprentice is earning money, which he prefers to keep with him rather than entrust him. But all this is done in good faith, because deep down, Maata loves Khatra.

Affectionate Maata is a very affectionate character. The film does not say whether he is the grandfather of his little apprentice Khatra, but he could well be, by the affection he shows the child, which goes beyond the simple relationship of master and apprentice. Maata takes the child in, tells him stories in the evenings, gives him advice for life and teaches him a trade so that he can earn a living tomorrow. Maata is a much-needed loving figure for the little orphan.

Depressed Maata is a fisherman, who became an electrician when the fishing trade gave way to migrant smuggling. Maata dislikes his job. He feels trapped in it, and it saddens him. Little Khatra wants to hear stories about Maata's days as a fisherman, but the old man tells him he hates talking about those nostalgic days. Maata's sadness is compounded by the fact that he is not always successful at his new trade. His persistence in getting a light bulb to work on a faulty electrical network makes him doubt his own abilities and stains his pride.

KHATRA Khatra is a playful boy who takes life in stride. He is always humming a French song and playing on the rooftops, which exasperates his old master. He teases his master and laughs at Abdallah's clumsiness. He is also a stubborn child who does as he pleases, but he knows exactly the path he wants to take in life.

Playful Khatra is a playful child. He is introduced to us, carrying around his neck his slingshot that never leaves his side, playing and singing on the rooftops of his neighborhood and being scolded by his old master Maata for it. The child is always cheerful and quick with a joke, teasing his old master, telling him that he is afraid of death, and laughing at Abdallah's difficulties in pronouncing the Hassaniya words he teaches him.

Stubborn Khatra is a bit of a rebel at heart. The child is not always willing to follow his master's advice. His master tells him not to play on rooftops, but he does. His master forbids him to sing the French nursery rhyme he likes to hum, but Khatra starts singing again as soon as he is out of old Maata's sight. When the master dies, and Khatra realizes that it was the electrical circuit that was faulty and not his master's work, he takes out his slingshot and smashes the streetlight bulbs to express his anger.

Determined Khatra is a very determined child, who has a clear idea of what he wants to do when he grows up: he wants to be an electrician. When Maata, angry, scolds him and asks him what he would become without him, Khatra replies, "an electrician". Already projecting himself into this profession, Khatra asks the electrical equipment salesman to save the overall he wears for when he grows up. In the end, Khatra takes over his master's difficult light bulb, buys himself an overall in his own size, and takes over his old master's job when the latter dies.

ABDALLAH Abdallah is a character alienated from his mother's culture, having lived too long in his father's country. He observes Mauritanian customs with a detached air non-participation. This causes him to find himself emotionally and physically isolated.

Alienated Abdallah is a character who has become alienated from his maternal heritage. Having lived most of his life in his father's country, Mali, Abdallah understands neither his mother tongue, Hassaniya, nor the way Mauritanians dress. In Mauritania, Abdallah is an outsider. His efforts to integrate into Mauritanian culture are clumsy and unproductive.

Passive Abdallah is a curious character. However, his curiosity is passive. Abdallah spends hours observing Malian behavior, but he does so with a kind of detachment and passivity, without really participating in Mauritanian daily life. It is as if he were a researcher, watching his subjects without deigning to interfere in their lives. The difference here is that Abdallah learns nothing from his assiduous observations.

Lonely Abdallah is a lonely character. He has no strong ties with Mauritanians. He finds their habits curious and bizarre, when they are not the ones who find him bizarre and ridicule him. Nana the Malian understands him better, and he tries to get closer to her from both a purely social and sexual standpoint. However, the prostitute's profession prevents him from having any real moment of intimacy with her. Their encounters are always interrupted by her customers.

Close-minded A closed-minded individual resists new experiences and is often opposed to any form of change. Abdallah exemplifies this attitude, having fixated on France as his sole aspiration, dismissing all else as unworthy of consideration. He perceives Africa and its traditions as obstacles, choosing to distance himself from them entirely.

Bamako (The Court) (2006)

MELE Melé is a determined and resourceful woman who boldly challenges traditional norms by singing in a bar to provide for her unemployed husband. Despite her efforts and resilience, she faces misunderstanding and rejection from both her husband and her in-laws, who respond to her actions by isolating her rather than appreciating her sacrifices.

Resilient Through Melé and the other women of Bamako, the filmmaker highlights the unwavering strength and ingenuity of African women, who have consistently risen above hardship to protect their families. Faced with Chaka's unemployment as a former railway worker, Melé courageously steps into the role of provider, even at the cost of societal disapproval from her husband and in-laws. Her decision to sing in cabarets at night reflects her determination to ensure her family's survival, showcasing the resilience that defines her character and the broader community of women she represents.

Isolated Melé's decision to sing in cabarets is met with disapproval from her husband Chaka and her in-laws, who ostracize her completely, leaving her to grapple with profound loneliness. In her isolation, Melé confides to Chaka her desire to visit her mother in Senegal, taking their daughter with her. However, Chaka's response is cold—he allows her to go but denies her the companionship of their daughter, amplifying her sense of solitude. Tragically, Chaka later takes his own life, an act that appears, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to seal Melé's isolation even further, leaving her to bear the weight of grief and alienation.

CHAKA Struggling with the loss of his job and wounded pride as he watches his wife, Melé, earn a living by singing in bars, Chaka clings to the distant dream of working in an Israeli embassy—an institution that does not even exist in Mali. However, as his hopes fade and the weight of his frustrations grows unbearable, Chaka ultimately succumbs to despair, taking his own life and leaving behind a somber legacy of unfulfilled aspirations.

Frustrated Chaka is a man frustrated by the situation he and his compatriots are facing as a result of the intervention of financial institutions in his country's political life. He attends the trial against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund without really being involved; he is silent, almost disillusioned. He is even more disheartened to see his wife, Melé, go out in the wee hours of the morning, only to return late at night from her work in the bars.

Diminished Chaka has a hard time coping with the loss of his job. He feels diminished and devalued, and this makes him withdraw into himself and become a stranger to his wife. In Mali's patriarchal society, men are supposed to be the breadwinners of the family. The fact that his wife, by force of circumstance, plays this role reduces him to a level he finds hard to accept.

Disillusioned There was a time when Chaka hoped to rise above his difficulties. He was learning Hebrew in order to become a security guard should an Israeli embassy open in Bamako. Chaka seems to have lost all hope in this prospect, turning instead to the promises of an evangelical preacher. When these promises fail to materialize, Chaka, disillusioned, takes his own life.

MR RAPPAPORT Rappaport stands out as a character of remarkable zeal, particularly when passionately advocating for his case. His defense of financial institutions and his vision of an ideal, all-encompassing society reflect his fervent commitment, though his arguments at times verge on naïveté. Amid the gravity of the high-stakes court proceedings, Mr. Rappaport also brings a subtle comedic touch, adding a layer of levity to the intense atmosphere.

Passionate Rappaport seems extremely convinced of the cause he is defending. And he defends it with a passion that challenges the decorum of the courtroom, and which must be reined in by the judges on more than one occasion. At times, Rappaport's passion and his rejoinder to the witnesses display a certain insensitivity for the plight of the Malian people.

Naïve Rappaport appeals to the witnesses, telling them that what is at the root of Mali's problems is, to some extent, the same cause that is degrading the business environment in Europe, that is, corruption. He

calls on Malians to unite with the rest of the world to fight corruption. What Rappaport fails to recognize is that corruption is the organizing structure of the neoliberal policy, and that this policy is supported by a Western military system that is loyal to it and ready to intervene on its behalf in Africa.

Comical With the character of Rappaport, Sissako introduces a little humor into his otherwise very tragic docudrama. The scene of Rappaport arguing with the counterfeiter about the inauthenticity of the sunglasses he tries on during the short recess is hilarious. At one point during the recess, while Rappaport is on the phone, a ram charges him repeatedly. The lawyer, who is at first startled, realizes that the belligerent animal's leash is too short to endanger him and resumes his telephone call at a taunting distance from the ram.

Timbuktu (2014)

KIDANE Kidane is a loving and devoted man, yet his inflated sense of pride and impulsive nature often cloud his judgment. His inability to heed Satima's advice ultimately proves disastrous, costing both him and his wife their lives. Tragically, Kidane's tendency to act first and think later leaves their daughter Toya orphaned, a heartbreaking consequence of his recklessness.

Affectionate Kidane is a loving husband to his wife, Satima, and a caring father to his daughter, Toya, and Issan, the little orphan he has adopted. Their days are filled with cheerful conversations and their evenings with songs to the glory of Allah, accompanied by the sounds of Kidane's guitar. Kidane never leaves home without kissing his daughter and giving his wife a discreet look of love. He is very fond of Issan, to whom he promises the calf of his favorite pregnant cow. Unfortunately, the cow is killed by the fisherman.

Proud When Kidane learns that the fisherman has killed his favorite cow, the shepherd grabs his pistol, telling his wife that "the humiliation must stop." Clearly, the fisherman suffers just as much humiliation at the hands of the jihadists as Kidane. So, it is not the humiliation from the fisherman that Kidane is talking about, but the incessant humiliation from the jihadist, this trampling of his pride, of which the fisherman's act is just the last straw. Kidane is a man with a wounded pride, who seeks redress, and who in the process meets with death.

Impulsive Kidane grabs his pistol to go and confront the fisherman who killed his favorite cow. Satima, his wife, advises him to leave his gun at home. In his anger, Kidane ignores his wife's advice. He feels that he has been humiliated too many times, and that the fisherman's act demands reparation. Kidane's impetuosity destabilizes the family when he kills the fisherman. He himself is condemned to death. His wife, running towards him, is killed along with him, making their daughter, Toya, an orphan.

SATIMA Satima, despite seldom leaving the confines of her tent, possesses a keen awareness of the peril encircling her family. She cautions her husband, Kidane, against the looming threats, but her warnings go unheeded. Kidane's dismissal of her advice leads him to make impulsive decisions that ultimately result in his sentencing to death. In a profound act of loyalty and devotion, Satima chooses to share her husband's fate, embracing the tragic path alongside him.

Perceptive Satima is a very insightful woman. She seems to be more aware than her husband of the danger of their situation in Timbuktu. With the unexpected visits from the jihadist Abdelkrim, who makes improper advances at her, and their isolation since their nomadic neighbors folded up their tents and fled, she sees nothing positive on the horizon. She begs her husband to do as their former neighbors did and leave. However, he is confident that the situation will improve. In the end, Satima's fears come true, as both she and her husband are killed.

Loyal Satima remained loyal to her husband until the day they both died. She never yielded to Abdelkrim's advances, even reminding him that she was a married woman, and that it was indecent of him to pursue her. When she realized that her husband was condemned to death, and that Abdelkrim would now seek to marry her, she took an action she knew would also lead to her death: she ran into his arms, causing the jihadists to riddle them both with bullets.

ABDELKRIM Abdelkrim is portrayed as a hypocritical and arrogant figure, embodying the very flaws he criticizes in others. His sense of self-importance drives him to overstep boundaries, particularly by asserting control over Satima's private life. What makes Abdelkrim truly unsettling is the unpredictability of his temperament, leaving those around him constantly on edge, unsure of when his mood might shift.

Hypocrite Abdelkrim is a great hypocrite. He would have severely punished anyone else in the name of the *Qur'an* for the actions he himself undertakes. He harasses and pursues a married woman, while for such a crime the inhabitants of Timbuktu are stoned to death. He smokes when smoking is forbidden by the jihadists, of whom he is one of the leaders. His actions contradict the principles he preaches.

Arrogant Abdelkrim is an arrogant man. He invites himself to Kidane's tent in Kidane's absence, trying to seduce Kidane's wife, Satima. As if he were within his rights at Satima's home, he demands that the young woman, who is washing her hair in the privacy of her own home, cover her hair. Satima reminds him that it is her home, and that he was not invited.

Unpredictable Abdelkrim is a volatile and impulsive character, whose mood swings keep both those around him and the audience in constant suspense. His facial tics, subtle muscle twitches, and moments of nervous irritation underscore his unpredictable nature, leaving an unsettling sense of potential eruption at any moment. His impatience and temper are illustrated by acts like shaving down a thicket in the dunes with his Kalashnikov—a reaction to a trivial annoyance. When his driver daringly mocks him, pointing out his lack of omniscience or the fact that everyone knows he hides to smoke, Abdelkrim's calm but reproachful gaze carries an ominous weight, leaving the viewer apprehensive for the driver's fate.