

# FILM REVIEW ESSAY

## 30 Years of the African Film Festival, Inc.

On Friday April 2, 1993, the front page of the Weekend section of the *New York Times* was historic. It featured a half-page photo of the beautiful enigmatic actress of *Yeelen*, Souleymane Cissé's mystic tale of a power struggle between two magicians, illustrating an article titled "Out of Africa: A Luminous World of Films." The article reviewed the first New York African Film Festival (NYAFF), and it was like opening up to a continent whose voices had been rarely heard or accessible outside of Africa. Africans were reclaiming their own histories and telling them in their own words through the medium of cinema. Until that time, few African films had been shown in New York's theaters.

Since the momentous inception of NYAFF in 1993, and over its parent organization African Film Festival, Inc.'s (AFF) thirty-year existence, the event has evolved into a multifaceted resource center; the flagship festival has expanded to encompass many other areas in terms of outreach and content.

AFF's yearly flagship program, NYAFF, is a staple of New York City life that cinephiles and scholars alike anticipate, as it allows for rich and rewarding interaction between filmmakers, the industries, and an eager public. One of AFF's important missions is to give guest filmmakers a warm and informal welcome, plus exposure for their films that goes beyond the festival itself.

Many fiction films shown at the festival have entertained and impacted the public over the years, introducing talented directors and adding up to a rich gallery of memorable portraits and intriguing narratives. The haunting story of reconciliation at the end of apartheid in *Forgiveness* (2004), the strong, remarkable women confronted with the many risks of their trade in Apolline Traoré's *Borders* (2017), and Ido Cedric's endearing fanciful boy portrayed in *Twaaga* (2013), among many others, have brought us closer to understanding the complexities of the continent and its people.

From its beginnings, there has been a recurrent urgency in African cinema to capture the essence of Africa, to hold on to a muddled past, and to construct or reconstruct its history. At the seventeenth festival, AFF screened *Kongo: Grand Illusion* (2010), in which Daniel Cattier used animation and never seen before colonial footage to examine the known or unsung

heroes who built the Congo in the earlier part of the twentieth century. The involvement of Cuban soldiers with African insurgencies was chronicled by Jihan el Tahri in *Cuba: An African Odyssey* (2008). In *All About Darfur* (2000), ordinary Sudanese confide to filmmaker Taghreed Elsanhoury, who, like many other directors, has made a significant contribution toward informing and deepening our knowledge of African history and politics.

In 2010, as AFF celebrated fifty years of the independence of African nations, it turned to a very unlikely source: the Soviet film archives in Moscow. Filmed at the time with remarkable state of the art equipment, the footage focused on themes of daily life and achievements of villagers, with a keen interest in their art and customs. The Russian archives also documented the First World Festival of Black Art in 1966 in Dakar, “African Rhythmus.” This is the only extensive account we have of that event, apart from William Greaves’s poetic journey (First World Festival of Negro Arts).

From the Sahel region, which is considered the birthplace of African cinema and where many seminal works were created, came a film by Rahmatou Keita, *Al Leessi...An African Actress* (2004), which is based on the enduring legend that each African filmmaker had, at some point, wanted to make a Western movie. See, for instance, *Hyenas* (1992) by Djibril Diop Mambety who, although he based his story on a play by Dürrematt, used very traditional hallmarks of the Western movie: the train station in the middle of nowhere, the sandy landscape, the small sleepy town, the ill-famed saloon. Also in this vein, one must mention Moussa Touré’s *TGV* (1997) a movie definitely pointing to John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, but with an unmistakable African touch.

Many directors’s careers were jumpstarted at the festival. When Alain Gomis introduced his recent film *Felicite* at the fifty-fifth presentation of the prestigious New York Film Festival in 2017, he reminisced about the sixth NYAFF in 2000. He marveled that he was given the opportunity, as the unknown guest author of a twelve-minute short film, to interact with the likes of Miriam Makeba, Andrew Dosunmu, and Fanta Nacro, all of whom were guests at the festival that year.

As for Abderrahmane Sissako, celebrated for his award-winning films, in particular *Timbuktu* (2014), he was invited as an intense young man to the second festival to showcase his black and white film *October* (1992), which was made at the time of his graduation from Moscow’s VGIK (Federal State Film Institute).

Of course, Ousmane Sembene was a frequent and honored guest. There is one image of his last visit after *Moolaadé* had won him international acclaim, which encapsulates the evolution of African cinema over the years. He sat very quietly as a group of young, female, anglophone filmmakers vehemently discussed female genital mutilation (the theme of the film). He looked puzzled and satisfied at the same time. In a way, he had achieved his goal. The world was listening to Africa, and Africa was talking to Africa. Indeed, Sembene had a Pan-African conception of cinema. He shot *Moolaadé* in a small village in Burkina Faso, with an international African crew. He was eighty-two years old at the time, which demonstrates not only his exceptional

resilience, but also a keen understanding of the potential of Pan-African exchanges.

In all these years, the AFF has remained attuned to the changing world in which cinema evolved, heeding the transformation of the industry and documenting the trends, from storytelling to a more focused social discourse; from a male dominated field to an explosion of young talents overwhelmingly female; from francophone industry to anglophone. Of course, digitalization transformed cinema, making it more accessible, which was reflected in the number and quality of films being produced each year, in particular docudramas. These blur in some ways the distinction between fiction and reality, as directors imbue true events about real characters with a unique artistic perspective. One interesting example among many is Ingrid Martens' *Africa Shafted Under One Roof* (2011), filmed entirely in an elevator where immigrants to South Africa from other African countries interact daily.

In recent years, the NYAFF has increasingly given a platform to young filmmakers, second generation or based outside Africa. The world they live in informs their works, but they also feel the attraction of the continent, and many return to explore or revisit their roots, as in Rosine Mbakam's *The Two Faces of the Bamileke Woman*, or the films of Akosua Adoma Owusu, Mamadou D'ia, Ekwa Msangi, and others. The festival has offered them support, highlighting at the same time their debt to those directors who defined African cinema. Classic works are also regularly screened at the festival. Safi Faye, Jean-Marie Téno, and Souleymane Cissé were guests of the twenty-sixth festival, which was especially dedicated to the pioneers.

The AFF has brought to U.S. audiences aesthetically and topically challenging and innovative works for thirty years, and it will continue to do so. It is also known for its momentous year-round outreach programs (in-school programs, outdoor screenings, workshops, and traveling series), which, from its very inception, included a partnership with community-based cultural institutions and a wide array of other organizations. It has also involved the participation of interdisciplinary artists who are regular guests, especially of its yearly Town Hall meetings, where artists from all disciplines weave a broader picture of what is transforming Africa and its diaspora today. Some of the guests and supporters include choreographer Nora Chipaumire, Harry Belafonte, Wolye Soninka, singer Angelique Kidjo, poet Saul Williams, and activist Kathleen Cleaver.

As tragic as it is, Covid-19 has given the AFF the impetus to reflect on its role and international reach. The AFF has focused its efforts on revamping its website, making its extensive data base more readily available to filmmakers, critics, scholars, film buffs, and audiences around the world. Additionally, its newsletter offers live streaming of films from past editions, easy access to interviews, reviews, and much more.

As for the twenty-seventh festival, it screened virtually from December 2–6, 2020 in the Film at Lincoln Center Virtual Cinema with a welcome spotlight on the cinema of two nations: Nigeria and the Sudan. Regardless of

Figure 1. 27th New York African Film Festival Digital Flyer



the circumstances, the AFF will continue to find ways to promote African cinema while connecting with audiences worldwide.

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