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**Abderrahmane Sissako** (dir), **Kessen Tall** (screenplay) *Timbuktu* 2014.  
Mauritania & France. 97 min

Reviewed by Amadou Fofana, Willamette University

Abderrahmane Sissako's film, *Timbuktu*, portrays life in occupied Timbuktu. It tells several intersecting stories of its inhabitants caught under an extremist Islamic regime, such as Kidane, a cattle herder, and his family who live outside of the city. Kidane is arrested for killing Amadou, a local fisherman, during a dispute. Kidane is then apprehended by the jihadists and taken to the city for trial. The jihadist court sentences Kidane to pay 40 cows to his victim's family. Since he obviously cannot pay this penalty, he is condemned to death for failing to do so. His wife, Satima, appears at his execution with a pistol, and although Kidane tries to subdue her, their actions are seen as an attempted escape. They are both killed.

During the time between Kidane's sentencing and his eventual execution, the film exposes various aspects of daily life in Timbuktu. It is a tense city with armed jihadists patrolling day and night to enforce ever more strict prohibitions on individual liberties. Music and singing are forbidden, women forced to wear socks and gloves, marriage imposed, and ordinary people deemed guilty of breaking the jihadists' code of conduct are flogged or stoned to death. The first thirty minutes of the film serve to primarily establish these simmering tensions resulting from the jihadists' control over Timbuktu and the violence of their methods.

The film portrays the jihadist group as ignorant and senseless, as they dictate new rules and attitudes and demand cooperation from the local people. Their ignorance is illustrated when the Imam confronts a group of them in the Djingareyber mosque for keeping their shoes on and carrying machine guns because, as they say, "we are in a jihad." In another scene, the Imam and the jihadist leader engage in a telling debate on the philosophy and practice of Islam and the jihad. The debate reveals the fundamental contrast of the tolerant and inclusive Islam that has been practiced in Timbuktu for centuries against the uncompromising and repressive Islam of the new invaders. The Imam's reaction to the jihadists' intrusion in the mosque eloquently summarizes their opposing, and most evidently, irreconcilable views: "Here in Timbuktu, he who dedicates himself to religion, uses his head and not his weapons."

Notably, *Timbuktu* also highlights the fearlessness of women who consistently defy the new power holders of Timbuktu by refusing to play by their rules: from a fish seller who would rather have her hands cut off than wear gloves, to the seemingly insane Zabou who calls the jihadists names and walks around without a head scarf. Satima epitomizes silent subversion when she sits outside her tent washing her hair only to be told by the jihadist leader to cover it. She responds with verve, telling him not to look if he does not want to see and proceeds to send him away. One of the most touching instances of female resistance, however, is when a beautiful

singer bursts into a song while being whipped. When facing public lashing for no reason other than singing and socializing with the opposite sex, she sings the very same song that caused her punishment. While violence is being inflicted on her body, she responds with verbal defiance. She refuses to be silenced and uses her only weapon - her voice - to counter senseless brutality.

To many in the west Timbuktu is just a name for a distant and remote place on the edge of the earth, and perhaps even fictitious. Sissako's film pulls Timbuktu out of the realm of the imaginary and makes it an accessible and even proximate reality. *Timbuktu* is an invitation to the viewer to reflect, and to act. Although the film addresses the unfortunate realities and struggles faced under an extremist regime, it is not too graphic to watch. In fact, Sissako has been critiqued for his somewhat subdued portrayal of the jihadists who are not as demonized as they normally are in the media. Sissako has managed to make a film about intense violence without eliciting gratuitous anxiety and trauma. This is not to say that some parts are not hard to watch, but rather that there is far worse out there.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Sissako is one of the finest African filmmakers to date. His *Timbuktu* is masterfully shot, with excellent cinematography, and good performances even on the part of the first time actors, including the Tuareg family. Though the film does not do justice to the full complexity of the religious, political, and ethnic issues and identities that have precipitated the fall of Timbuktu in to the hands of the jihadists in the first place, *Timbuktu* is well worth watching.

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