

Cinematic Economies of the Hypercontemporary in Haroun and Sissako

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Two pre-millennial films, released just one year apart, set the scene for this chapter on narrative and economic understandings of post-millennial contemporaneity in Francophone Africa. I focus in this chapter on recent cinematic work by Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauritania) and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun (Chad), but two of their films from before the turn of the century signal the set of anxieties and narrative problems I want to examine here. The first of these films is Sissako's *La vie sur terre* (*Life on Earth*, 1998): This is a fictionalized documentary dealing with the return of a middle-aged man (played by Sissako himself) from France to his father's village in rural Mali. The man, Dramane, arrives in the run-up to the new millennium, and as he cycles through the dusty streets we see the village's residents going about their everyday lives while news bulletins from Radio France Internationale (RFI) relay the excitement of new year's celebrations taking place in other parts of the world. The lack of obvious mise-en-scène in Sissako's shots communicates to viewers a sense of documentary immediacy, drawing us into the everyday as a cinematic narrative category. At the same time, ambiguous voice-over quotations from Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) about colonial marginalization suggest a transitional cultural-political context that is no longer "postcolonial" in the conventional sense, but that is not yet fully millennial, either.

La vie sur terre communicates Mali's uneven integration into the global cultural and economic landscape by playing with the uncertainty of its ill-defined historical moment; the film's sense of immediacy nonetheless gives us to understand that we are on the cusp of a new understanding of the present that has yet to take shape. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), my second filmic example,

offers a similar narrative of homecoming: Haroun plays himself as a fictional character who returns after a long absence to his native Chad following the death of his mother. *Bye Bye Africa*, like *La vie sur terre*, weaves fiction into a documentary aesthetic, and we watch Haroun's character film street scenes, record interviews with producers and aspiring actors, and gather footage for a new film that, as it turns out, may or may not be the one we are actually watching. *Bye Bye Africa* evokes a sense of anxiety akin to the one we witness in Sissako's film: Haroun's return to Chad also signals a transitional moment, one whose attendant uncertainty causes the director to inquire ceaselessly about the economic future of big-screen African cinema, its viability in Chad's fragile post-conflict society, and its desirability when faced with competition from low-rent video clubs.¹ *Bye Bye Africa* asks, how can cinema mark this transition and communicate its urgency as well as its most pressing filmic stakes? Like *La vie sur terre*, this film links African cultural production with cinematic attempts to define and characterize the immediacy of a cultural moment that overlaps with the turn of the new millennium.

These films situate global economics and the future of film in Africa within localized and intensely felt experiences of the now; they bespeak a desire to record, imagine, and narrativize the actuality of millennial transitions. At the same time, they indicate a desire to periodize and to outline changing experiences of historical time in the face of the "promise" offered by the new century, as Alain Badiou has put it (2007, p. 17). Building on the themes explored and questions raised by these early-millennial films, in this chapter I turn to Haroun's and Sissako's post-millennial cinematic archive in order to investigate the development of their cinematic approaches to an aesthetic economy of immediacy. How do their post-millennial films – specifically those about economics and war – communicate "now-ness" to spectators? In what ways do Haroun and Sissako endow everyday life with a current of urgency? How do they visualize and narrativize the everyday as a cinematic category that has an aesthetics as well as a political economy? Relatedly, but more generally, how do filmic narratives designate historical periods and cultural moments, and how does film attribute narrative value to contemporaneity as a post-millennial aesthetic category? These are the interrelated questions I take up in this chapter, and the responses Haroun and Sissako propose to them comprise what I call cinematic economies of the hypercontemporary. This formulation references how a thematics of urgent contemporaneity intersects with visualizations of warsapes, post-millennial capitalism, and with new narrative strategies designed to express in film emerging relations to immediacy. The economic here refers to the ways in which cinematic narratives thematize and visualize political economy; more metaphorically, it also refers to modes of attributing value to key elements of filmic narrative.

The hypercontemporary refers not just to narrative experiences of "now-ness," but more importantly, as the prefix "hyper-" suggests, to the fact that these experiences can possess a surfeit of intensity that speaks to a broader historical moment. As Paul Rabinow (2008) reminds us in his work on "the anthropology of the

contemporary,” the now is not necessarily synonymous or coterminous with “the new,” and for him the contemporary is the shifting terrain upon which “older and newer elements” interact and are negotiated (2008, pp. 2–3). My reading of the hypercontemporary here focuses on forms of cinematic periodization, but Rabinow’s reminder helpfully points toward the co-presence of contrasting experiences of temporality within an emerging historical moment. This co-presence helps explain why the now appears in multiple forms in the films I study here. On the one hand, cinema expresses the now thematically: For example, in this chapter’s first section I examine how economic urgency is woven into filmic narratives of everyday life, and Sissako’s *La vie sur terre* takes as its central theme the very moments marking the changeover from one millennium to the next. On the other hand, the idea of the now goes beyond the realm of the thematic and also enters into questions of cinematic form. Thus, certain films slow time down or even seem to pause it completely (as in Sissako’s 2014 film, *Timbuktu*), drawing out the now into an expanded temporal moment, whereas others condense the now into an increasingly saturated immediacy, heightening the tension and intensity of “real time.” What these disparate renderings of the now have in common is that each one also articulates and accounts for a new historical moment; these related but distinct expressions of temporal intensity and periodization are what make up the hypercontemporary.

We can consider several brief examples from Haroun and Sissako that illustrate more concretely what the hypercontemporary looks like in the context of cinematic narratives of everyday life. In *La vie sur terre*, for instance, Sissako’s camera lingers in six different shots on a group of men lounging in chairs and listening to the radio (presumably RFI) in the little shade offered by a building. These shots punctuate his hour-long film, and the men do little more than inch their chairs closer to the building as their strip of shade grows smaller. They communicate intense feelings of boredom that contrast sharply with the foreign news bulletins excitedly describing how the world plans to celebrate the arrival of the year 2000. This set of shots pulls viewers at once into the excruciating actuality of the men’s boredom and into a globalized millennial moment that seems to have left this rural Malian village behind. Filming boredom, that most unproductive of conditions, is actually a productive mode of communicating now-ness since the viewer comes to feel the weight of useless instants all the more acutely as they connect to the broader articulation of a new post-millennial historical period. Numerous shots of everyday labor in Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006) have a similar function: As African civil society faces off against global financial institutions in a mock trial, daily life proceeds unimpeded in the neighborhood where the film is set and shots of a local open-air dyeworks bring the trial’s political-economic rhetoric into highly localized focus. Labor both compresses and stretches transitional time in Haroun’s *Daratt* (2006): The young Atim begins a baker’s apprenticeship with Nassara, the man who killed his father during Chad’s civil war. Sequences of the two preparing bread, sweating from their painstaking efforts, extend wordlessly as the political

time of post-conflict reconciliation seeps into the elongated moments of Haroun's shots. These examples convey to viewers intense cinematic experiences of the now while, at the same time, pointing to and defining much broader cultural moments that coalesce into a post-millennial period whose contemporaneity, as I show in what follows, becomes an especially pressing problem for cinematic narrative.

Manthia Diawara has grouped Haroun and Sissako together with other African directors (Serge Coelo, Gahité Fofana) in what he calls the Arte Wave of new African filmmaking (2010, p. 100). Arte is the French and German television network that has produced and funded many of Haroun's and Sissako's films, allowing them free rein to experiment with *essayiste* (aestheticized, almost literary) approaches to cinema with little regard for the immediacy of popular acclaim.² The films by Haroun and Sissako I examine here bring a sense of popular urgency to everyday life even if they are not distributed or produced in the same way as, say, Nollywood video films. Other scholars have highlighted Sissako's engagements with globalization and economics, pointing to the contested "rationality" of structural adjustment in *Bamako* (Olaniyan, 2008) and to this film's difficulties in communicating an economic didacticism from an African perspective (Limbu 2013, p. 48).³ Critics engaging with Haroun's work have tended to emphasize corporeal aestheticism, that is, the way bodies create new forms of cinematic language (Barlet 2011) or new intersections of masculinity and postcolonial nationalism (Williams, 2014). My emphasis here diverges from this work because it situates political economy, warsapes, and corporeality as thematics that gain cinematic salience through the intensity of temporal compression and through a periodizing impulse that urgently traces the outlines of the post-millennial now. As such, the perspective I articulate in this chapter considers how cinematic experiences of new temporalities generate economic visions of contemporaneity.

Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (2001) periodize millennial economic ideologies by turning to the eschatological (but not apocalyptic) metaphor of capitalism's "Second Coming" to describe how capitalism in the early twenty-first century is both resolutely contemporary and "salvific, even magical" (p. 2). They refer to "the odd coupling ... of the legalistic with the libertarian; constitutionality with deregulation; hyperrationalization with the exuberant spread of innovative occult practices and money magic, pyramid schemes and prosperity gospels..." and point toward "a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered" (p. 2). The periodizing impulses of Haroun and Sissako I examine here chronologically overlap with those of the Comaroffs. But, in the films I examine here, they drain millennial capitalism of its "salvific" potential (notwithstanding *Bamako's* sequence set in a charismatic Christian church) and position it as a temporal problem whose weighty immediacy can be produced and communicated cinematically. For Haroun and Sissako, millennial capitalism's paradoxical characteristics yield temporal uncertainty rather than salvation, and it is the task of cinema to visualize and narrativize negotiations in everyday life of this emergent contemporaneity.

In the following section of this chapter, I turn to a set of films that thematize the temporal dimensions of post-millennial economic precarity. In these films, Haroun and Sissako combine cinematic storytelling with political economy, bringing ideological debates about new social relations into the realm of everyday life and the opportunities for narrative immediacy it provides. These debates may flare up explicitly, as in *Bamako*, or they may drive a given narrative from below the surface, as in Haroun's *Grigris* (2013), but, in all the examples I draw on, economics plays an outsized role in (over)determining visualizations of contemporary uncertainty. The next section deals with cinematic warscapes: Here I consider how conflict introduces new understandings of the now into daily life and how the warscape spurs cinematic periodizing impulses. The films I approach in this section deal less obviously with a thematics of political economy, but they attribute value to narrative immediacy in ways that complement the forms of periodization at work in the previous, "economic" set of films.

Economic Precarity and Everyday Urgency

I would like to begin by proceeding along three axes that nonetheless speak to each other: In an important set of films, debt, development, and the pervasive unease of economic precarity function as thematic lynchpins holding together more abstract economic debates and stories about everyday life. The films comprising this series of texts are Sissako's *Le rêve de Tiya* (*Tiya's Dream*, 2008), *La vie sur terre* (1998), and *Bamako* (2006); as well as Haroun's *Grigris* (2013). Taken alongside one another, these films help us understand how debt and development can be translated as economic concepts into the temporality of the hypercontemporary. The cinematic expression of these ideas and their attendant ideologies takes on special salience through stories of economic precarity that double as visual narratives of urgency.

Sissako's *Le rêve de Tiya* offers a particularly striking example of how these processes of translation and expression play out on screen. This short, roughly ten-minute film is part of a longer anthology called *8*, in which directors (including such figures as Wim Wenders and Gus Van Sant) made short films corresponding to the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2016) to which all member states signed up in the year 2000.⁴ These goals were wide-ranging (touching on such domains as gender equality, universal primary education, and HIV/AIDS prevention), and member states set themselves the deadline of 2015 to meet them.⁵ Sissako's film corresponds to and visualizes the first development goal, "to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger."

Tiya is set in Ethiopia and follows a young girl, the film's eponymous heroine, as she arrives late for school. The film opens as Tiya, sitting on the front stoop preparing her school satchel, is called back by her ailing father who reminds her to

finish sewing a shirt before she leaves. This establishing sequence contains didactic overtones: We are given to understand that the economic expedient of child labor unfortunately trumps the prerogative of primary education. Tiya finally arrives at school during a lesson on the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but is quickly distracted by a chaotic game of pickup rugby taking place in the courtyard. Sissako's camera cuts back and forth between the game and the classroom, and we see Tiya drop one of the two pieces of fruit she has brought with her out the window for a shoeshine boy. During this sequence the other students dutifully recite their interpretations of the MDGs and the teacher shakes our protagonist from her reverie by asking her to name the first goal, that is, the very one Sissako's film is meant to illustrate. Tiya answers correctly but in too soft a tone for the teacher's liking; she explains herself by revealing that she does not believe in this goal, since "To reduce poverty, we must share wealth more evenly. But people don't like sharing." The film ends with a shot of Tiya staring dreamily out the window again, this time at an older boy who has come to serenade her with promises of affection and support when she loses her father.

The uncertainty communicated by *Tiya* stems, first, from the fact that we as viewers remain unsure of the film's decisive moment: Does it occur when Tiya initially drops her fruit for the shoeshine boy, or does it come later when she declares her skepticism of the MDG and philosophically validates her earlier action, challenging viewers to prove her wrong? I would suggest, however, that the more evocative moment in the film is the series of shots of Tiya staring out the window at either the rugby players or at her older suitor. In all these shots, Tiya appears somewhat dazed, and it is unclear whether she is truly absorbed in the activity taking place outside her classroom or whether she is unable to focus on the day's lesson because she is simply hungry. The uncertainty in this sequence intersects with the MDG Sissako is tasked with communicating in the film: He must visualize extreme poverty and hunger as well as their potential eradication, and before the credits roll statistics appear on screen to remind viewers of the numbers of people who either go to bed or die hungry each day. Upon seeing these statistics, we might be tempted to attribute to *Tiya* a certain uncritical moralizing; the film manages to skirt such charges, though, by highlighting its own uncertainty and immediacy. Tiya's remark challenges Western viewers but also casts doubt on the viability or accountability of the MDGs. At the same time that we process this thematic uncertainty, we watch Tiya watching the other children and experience her hunger and distraction at their most urgent through a cinematic *mise-en-abîme*. The combination of these two processes (and the fact that we are forced to take them in simultaneously) allows Sissako to translate critically "development" as an abstract UN mandate/goal into the visceral immediacy of hunger in daily life.

Sissako's earlier *La vie sur terre* engages in similar processes of conceptual translation, but the perspective he adopts in this docu-fiction is much more obviously poeticized, not least because citations from Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*

punctuate the film's millennial narrative. Sissako's character, Dramane, assimilates himself to Césaire's poetic *je* in imagining his return to his father's village of Sokolo. He initially couches his desire to film the village as it transitions into the new millennium in Césaire's lines about arrival, which he reads in a voice-over: "I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine and I would say to this land whose loam is part of my flesh: 'I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your sores'" (Césaire 2001, p. 13). Despite the colonial context of Césaire's masterpiece, its presence in the film is part of a much more ambiguous reading of millennial temporality, since Sissako is primarily interested in how millennial ideals of development and global connectivity reach everyday life in rural Mali, a place that appears in the film as in but not of the millennial global ecumene.

We have seen how Sissako shows local villagers consuming global connectivity in his collection of shots of intense boredom, that is, the shots of men listening to RFI excitedly announce the world's plans for new year's celebrations. But in *La vie sur terre* local experiences of connectivity belie the triumphalist rhetoric of these ideals. These experiences come across most clearly in the tongue-in-cheek scenes set in the local post office, where villagers come to place local and overseas phone calls. We have the impression of laughing along with Sissako as some of the callers, Dramane included, do not succeed in reaching the people with whom they want to connect: Shoddy lines, absent interlocutors, and wrong numbers all prevent communication from taking place. In several shots from these scenes, the slogan for SoTelMa (Société des télécommunications au Mali) is visible on an advertisement: "The telephone for all! This is our priority." The irony here, of course, is that although the telephone is indeed available to Sokolo's residents they do not manage to use it to good effect.

In a sharp contrast with the irony and levity of these telephone scenes, Sissako's critique of the ideal of connectivity as lived experience takes on a more pathetic and urgently economic tone at the end of the film, when one of the village's residents dictates a letter in which he implores his brother living abroad to send money back to Mali. This man is coping with a poor harvest and medical problems, and he filters connectivity through the immediacy of kinship ethics: "If we don't help each other, the family cannot prosper," he pleads in the letter. On the one hand, kinship connections bestow certain obligations upon the man's unknown addressee; on the other hand, though, arriving as it does at the end of the film we never find out what becomes of this request, and the circumstances of its enunciation leave us less than optimistic about its viability. Connectivity, from this perspective, is both urgently real and idealized, almost fictive, at the same time: It is supposed to index development and herald new forms of global belonging, but it also enables expressions of economic precarity to take on transnational dimensions even if the fact of connectivity as such does not guarantee a certain outcome.

The tenor of Haroun's *Grigris* matches the plaintive immediacy of this final expression of precarity from *La vie sur terre*. But *Grigris* thematizes political economy more implicitly than Sissako's millennial "economic" films. Haroun's eponymous protagonist is a disabled part-time dancer in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena, where he moved from Burkina Faso with his mother. The film turns on the questions of economic urgency and precarity, as Grigris must turn to his friend Moussa for work in order to help his adoptive and ailing father pay off his hospital bills. Moussa works in the shadow economy, and Grigris ends up becoming a getaway driver in his friend's gasoline-trafficking scheme. Pressed for cash, Grigris steals a shipment of gas and sells it himself; in the rest of the film he evades Moussa's henchman by fleeing to the countryside with his love interest, a local sex worker.

The most striking scenes in *Grigris* show Haroun's protagonist dancing in a local bar. These scenes capture our attention both because and in spite of Grigris's disability, what Moussa calls his "dead leg": his brilliant dancing relies on exceptional bodily strength and on the use of his leg as a corporeal prop, such as when he holds and "fires" it like a machine gun. But in the context of my argument here, these scenes' aesthetic success lies in the fact that Haroun never quite lets viewers forget that these captivating displays of eroticized masculinity are, first and foremost, forms of labor: shots of a hat being passed through the crowd for donations remind us that Grigris's dancing is not so dissimilar from the work of his love interest, Mimi, an aspiring model who seduces clients in the bar where she meets our protagonist. Alongside the aestheticized and eroticized bodily labor visualized in the film, though, what drives Haroun's narrative here is debt. Grigris's adoptive father incurs a crippling debt due to his illness, which prompts Grigris to incur a life-threatening debt to Moussa when he steals the gasoline. The film presents these debts as following logically from economic urgency, since this is a world where the state is absent (save for the police apparatus), and where social protection, welfare, or what James Ferguson (2015) has called a "new [African] politics of distribution" are unthinkable. In this cinematic landscape the shadow economy morphs into the real economy, and a thematics of debt introduces immediacy as the only narrative temporality possible.

Debt is accompanied by urgent immediacy as its attendant form of temporality, for although debt is a promise projected into the future its uncertain resolution comes to weigh on every instant of the present. At first glance, the end of *Grigris* would seem to abolish both this thematics and its sense of time: Our hero and his girlfriend escape to a hamlet in the countryside, and when Moussa's hired muscle tracks them down, the women of the village come to their rescue and kill the henchman, vowing never to speak of the incident again. The film ends with this incident, suggesting at first glance a satisfactory resolution of the narrative. From the point of view of debt, however, this final sequence remains entirely uncertain: Grigris has not made good on his debt to Moussa and with the killing of his employee has in fact incurred another one. The film's supposed crescendo, its

apparent moment of resolution, is a doubling-down on the cycle of debt that trapped Grigris in the first place. Although the film ends, then, the temporal dimensions of debt the narrative reveals remain steadfastly open-ended and Grigris becomes something of a tragic hero, a figure with whom we identify but who comes to embody debt as the emblematic relation of subjection in contemporary life (Lazzarato, 2015). And it is this seemingly irresolvable relation of subjection that signals Haroun's periodizing impulse in the film. The uncertainty of the film's ending is of a piece with its sense of temporal immediacy, as Grigris's debts continue to hang over his head as ever-present threats. But these elements of urgency and precarity also intersect with debt's open-endedness, what Maurizio Lazzarato (2015, p. 73), summoning Nietzsche, refers to as its "infinity."⁶ Haroun's idea of the now in *Grigris* encompasses all of these qualities and he communicates them in a narrative whose ambiguity only grows as the film comes to a close.

The thematization of debt in the hypercontemporary is more implicit in *Grigris*, driving the (unresolved) narrative from below the surface. In Sissako's *Bamako*, however, sovereign debt, alongside structural adjustment programs and globalization, takes center stage as African civil society brings the World Bank to trial in a Malian courtyard. What makes this film so striking is Sissako's embedding of the highly formalized trial, whose political-economic issues are real but whose stakes are purely hypothetical, in the banality and boredom of everyday life going on around the trial. Although the trial, with its expert testimonies and cross-examinations, is *Bamako*'s narrative focal point, it would be wrong to consider these elements of daily life as somehow peripheral to the debate the film stages on neoliberal ideologies of development in post-millennial Africa. My reading of this film is situated instead at the interface of the judicial proceedings and the happenings of everyday life that impinge upon them. These are seemingly extraneous moments of disruption or cinematic framing, like when a toddler waddles across the judges' line of sight or when Sissako stages a shot of the trial from across the courtyard, taking in people and activities that are uninvolved in the proceedings. It is at the juncture of the juridical and the everyday that Sissako locates the film's temporal thrust; *Bamako* communicates to viewers its sense of the now by connecting debates about political economy, debt, and development to the immediacy and ordinariness of everyday life with its lack of obvious mise-en-scène. *Bamako* is indeed "anti-imperialist art" (Benjamin, 2012), but it is also hypercontemporary free play, a narrative where images of urgency confront the "textuality" (see Harrow 2013, p. 180) of the trial's argumentative logic.

The trial's procedural rigor constitutes the film's structural backbone, but the ill-defined (in the sense that it lacks the hyperorganized rationality of the court case) bustle of everyday life going on around the proceedings grabs our attention in a no less forceful manner. Thus, for instance, very early on in the film as the lawyers and spectators sit silently, waiting for the day's events to begin, an elderly man approaches the witness stand out of turn. In Sissako's shot, we look out at an angle, presumably from near the judges' bench, as the old man stands just to the

left of the frame's center. At the center itself sit the lawyers, but our eyes are not drawn to them: For several seconds, as these individuals in the foreground stand and sit silently, the only movement we catch in the frame is that of a woman in the background washing clothes in a bucket. Although the woman appears smaller because of her distance from the camera, she demands our attention because she too is near the center of the frame and because her movement drags our eyes away from the individuals in the foreground, all of whom are "inside" the trial. And we can read the comings and goings of Melé, the lounge singer, in a similar manner. The trial takes place in the courtyard of the residence she shares with her husband, Chaka, and other families, and *Bamako* traces their growing estrangement as a secondary cinematic focal point. Throughout the film, Melé walks through shots of the trial, often looking stony-faced and uncomfortable, as she prepares to leave for work at the bar. Her movements and appearances disrupt the linearity of the court's proceedings, to be sure, but in terms of my argument here they also point to the forms of ordinary labor taking place in this Bamako neighborhood as the (mis)deeds of the World Bank are being hashed out and contested in the trial. The immediacy of everyday labor contrasts with the abstract political-economic arguments of the trial, bringing both of these narrative categories into sharp relief even as Sissako's camera holds them together in a single shot or sequence.

At times, our attention plunges directly into the trial's visual paratext: The most telling example of this is the interpolated short Western film, *Death in Timbuktu*, that Sissako inserts into his narrative. This film, starring Danny Glover (among others), is a very loosely structured tale of a shootout in the historic Malian city; we are only afforded a several-minute glimpse of the film, and thus are not aware of its stakes or its narrative resolution. Sissako shows off his virtuosity here, cheekily reminding viewers that cinema's generic categories can be provided with unexpected geographic genealogies – a Western set in Africa is hardly what the first-time viewer of *Bamako* expects to see in the middle of this film. But the function of this cinematic interpolation, I think, is to periodize and to reassert the film's sense of time, that is, to remind viewers of the immediacy it wants to communicate alongside the abstract political-economic debates of the trial. *Death in Timbuktu* is presented as a film the neighborhood children are watching at night on an outdoor television set, and at times Sissako's takes us outside the interpolation, back to the "real time" of the film, to one of the children laughing at the antics of one of the cowboys on screen. As viewers, we become aware that we are watching what the children are watching, at the same time, and this is how *Bamako* visualizes an intense now-effect that comes to characterize the entirety of the film.⁷

It is in terms of this "now-ness" that we experience Sissako's visualization of labor in the film. Thus, for instance, one witness, a Malian intellectual trained in France, gives testimony to the court about the one-way flow of information from the West to Africa, such that the "foundations" of local societies erode in the face of Western ideals and cultural models: "they take our minds, too," he concludes. This commentary seems to stray from the realm of the strictly political-economic and rests on

certain shaky assumptions about supposed African “authenticity” (about which he is duly questioned during cross-examination), but the key moment of this sequence comes when Sissako cuts away from the trial to the interior of a house, where a young girl is sorting and spinning cotton by hand with an old woman, perhaps her grandmother. The relationship here between image (the production of a material to be used as a commodity, as value) and text (the description of alienation provoked by Western-led globalization) is a visual reversal of commodity fetishism, wherein the social relations that inhere in local forms of production become concrete while a disembodied voice comments on contemporary forces of social estrangement.

Production enters into the framing of Sissako’s shots, as well. His camera returns time and again to images of a dyeworks operating in the compound. We see local women creating lovely, brightly colored lengths of cloth, although it is unclear to whom they are destined. One morning, as the day’s proceedings are about to begin, Sissako cuts to an establishing shot of the bench framed by clothes and a length of the cloth drying on a clothesline – the framing is akin to a theater stage whose curtain has just opened. This shot brings the production of goods together with the production of domesticity, commercial labor with affective labor (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 217). It also underscores the fact that debt, development, and production (or anti-production, as the plaintiffs might put it) taken as abstract political-economic categories have everyday visual referents that interface with broader critical debates in a medium that signals its own immediacy.

Bamako ends with a quotation from Césaire’s poem “Les pur-sang” (“The Thoroughbreds”): “My ear to the ground, I heard tomorrow pass by” [L’oreille collée au sol, j’entendis passer demain]. In this context these words have a futuristic bent, and they signal utopian longing for a new kind of economic time, one divorced from neoliberal ideologies of structural adjustment, and for an alternate reality where civil society’s request for justice (namely that the World Bank perform community service in perpetuity) is actually enforceable. This same citation also figures in Sissako’s *La Vie sur terre*, where it performs different temporal work. In this earlier film it indexes stasis, the emphasis now falling on a millennial tomorrow that “passes by,” occurring elsewhere but hardly registering in the village of Sokolo. But Césaire’s words intersect with the periodizing drive expressed throughout the set of “economic” films I examine, for the idea of tomorrow is conceived and expressed here through a diagnostic of the now that endows political economy with a cinematic phenomenology of urgency and immediacy.

Warscapes and the Hypercontemporary

In turning our attention to Haroun’s and Sissako’s warscapes we do not rid ourselves so easily of Césaire’s poetic influence: Haroun’s *A Screaming Man* [*Un homme qui crie*] borrows its title from the *Cahier*: “For a screaming man is not a dancing

bear,” reads the full line. This is anti-spectacular logic (“For life is not a spectacle, for a sea of pain is not a stage” are the two preceding clauses in the poem (Césaire 1956, p. 42)), and it suggests that suffering or traumatic upheaval might be rendered narratively in their barest banality and facticity, shorn of “theatrical” (following Césaire’s imagery) adornment.⁸ We can read Haroun’s *Daratt* and *A Screaming Man* and Sissako’s *Timbuktu* as cinematic translations of Césaire’s assertion. We can also read them as explorations of how the warscape as felt cinematic contemporaneity tells a story about time: How do Haroun and Sissako film conflict so as to create cinematic value from intense narratives of the now? This set of films is not “economic” in the strong, thematic sense that characterizes the films I took up in this chapter’s previous section; but we are dealing nonetheless with narrative economies of the hypercontemporary that valorize the communication of temporal immediacy by periodizing cinematic warsapes.

Haroun’s war films are slow-moving texts that communicate now-ness through silences, awkward pauses, ambient sounds, and the painstaking arrangement of bodies in frames. Many of his shots are reminiscent of tableaux vivants, in which the careful distribution of bodies signals an elongated and expanded sense of immediacy: Haroun forces us to take in shots that go on far longer than we feel they should, and in so doing he narrativizes war and its aftermath by burrowing into his characters’ interiority rather than by pulling back and contextualizing the stakes of civil conflict. These shots elongate now-ness by slowing down and stretching out the immediacy of private moments, rendering them all the more intense for their reduced speed. In *Timbuktu*, by contrast, Sissako conceives of cinematic immediacy by filming armed occupation (by Islamist militants Ansar Dine) as a time outside of time, as a temporal subtraction from the normal working order of everyday life. If African war fiction creates historical narratives (see Coundouriotis, 2014), it also uses warsapes to visualize new experiences of the contemporary that are shot through with and overdetermined by the urgency of conflict.

Haroun’s *A Screaming Man* was released in 2010, four years after his *Daratt*, but this later film offers a provocative starting point because it visualizes the warscape in real time whereas the earlier film periodizes post-conflict reconciliation. *A Screaming Man* is set during the Chadian civil war that began in 2005 and deals with the deeply wounded pride of a father, Adam, once a Central African swimming champion, who loses his job at an upmarket hotel pool to his son, Abdel. The hotel has recently gone under Chinese management and the new proprietress is eager to cut costs, but Adam takes his replacement to heart and this dismissal opens up the film’s broadly Oedipal conflict. At the same time, Adam is relentlessly pressured by a neighborhood government functionary to make a financial contribution to the state’s “war effort,” an informal tax he cannot afford. Stinging from his career’s abrupt end, Adam decides to give Abdel to the army in lieu of a monetary donation, a choice that eventually leads to the latter’s death in combat. In keeping with the themes of this chapter, then, the crux of this film is transactional and the

principle of (coerced) exchange is seen as part and parcel of the cinematic warscape. But the transaction upon which Haroun's narrative turns is embedded in a much broader visualization of war as a form of felt urgency, even or especially when the war in question remains unseen or only tangentially experienced. The obliqueness of the warscape in *A Screaming Man* seeps into Haroun's shots and also comes to condition his sense of the contemporary.

Early in the film, for instance, a sequence set indoors shows Adam and his wife, Miriam, feeding each other watermelon. The sequence begins in a medium close-up that moves in even closer as Adam and Miriam kiss, the juices from the fruit dripping onto their lips and chins. Haroun's close-ups compound the extreme tenderness expressed here: They make us uncomfortable, and we have the impression that we are intruding on a display of intimacy that we should not be seeing. Playing in the background during these intimate moments is a television newscast about the ongoing war, but we can only glimpse with difficulty the images on the screen as extreme close-ups fill the frame. The newscast's audio, however, comes through clearly, and, as the pro-government broadcast denounces the rebels, it becomes increasingly challenging to concentrate on the information conveyed in what under other circumstances would be a helpful moment of contextualization. Visuality and textuality overlap here without coinciding (akin to what we have seen in Sissako's *Bamako*), and Haroun pulls our attention in two contrasting directions as he refuses to let the war come fully into view, favoring instead the affective immediacy of Adam and Miriam's intimacy.

This sequence lacks dialogue (until a neighbor calls and interrupts our characters), and it highlights the way in which Haroun uses wordlessness to convey a sense of immediacy to viewers. Dialogue is sparse in his war films, and in *A Screaming Man* wordlessness allows the warscape to coexist with psychological interiority on screen. Wordlessness is not silence, however: Ambient noise around Haroun's characters brings the immediacy of everyday life to the fore while dialogic reticence paradoxically communicates the intense urgency of war even as the conflict hardly ever takes center stage in the film's shots.

The sequence in the film that most effectively illustrates this paradoxical communicative conduit occurs when Adam decides to "donate" his son to the government's war effort. While walking to work at the hotel where he is kept on as a gate attendant after Abdel is given sole custody of the pool, Adam is picked up by the neighborhood government functionary and informed once again of the urgent matter of his contribution. Adam insists that he cannot afford to pay the informal tax when the man proceeds to explain suggestively that he donated his own son to the army. After this conversation Haroun cuts away to a series of shots of Adam walking silently through the hotel, the sounds around him magnified by his introspection: Children splashing in the pool as Abdel gives swimming lessons, machines whirring and beeping in a back room, cars driving past in the distance. Haroun follows up this conjunction of silent bodily movement and ambient noise with a long-take shot of Adam sitting in his chair at the hotel's front gate, staring stonily

into the camera. This shot lasts for over 50 seconds as the camera slowly zooms in on Adam's face, situating him just off center in the frame. This weighty sequence condenses war, alienation, and characterological interiority into the cinematic relationship between background noise and pensive silence, a relationship that intensifies the instantaneousness of Adam's thought processes. By visualizing this interaction between sound and wordlessness, Haroun brings the warscape into the immediacy of his character's consciousness without actually filming the conflict.

From this point of view, then, the title of *A Screaming Man* appears tragically misdirected: In the face of Adam's reflective silence, the only screams that stay with us viewers are those Abdel makes as he is hauled off to join the army while his father listens shamefacedly from his bedroom. However, within the anti-spectacular logic opened up by the title's Césairean roots, we come to recognize that wordlessness communicates the warscape not only as woven into everyday life but also as immediate to consciousness in ways that can be unexpectedly visualized in film.

If wordlessness signals the hypercontemporary in *A Screaming Man* by bringing the warscape and the logic of transaction into the immediacy of consciousness, this same quality functions differently in Haroun's *Daratt*. In this earlier film, the hypercontemporary is bound up with the periodization of post-conflict reconciliation and not with the experience of war in real time, as it were; the now, in this case, indexes the types of affective investment that emerge in the political time of the postwar moment. *Daratt* also tells the story of a troubled and troubling father figure, but here we are dealing with a case of paternal substitution: The film's protagonist, a teenage boy named Atim ("orphan," as he explains in a voice-over), travels from Abeche in the Chadian hinterland to N'Djamena in order to kill the man who murdered his father during the civil war. For Atim and his grandfather, revenge appears as ethically necessary since the state (or what we hear of it in the film via a radio broadcast) has granted amnesty to all war criminals. Once in the capital, Atim reluctantly befriends Nassara, his father's killer, and goes to work for him as an apprentice baker. Atim rebuffs Nassara's attempts to formally adopt him as his son, but he is nonetheless ultimately unable to kill Nassara when finally presented with an opportunity. Whereas in *A Screaming Man* the thematics of transaction involves coercion and renunciation, in *Daratt* transactional logic mobilizes an ethics of substitution: Atim allows Nassara to occupy the place of his father (even if he does not replace him outright) in a makeshift familial structure that sets in motion the time of national reconciliation.

Haroun's shots in *Daratt* are just as wordless as those in *A Screaming Man*. Dialogue is hard to come by in this film, and the tension expressed in Atim and Nassara's wordless sequences seems to stand in allegorically for the uncertainties involved in the establishment of a lasting sense of post-conflict political time. Relatedly, but even more fundamentally, our protagonists' lengthy periods of silence bespeak a relationship between labor and the production of affect that overlaps with the broadly allegorical elements of Haroun's story.

Much of the film is given over to the affection (grudging in Atim's case and desperate in Nassara's) and emotional dependence that grows between the two characters as Nassara teaches Atim the ropes of the bread-making trade. They rarely exchange words during these sequences – indeed, Nassara uses speech only sparingly since he must use an electrolarynx after an attacker slit his throat during the war – and the ambient noise of the ovens or other machines takes the place of the conversations we might expect them to be having. But the labor they undertake in concert compensates (the economic pun here is intended) for the shortfalls in their capabilities of verbal expression. Production in these sequences does double duty as both economic necessity and affective conduit, for it becomes a vehicle for the visualization of ways of feeling that cannot manifest in conventional forms of cinematic dialogue.

Haroun draws out the connections between this thematic of production and his film's periodizing impulse by returning occasionally to the national context, reminding us that his characterological intimacy has much broader referents. This is how we understand the brief sequence of Atim and Nassara silently eating outside and listening to a radio newscast describing protests against the government's decision to grant a blanket postwar amnesty to former combatants. As an interviewee angrily describes how "amnesty" here is synonymous with "impunity," Haroun's camera slowly zooms in on Atim looking accusingly at Nassara, whose face we cannot see. The interviewee refers to the need for "payback" as Nassara gets up from the ground and goes to turn off the radio, the upper half of his body leaving the frame entirely. Haroun then cuts to Nassara seated once again, angrily biting into his food and avoiding Atim's glare. The protester being interviewed voices sentiments that Atim seems unable to articulate, and the sequence's final cut showing Nassara tearing into his food while looking away from his young apprentice signals wordless acceptance of Atim's grievances. This moment reminds us of *Daratt's* temporal stakes: The film makes its claim on the hypercontemporary by condensing redemptive possibilities and national narratives of postwar reconciliation into intense instants of wordless labor and silent communication.

In contrast to Haroun's hypercontemporary aesthetics of wordless instants developed in *A Screaming Man* and *Daratt*, Sissako's *Timbuktu* explores the temporality of the warscape using an effect of cinematic bracketing. *Timbuktu* is under occupation by the jihadists of Ansar Dine, and as ordinary residents push back against the dictates of Islamic law we are presented with a city that has come to a standstill – this is true even in a literal sense, as in the nighttime shots of soldiers patrolling the streets, ensuring that residents do not go about their lives as before. Sissako constructs the "now" of the warscape through a narrative of temporal subtraction and by portraying occupied *Timbuktu* as withdrawn from ordinary life, stuck in a time outside of time, as it were. The hypercontemporary here certainly expresses a state of exception, but it is one whose relationship to the law requires us to adjust Giorgio Agamben's understanding of exceptionality and *nomos*. Agamben (2005, p. 39) argues that "The state of exception is an anomic

space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law," in which sovereign decrees take on an aura of legal authority even though the juridical order has been suspended. Sissako's *Timbuktu* accounts for a similar act of suspension, to be sure, but this film visualizes a state of exception in which ordinary juridical norms have been replaced not by the whims of a dictator but by the importation and (selective, it must be said) articulation of a different legal order entirely, namely sharia law. The immediacy of *Timbuktu*'s time outside of time is of a piece with an understanding of "exceptional" law as divine intervention, that is, as imposed from without but possessing the rigor of God-given systematicity in the here and now.

The film's atmosphere is one of stifling expectation, as occupying forces and locals standoff in a narrative of open-ended near-confrontation, the former issuing Islamic decrees through megaphones in the streets (women must wear socks at the marketplace, residents must not congregate outside after hours or listen to music) and the latter resisting by forcing everyday life back into the time of occupation (by playing music at home, for instance, or not wearing gloves at the market). In spite of these activities, though, what drives Sissako's narrative are images of people waiting, killing time until some resolution of the siege occurs. The Tuareg family, whose tent lies just outside of town, has not moved away because Kidane the patriarch wants to see what will happen; Abdelkerim, the leader of the occupying army, takes driving lessons in the desert from his translator; another soldier steals away to dance to music he cannot hear; and the city's imam tries to soften the application of sharia through counterreadings of the Qu'ran while realizing that he is powerless outside the space of his mosque. Sissako's sense of the now in this film involves immediacy without urgency, in the sense that *Timbuktu* narrativizes the real time of occupation without offering a horizon of resolution for the film's understanding of bracketed time. He does not let us glimpse any potential return to normative, non-occupied temporality and we are left with a succession of immediate instants comprising an occupied time that appears endless.

The film's most striking example of this time of waiting, of bracketed time, is a sequence that is paradoxically not about inactivity but about action as enforced make-believe. Following a scene in a makeshift courtroom in which young men are sentenced to 20 lashes for playing soccer, Sissako cuts to a sequence showing boys playing a soccer match without a ball. This sequence is silent but overlaid with music, and we observe the intricately coordinated movements of players who make tackles, passes, and saves as if the ball were at their feet, interrupting their imaginary match and pretending to stretch or do calisthenics when soldiers on patrol drive by the field. The looks on the boys' faces lead us to believe they are taking the match seriously, but at the same time we realize that there cannot be any result or rules-based endpoint to their play when the sport's crucial instrument has been outlawed. Coming as it does on the heels of the courtroom sentencing, we can of course read this sequence as illustrating a sly act of resistance to the strictures of Ansar Dine's interpretation of sharia. But it also offers a ludic analogue to the idea of the now that Sissako wants to convey: An unwinnable match

with an imaginary ball maps onto the uncertainty and amorphousness of occupied time, and the players appear to make up their own rules in a moral economy that strictly circumscribes the distribution of bodies and activities in social space. This moral economy is a contested ideological site involving competing notions of justice and the good life and, in a stronger sense, the imposition of and resistance to a new moral order artificially grafted onto everyday life (Figure 1.1).

Another figure in the film embodies this idea of the now as hanging in suspension, as “time out of joint,” to borrow the Shakespearean phrase. This is a woman who has the bearing of an eccentric Vudu priestess, a *mambo*; she walks through Timbuktu’s streets in a long, brightly colored robe (that contrasts sharply with the ubiquitous light ochre of the city’s streets and buildings) and is largely unchallenged by the Islamic police or other occupying soldiers – they observe her but pay her little mind, it seems at first. But they do not avoid her entirely, and her rooftop offers certain soldiers a respite from the rigors of occupation and sharia enforcement (this is where one soldier silently dances, for example).

In one sequence the woman, Zabou, offers a brief monologue explaining her presence in Timbuktu in a way that intersects with the theory of the hypercontemporary warscape as suspended time: Three soldiers stand in the foreground watching her tear up cloth at a bench or work station before she tosses one man a magical charm for protection. She proceeds to proclaim theatrically (speaking perhaps to her chicken named Gonaïves after the city in Haiti, perhaps to no one in particular) that she was instantly transported to Timbuktu from Haiti on 12 January 2010, at the exact moment that a devastating earthquake struck the country. “Time doesn’t matter,” she exclaims, “the earthquake is my body. I am the



Figure 1.1 A player lines up to take an imaginary penalty kick. Source: *Timbuktu* (2014), dir. Abderrahmane Sissako, Arte France Cinéma / Canal + / Ciné + / CNC / TV5 Monde.

cracks! Cracked from my head to my feet, from my feet to my head. My arms, my back, and my face cracked! What is time? I am cracked.” In describing herself as “cracked” or “split” [*fissurée*], Zabou positions herself as torn between the time of the “real world” and the timeless now of the occupation, between time as chronological progression and time as indefinite suspension. For her, the concept of temporality is either uncertain or unimportant but, at the same time, extremely precise: It was at 16:53, “the same time as in Miami,” that the earthquake struck Haiti and she found herself in Mali. The paradoxical experience of time that Zabou expresses in this sequence encapsulates Sissako’s sense of the hypercontemporary in *Timbuktu*, for throughout the film we observe characters on both sides of the occupation recalling normative chronological time as they make do with the constraints of occupied time and the moral economy imposed through this temporal subtraction or suspension.

For Haroun and Sissako, warscapes signal new understandings of cultural and political time and, as *Timbuktu* shows, are capable of constituting periods in their own right. They do so by visualizing and narrativizing forms of temporality and immediacy that both respond to conflict and imagine social forms existing outside of it, as with Sissako’s soccer players or Haroun’s thematics of uncertain reconciliation in *Daratt*. The hypercontemporary warscape thus appears as perpendicular to everyday life in these films, intersecting with it and overdetermining it, but also, at the same time, leading it away from its normative forms of temporal organization. The richness of this perpendicularity is what makes the warscape such a fecund narrative site for new cinematic conceptions of the now.

★

We might conclude with a final nod to Agamben. In an essay titled “What Is the Contemporary?,” he writes that “Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*” (2009, p. 41, emphasis in original). This idea of the contemporary involves temporal distance, the idea of being “out of phase” with one’s cultural and historical moment, as well as studied curiosity, that is, the desire to account for one’s own time even as it confounds our attempts to do so. But what, precisely, sustains this relationship and renews it in spite of the contemporary’s constitutive elusiveness? Haroun and Sissako suggest that this relationship is primarily one of narrative, one that can be managed and (re)fashioned through stylized storytelling about everyday life. Further, their cinematic treatments of political economy and warscapes lend the contemporary a sense of urgent immediacy, transforming it from a narrative category into what we might call a narrative imperative, an idea of the cinematic now that demands exploration and theorization. The appearance in narrative texts (filmic ones, in our case) of these demands is what I have been calling the

hypercontemporary. This is not just a thematic concern but one that enters into cinematic composition, as well. Haroun's and Sissako's films create temporal distance by expanding or compressing now-ness, effects that throw into relief the broader historical and cultural periods these films articulate. The gaps and distances generated by this setting into relief create the sort of "anachronisms" and "disjunctions" of which Agamben speaks. And the disparate temporal intensities at play in these operations of periodization are the markers of the hypercontemporary in cinematic form.

In a broader sense, though, the hypercontemporary provokes African directors to rethink their relationships to cinema as a medium. Beyond the translation of war, debt, or development into narrative markers of the now, the hypercontemporary as a form of narrative intensity urges filmmakers to devise new ways of communicating time through engagements with the immediacy of everyday life. To do so involves setting in motion new theories of periodization that redirect now-ness through the African continent by narrativizing abstract debates of global import (such as how to challenge radical Islam, or how to critique the operative assumptions of Western political economy). From this perspective, periodization becomes a powerful cinematic impulse, one that drives African cinema's changing interactions with pressing worldwide questions.

Notes

- 1 Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno examines a broadly similar series of questions in his 2009 documentary, *Sacred Places*. As I have written elsewhere, Teno filters these questions through an investigation of cinema's relationship with other African art forms. See Justin Izzo, "Jean-Marie Teno's Documentary Modernity" (2015).
- 2 From this point of view, it seems ironic that Haroun in *Bye Bye Africa* would articulate his concerns for the future of cinematic consumption in Africa using a rather esoteric pseudo-documentary form. But in this earlier film, Haroun does not hide his aesthetized approach, and I would argue that he implicitly wrestles with this irony when he asks, over and over, what the future of African film might be.
- 3 Tsitsi Jaji (2014, p. 156) reads the political overtones in Sissako's oeuvre as reminiscent of the Spaghetti Western genre, beginning from the Western film inserted into *Bamako*. I return to this sequence later in this chapter, although I am less interested in generic attributions in Sissako's work.
- 4 This film, as well as the others in the anthology, was released on YouTube in 2010: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JGjljTLYgA.
- 5 See the United Nations website on the Millennium Development Goals and their relevance beyond 2015: www.un.org/millenniumgoals/.
- 6 In his book *Governing by Debt*, Lazzarato is primarily concerned with the public debt of nation-states, not the debts of private individuals, but his remark about infinity still holds for private individuals insofar as debt appears in his analyses as the pre-eminent relation of subjection of our times.

- 7 Sissako returns to this cinematic effect at the end of the film, as well: Chaka commits suicide and, as a local videographer films his funeral, Sissako shifts back and forth between shots of this man filming and shots from his camera. This is the same sort of *mise-en-abîme* that occurs during the *Death in Timbuktu* sequence.
- 8 Sissako also reads this quotation in a voice-over from *La Vie sur terre*, and in this early film Césaire's anti-spectacular language leads Dramane further into the as yet unexplored banality of millennial life in Sokolo.

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