

# Timbuktu

(2014, Abderrahmane Sissako, Mauritania)

## Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

#### Rationale for study

- A timely African film on Islam best described as 'political art'. A complex tragedy of life in the northern desert of Mali under Jihadist occupation. The film avoids a didactic or simplistic 'good westerners v evil Islamists' narrative, shifting in tone and perspective it offers the spectator an understanding of the complex and competing portraits of stereotypes and misconceptions that divide our world whilst addressing issues of globalisation and identity politics. A visually stunning film that allows characters and human connections to offer a meditation on what is seen as a difficult and alien culture; presenting a radical alternative to Hollywood conventions of cinema and storytelling.

#### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- 10.40 – 11.50 - Jihadists confront the women fish sellers who demand that they wear gloves to cover their hands. One woman resists and presents a reasoned argument. This scene demonstrates both the absurdity of the demand and exposes the lack of conviction the Jihadists have to enforce the regime.
- 26.45-42.00. This sequence is a montage of events absent of any real temporal or causal anchorage.
- The young jihadist who must renounce pop music, whilst being

filmed in the all too familiar set up of direct to camera announcements, but cannot do so.

- The jihadist patrols sent to enforce the 'no music' decree who are uncertain how to proceed.
- The use of classical music and intercutting to show the sadistic stoning of the young couple with the jihadist who seems to enter a trance like state in the grip of a serene ballet dance.
- The invisible football sequence.
- This section juxtaposes the sublime with the ridiculous.

#### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

##### Cinematography

- Soft light on hardened faces, clouds of dust, turbaned silhouettes and a wide, wide lens capture a place that is both harsh and beautiful.

##### Mise-en-Scène

- Set in neighbouring Mauritania as it was too dangerous to be filmed in Mali. Sissako originally conceived the film as a documentary but changed his mind as he felt that people would be unable to speak freely about their situation and chose to dramatize the story instead. Some actors are professional but others were recruited from nearby refugee camps to play roles.
- A key element of mise-en-scène is the breath-taking location. Wide expansive deserts contrasted with urban back streets. The natural world is evoked through water, sky, sun, dust and animals.
- The subtle use of props such as the mobile phone and cameras aid the satirical approach.

##### Editing

- A series of interwoven stories/tableaux which offer multiple perspectives with the drama revolving around the death

of a cow, named GPS – a symbol for a country that seems to have lost its way.

- The film is very much *in media res*, there is little historical or regional context.
- The effect and horror is built-up elliptically and is shocking when it arrives.

### Sound

- Opening sound of diegetic automatic gunfire gives way to mournful soundtrack that segues into guitar music reminiscent of 1960s westerns.
- Song is used as an expression of political descent and personal freedom.
- Several languages are spoken, characters do not speak each others' languages.
- The loudhailer used by the Jihadists is abrasive and comical.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- The film presents a vivid representation of ordinary Muslims, particularly Muslim women in their resistance to fundamentalist tyranny. The suppression and control of women is presented as both chilling but humorous when the women challenge the dogma in relation to dress codes, behaviour, marriage and the censoring of any creative or individual form of artistic expression.
- Offers complex representations of Islamic militants, often conflicted by their religious beliefs themselves and seem more driven by their own greed, lust and power than by any religious fervour. They lack the two dimensional representation that is generally seen in Hollywood film. Whilst they reject football, music, smoking and other forms of 'western' pleasure they can't stop talking about football teams and are obsessed with technology, particularly mobile phones and cameras as a way to tell their story. Sharia law seems to confuse even them.
- Some representations have been criticised for being too romanticised. The view of the 'good' Muslim in the form of the local imam who preaches benevolence and tolerance and the idealised nomadic life of the father of the family (Kidane) who is constructed as the noble Tuareg hero. Issues of Tuareg separatist movement atrocities are largely ignored in favour of a more sentimentalised representation of a pastoral idyll disrupted by outside hostile forces.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Universally acclaimed for its stunning visuals of the desert landscape with the use of vivid and dramatic costume colour, particularly used to dramatize the resistance to the regime.
- Panoramic shot of Kidane and the fisherman staggering apart and framed in long shot at either edge of the frame against a blood orange sky is a stand out example of the symbolic use of composition and colour.
- A more playful image of undulating sand dunes with a strategically placed patch of scrub suggests a vision of a woman's body. A subversive and ironic device to highlight the double standards of the Jihadist leader.
- A football match played with an invisible ball, stunningly choreographed, having all the grace and skill of a real match. Poignantly drawing attention to the absurdity of the ban. Clear satire of a regime that outlaws football as a 'western sin'.
- The opening scene juxtaposes snipers shooting at both innocent wild life and historic cultural relics. A visual metaphor for the occupation of northern Mali.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- The film explores the impact of the imposition of Sharia Law, which appears abstract and rigid. Human rights were violated; World Heritage sites were systematically destroyed.

### Historical

- Set against real events – the al-Qaeda occupation of Timbuktu in 2012. The film takes its starting point from a story of a couple who were reportedly stoned to death for having children out of wedlock. As a former French colony a legacy of involvement from France and the use of the French language remain in places. In the 2012 coup France intervenes militarily, recapturing some towns from Islamic fighters.

### Political

- Timbuktu is a place with one foot in the past

and the other firmly in the present. The name of the city itself conjures images that are exotic and mysterious to Western ears. For Africans the place stands for a pre-colonial African Empire. In 1898 Mali becomes a colony of France, renaming it French Sudan. Achieving independence in 1960, Mali becomes a one party Socialist State under Modibo Keita as president.