

## **Cross-Cultural Film Guide**

### **Films from Africa, Asia and Latin America at The American University**

**By Patricia Aufderheide**

This work was completed with the Help of a grant from the College of Arts and Sciences Mellon Fund at The American University. It benefited substantially by guidance from Diana Vogelsong, Media Librarian at the American University Library. Hilary Bonta, Howard Heard, and Jeri Jones at the American University Helped research this project.

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#### INTRODUCTION

This is a guide to films, available in video or film either in the Media Services department of Bender Library, or in the Language Lab, that are useful to allow people who may not have much experience with different cultural perspectives to see the world differently, as a result of experiencing an artwork in a mass medium. This guide provides short background sketches on each film, its director and production history, its production context, and its relevance to teaching.

Most of them are feature films, although all can be used in excerpt. They come from Africa, Asia and Latin America, mostly from areas where national cinema production is overshadowed by the powerful international cinema/TV industries of the U.S., India and Egypt. In some cases, films from these international centers, as well as from areas where entertainment movie production also flourishes (such as Brazil and Argentina), are included. These are typically authorial films made as an expression of cultural identity by filmmakers who see their mandating not only as entertaining but also provoking thought. Occasionally, as in the Zairian film, *La Vie Est Belle*, a frankly entertainment film is included, to demonstrate how movie styles cross-fertilize and to shed light on cultural values.

One common umbrella term for grouping the perspectives these films offer is "third world," an awkward one that many people find contentious. It may Help to understand the background of the term. It was first used in 1952 by a French demographer, who referred to the "third world" as a parallel to the French "third estate"--the pre-Revolutionary lower class of society, without privileges (unlike the clergy and nobility). He meant rather loosely to point up the political marginalization of states outside the major powers of the time.

With international meetings of non-aligned countries in 1955, 1961 and 1964, the term got wide currency, although it was still used loosely, to mean countries outside the socialist and capitalist bloc countries. Later Mao Zedong proposed a theory of "three worlds," in which the first one was the superpowers USSR and US, the second was all the other industrial countries and the third was everybody else.

So this term is a residual one--an "everybody else" term. It reflects the realities of international power, and the problems in using it (since it describes what something is not rather than what it is) also reflect political, economic, and social marginalization as a result of international power.

These films typically express the tensions of those political, economic and social realities. They grapple with the need to assert not only opposition to something (colonialism, imperialism, economic inequality, Americans, a neocolonial elite) but to construct an autonomous identity.

One reason the clumsy term "third world" lingers on is because there is no convenient substitute, insofar as economic, political and social inequalities remain at an international level. "Underdevelopment" and "developing societies" suffer from the same problems as "third world," although they are often regarded as less contentious, particularly in the so-called "development community" of funders, bankers, and aid bureaucrats.

Watching films should be as critical a process as reading a book or analyzing any other text. It does not take special expertise to ask, How does this film say what it says? If you are not already comfortable with using film and video, you might work from a simple checklist:

- production values (does the film flow along? do the images look glossy? does the film look kind of rough? do you notice that it's a movie, or does it spend money to imitate real life so effectively that you don't think about it?);
- the kind of acting (professional? nonprofessional? was that a choice?);
- the use of sound (was it "synch sound," i.e. was the sound recorded at the same time as the image? what kind of background music and/or ambient sound was used? what kinds of sound cues are given for action?);
- the framing of the action (is the action shot in close-ups? is it more in medium or wide shots? if there are a lot of closeups, we know the director is telling a story from the perspective of a few individuals; if it's more medium and wide shots, he or she is privileging the body social, because you can get more people into the frame with a medium or a wide shot);
- the choice of techniques that either draw a viewer in or distance him or her from the image (is there jump cut editing, the kind where an image suddenly shifts from one locale to another abruptly without a transition? did the filmmaker slip in some material into the middle of a scene, making you notice that this is a movie, not real life? was it "seamless editing," the kind you don't notice? were color filters used to noticeably distort the color of a scene, and if so why?).

If you want a more thoroughgoing, but still accessible, guide to the basic terms of film and video, you might want to sample a text such as George Wead and George Lellis, *Film: Form and Function* and James Monaco, *How to Read a Film*.

But the basic idea is that common sense carries you a lot further than you think, when you start to look closely at a film.

It is also, of course, important to understand the context of production and reception. Is the film typical or atypical? Is the filmmaker a veteran or a novice? Is this a traditional theme or a new subject on film? How was it received? This guide is intended to provide some background on such questions.

Cross-cultural films pose a special challenge in viewing. Howard Shapiro, in *Beyond Experience: The Experiential approach to cross-cultural education*, ed. Donald Batcheler and Elizabeth Warner (*The Experiment in International Living*, 1977), provided some Helpful guidelines (p. 75), which I quote here:

- "1. Viewing a film is a group experience;*
- 2. There are no right and no wrong responses to a film experience, just honest responses;*
- 3. The value of viewing a film depends upon the quality of the discussion;*
- 4. What you perceive is based upon your background and experience;*
- 5. There is educational value in learning about different perceptions of film;*
- 6. Emotions are as important as intellect in responding to films;*
- 7. A cross-cultural film is defined as much by the composition of the audience as by the content of the film."*

Some other resources:

\*An excellent overview text is Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

\*Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, *Questions of Third Cinema*. London; British Film Institute, 1989, discusses some theoretical issues around "third world film."

\**Third World Guide*, Rio de Janeiro/New York: Editora Terceiro Mundo/Grove Press, annual until 1987 in English contains excellent capsule histories of countries and regions.

\*William Luhr, ed., *World Cinema since 1945*, New York: Ungar, 1987, offers synoptic overviews of many national cinemas. \*The annual *Variety International Film Guide* offers an excellent snapshot of film production in different regions and nations.

## FILMS

### [Alsino and the Condor](#)

Miguel Littin  
 Mexico/Cuba (director:Chile/re: Nicaragua)  
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 89 minutes  
 Language Lab

### [Angano, Angano...Tales from Madagascar](#)

Cesar Paes, Marie-Clemence Blanc Paes  
 Madagascar/France  
 Africa  
 California Newsreel  
 1989  
 64 minutes  
 VHS 1400

### [Antonio das Mortes](#)

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 100 minutes  
 VHS 568

### [Borom Sarret](#)

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 MPC2

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SC 23

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India  
South Asia  
Facets  
1973  
92 minutes  
VHS 1085

Erendira

Ruy Guerra  
Brazil  
Latin America  
Facets  
1984  
103 minutes  
VHS 424

O Espirito da TV (The Spirit of TV)  
Vincent Carelli/Video in the Villages  
Brazil  
Latin America  
Centro de Trabalho Indigenista  
(Rua Fidalga, 548, #13, Sao Paulo 05432)  
1990  
18 minutes  
VHS 1825  
(SEE in Summary: [Video in the Villages](#))

Festa da Moca (Girl's Puberty Ritual)  
Vincent Carelli and Capião Pedra, Nambikwara tribal leader/Video in the Villages  
Brazil  
Latin America  
Centro de Trabalho Indigenista  
(Rua Fidalga, 548, #13, Sao Paulo 05432)  
c. 1989  
18 minutes  
VHS 1824  
(SEE in Summary: [Video in the Villages](#))

Finzan

Cheick Oumar Sissoku  
Mali  
Africa  
California Newsreel  
1989

107 minutes  
VHS 1398

From Here, From This Side

Gloria Ribe  
Mexico  
Latin America  
Women Make Movies  
1988  
24 minutes  
VHS 900

Gregorio

Grupo Chaski  
Peru  
Latin America  
Karen Ranucci  
1983  
90 minutes  
VHS 728

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Susana Amaral  
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Latin America  
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90 minutes  
VHS 858

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Jorge Bodanzky  
Brazil  
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Cinema Guild  
1975 (released 1980)  
90 minutes  
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Lucia

Humberto Solas  
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Center for Cuban Studies  
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160 minutes  
VHS 702

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VHS 961

Memories of Underdevelopment

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Latin America  
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VHS 1823  
(SEE in Summary: Video in the Villages)

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VHS 691

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[The Time to Live and the Time to Die](#)

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[La Vie Est Belle](#)

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VHS 1397

[Wedding in Galilee](#)

Michel Khleifi  
Palestinian  
Middle East  
1987  
113 minutes  
VHS 727

[Wend Kuuni](#)

Gaston Kabore  
Burkina Faso  
Africa  
1982  
70 minutes  
VHS 1402

[World of Apu](#)

Satyajit Ray  
India  
South Asia  
1959  
103 minutes  
VHS 44

[Woza Albert](#)

Percy Mtwa and Mobongeni Ngena, with BBC crew  
South Africa/BBC  
Africa  
California Newsreel  
1982  
55 minutes  
VHS 562

[Yeelen](#)

Souleyman Cisse  
Mali

Africa  
California Newsreel  
1987  
105 minutes  
VHS 1399

Yol

Serif Goren, acting for Yilmaz Guney  
Turkey  
Middle East  
Columbia  
1982  
111 minutes  
VHS 572

Zan Boko

Gaston Kabore  
Burkina Faso  
Africa  
California Newsreel  
1988  
92 minutes  
VHS 964

Other films:

After the Hunger and Drought  
Olley Maruma  
Zimbabwe  
Africa  
1988  
52 minutes  
VHS 564

Discussions among African writers cover subjects of racism, colonialism, neocolonialism, sexism, and generational conflicts in the struggle to produce art that has social resonance.

Horse Thief  
Tian Zhuangzhuang  
China  
Asia  
Facets  
88 minutes  
1987  
VHS 1314

A visually stunning epic of Tibetan life--portrayed as cruel, elemental, ritualistic and also majestic--made by a member of mainland China's "fifth generation" of '80s filmmakers (briefly) recovering personal voices and socially engaged filmmaking. Significant within China, where it was banned, for being what was seen as a sympathetic portrait of the indigenous and autonomous culture of Tibetans.

La Magia de lo Real  
60 minutes  
1981  
VHS 1084

"Film essay on the Colombian author, Garcia Marquez, and the people who are source for his works"--AU Library catalog description

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## TITLES

### **Alsino and the Condor**

Plot: Alsino (Alan Esquivel), a Central American peasant boy, lives with his grandmother (Carmen Bunster) and plays with the girl next door, Lucia (Marta Lorena Perez). He dreams about being able to fly, and climbs trees. One day an American helicopter pilot, an "advisor" to the army, spots him in the tree, and they are seized by soldiers. The pilot, Frank (Dean Stockwell), warms to the boy, although the local major (Alejandro Parodi) warns him that children are often guerrillas. Frank gives Alsino a ride in the helicopter, but Alsino wants to fly on his own. He jumps from a tree and is wounded. During his convalescence, the family gets ever poorer until they must sell the family horse. For a while he sells forest birds, crippled to keep them from escaping, with an old man, who soldiers also intimidate.

Frank is Helping the army fight a losing war, and when his buddy is killed in combat, he becomes even more ferocious. As Alsino returns home to his dying grandmother, he happens on soldirs in mid-massacre on the spot that was once Alsino's favorite play area. The guerrillas win the battle; Frank's helicopter crashes into the tree Alsino once climbed, and Frank dies. Alsino is welcomed into the winning side, and takes the generic name of the guerrillas: Manuel.

Style: Alsino is lyric Latin populism, at times gaudy and expressionistic, at times documentary-style. The narrative is unashamedly allegorical. Alsino, emblem of the people, wants freedom (flying), not the foreign and artificial substitute (helicopter). When he tries on his own (individualistic solutions), he can't make it, but his dreams come true when he joins the struggle.

The power of film to overwhelm viewers with sensations is used consistently to deliver a sense of a child's awe of the world, curiosity and discovery. The film might be considered as participating in a filmic equivalent of the magical realism celebrated by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in print. (See Erendira.)

The narrative is carefully developed so that both villains and heroes are given motivations, multifaceted characters and choices, a resort that then makes the villains responsible for their decisions.

Background on director/film: Miguel Littin, a Chilean filmmaker, came to international prominence in the early years of the Latin American film boom cine nuevo, with his 1969 fiction feature *The Jackal of Nahueltoro*. Based on a true story that became the stuff of tabloids in Chile, it probed the social reasons behind a drunken man's murder of a poor woman and her children. Under the Allende government, Littin headed for ten months the national film agency Chile Film, also working on an epic about Chilean history. Upon Allende's murder and the Pinochet coup, Littin and many others went into exile. Littin in ensuing years depended heavily on Help from the Cuban government and film industry.

*Alsino and the Condor* was made as a co-production between Cuba, where many of the technicians and post-production facilities came from; Mexico, where financial support came from; and Costa Rica, where it was filmed. At the time, the Mexican government not only strongly supported "independent" (non-studio, non-lowest common denominator entertainment) cinema, but also espoused a Third Worldist rhetoric. *Alsino* was widely seen as a filmic expression of Third World solidarity.

Production context: The national film expressions that evolved throughout Latin America from the late '50s through the '70s were known collectively as New Latin American Cinema, or *nuevo cine*. Diverse in style, form, subject matter, and responding to the particular social and political realities of each country, they shared some commonalities. They were typically authorial works, produced outside commercial cinema; they were marked by a strong passion to probe social reality and reveal popular culture; they were often oppositional to regimes that, in this period, were often military or military-controlled. Producing works that were internationally heralded, while often

bitterly contested and even censored at home, this movement became one of the hallmarks of the vibrancy of modern Latin American culture.

The roots of nuevo cine are in a distinctively Latin American neorealism. This Latin American neorealism drew inspiration from the Italian cinematic neorealists, gradually incorporating into itself as well a fascination with the iconoclasm and personal voice of the French New Wave and expressions of the fiercely argued political culture of the day. It became a major voice in a continent-wide movement for cultural nationalism.

The Italian neorealist movement, arising from the ashes of the commercial Italian film industry after World War II, featured such technical elements as location shooting, low budgets and use of non-actors. Philosophically, it was grounded in passionate sociopolitical concern, the authorial voice, the search for the drama of ordinary life, and the capturing of the reality we usually take for granted. As scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini (*Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thief*) wrote, "Now it has been perceived that reality is hugely rich, that to be able to look directly at it is enough; and that the artist's task is not to make people moved or indignant at metaphorical situations, but to make them reflect (and, if you like, to be moved and indignant too) on what they and others are doing, on the real things, exactly as they are" (in Richard Dyer MacCann, ed., *Film: A Montage of Theories*, NY: Dutton, 1966).

Neorealism had a profound impact throughout the developing world, where its low-cost production techniques and social mandate caught the imagination of many filmmakers. In Latin America, the influence of the example was pronounced. Several Latin American filmmakers studied at the neorealist Experimental Cinema Center in Rome, and Zavattini among other Italian filmmakers visited several Latin American capitals, to a typically triumphal reception. Neorealism was the beginning of a movement that searched for the Latin American reality in slums, villages, and in the poetry of ordinary life, in distinctive national and artistic voices.

This movement did not simply attempt to imitate European example, although it is true that Latin American elite culture has always been drawn to Europe. Rather, the message of the Italian neorealists (like, *mutatis mutandis*, that of the French New Wave) was seen as a liberating one for filmmakers--even if impoverished, even if confronting the challenge of capturing a reality never before dignified in cinema--to be able to make movies about the authentic realities of their own cultures. Nuevo cine brought Latin Americans from diverse regions of the continent in contact with each other and shaped a pan-Latin American rhetoric of social concern wedded inextricably to the search for authentic and revivifying aesthetic language.

Importance: *Alsino and the Condor*, well received throughout Latin America, was an Academy Award nominee for Best Foreign-Language Film of 1982. It is interesting as an example of stretching psychological realism, the narrative drama, and the coming of age story.

Further reading:

Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West*. Berkeley: University of California, 1987.

Patricia Aufderheide, "Latin American Cinema and the Rhetoric of Cultural Nationalism: Controversies at Havana in 1987 and 1989," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 12:4 (1991), 61-76.

Burton, Julianne, ed. *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Michael Chanan, *Twenty Five Years of New Latin American Cinema*. British Film Institute, 1983.

John King, *Magical Reels: A History of cinema in Latin America*. London: Verso, 1990.

Schnitman, Jorge A. *Film Industries in Latin America: Dependency and Development*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1984.

## **Angano...Angano...Tales from Madagascar**

Plot: "Tales, tales, nothing but a tale," says one of the master storytellers at the beginning of this winsome and deceptively easygoing documentary. "It's not me telling lies, but the people of long ago--and that's how they heard it as well."

Angano...Angano...Tales from Madagascar ("Angano" means "story") showcases the living culture of the Malagasy people of Madagascar, who have weathered, since formal independence in 1960, a neocolonialist regime, an autarchic leftist government, and economic hard times that interweave with ecological degradation. The stories are told through the voices of several master storytellers, both men and women.

What initially appears a quaint recapturing of folklore gradually asserts itself as a powerful statement about a vital tradition, no backwater throwback but an aggressive confrontation with the folkways and ideologies of powerful industrial societies that these people recognize and challenge. As one historian meticulously explains near the end, the French mission civilisatrice was among other things an attempt to supersede and supplant Malagasy culture; but "oral history is our history."

Oral history, told through fantastic and witty tales, is also the present, not just of cultural premises but also lived experience. One woman recalls her childhood encounter with frightening spirits who inhabit not only folktales but apparently also the local river, from whence they snatched her laundry. As storytellers recount ancient myths, the camera wanders across the landscape of daily life, showing us the connection between, say, the story of how rice came to the Malagasy and rice planting today.

The tales themselves have a pungency and charm that gives special zest to the discovery of this complex culture. The origin of rice begins with a boy so lazy that he "waits for god to feed him." (Fortunately for him, he marries the right woman.) The origin of the custom of sacrificing zebu from their cattle herds is also a cautionary tale of greed and lack of deference. Perhaps the most astonishing sequence is one that highlights a custom that may be unique to the Malagasy, of unburying their family dead during an annual festival, where they celebrate the ancestors' part in the living family and then rewrap them tenderly and rebury them. Infused with folk memory, celebrated with lively song, and conducted in a raucous festival mood, the festival makes a New Orleans funeral march look tame. It also illuminates the importance of the Malagasy sense of place, one where one lives on in the lives of one's descendants.

The film thus celebrates Malagasy culture, elevating folklore to its proper place as part of the fabric of daily ideology, and reframing the importance of oral tradition. It thus has a more-than-Malagasy message as well, by focusing on the role of myth in culture, no matter how it is transmitted.

Background on director/film: The film was co-directed by a husband and wife team, Cesar Paes and Marie-Clemence Blanc Paes. He is Brazilian; she was born in Madagascar to a Malagasy mother and French father. "We didn't want to come to the project with a Western 'Look what we can bring to this country' approach," Paes told a French magazine. "Our approach was more to say, 'What can countries like Madagascar, Brazil or others tell us?'"

The lessons are many, as Don Consentino explains in California Newsreel's catalog for the Library of African Cinema. The professor of African folklore and mythology at the University of California at Los Angeles believes that Angano...Angano "may well be called one of the first 'postmodern' films on folklore and mythology," as it "makes visible the necessary fictions from which we construct our sense of the real. It reveals the ever shifting, perhaps illusory, boundaries between reality and myth."

Film production context: Madagascar has no film production history, and this work was executed as a personal project with financial resources outside the country. Madagascar, an island off the coast of Mozambique, originally drew its population both from Africa and Asia, and the island has always been in the crosscurrents of international trade. Its current drastic ecological crisis stems from stripping of mountain forests for tropical plantations, a practice that became general during French colonial rule starting at the beginning of the century. Independence in 1960 also precipitated internal political turmoil; the falling price of tropical forests has not been kind to the already indebted Madagascar economy in recent years.

Importance: Its inclusion in the Library of African Cinema provides the first opportunity Americans have to see this film. Folklorists, historians and students of the quest for cultural autonomy will all find its showcasing of oral history interesting.

Further reading:

Third World Guide. New York: Grove Press, 1987.

Library of African Cinema: A Guide to video resources for colleges and public libraries, catalog, California Newsreel, 1991.

## **Antonio das Mortes**

Plot: The action takes place in the sertao, the desertified Northeast backlands of Brazil traditionally beyond the rule of law, and the site of some of Brazil's most enduring folklore. Here, the sertao is the region of myth, encapsulated by the historical world of progress symbolized by the highway. The tale employs the cast of folklore characters: the colonel (as in "Kentucky colonel") of the ranch; his mistress; the colonel's sidekick; the colonel's enforcer; local bandits (typical of the gangs that grew up in the region either as enforcers or as rural poor abandoned by a patron who lost a local battle); a group of millennialists (similarly, typical of groups of disenfranchised rural poor); the local teacher, a dependent of the colonel.

Antonio das Mortes is a character at war with himself. The dark figure of an earlier film, *Black God/White Devil*, he has, he thinks, murdered the last bandit and has retired to the city. (The opening sequence reprises his past role.) In this film, he undergoes a transformation to become an agent of the oppressed.

He comes at the call of the colonel to kill Coirana, the self-proclaimed inheritor of celebrated bandit Lampiao; he undertakes the job as a work of honor. Coirana, who is leading his band into town, has sworn vengeance for the death of his predecessor. He refuses to listen to a black member of a millennial group, Antao (a figure of black resistance), who cautions him to respect authority and himself dreams of return to Africa. Coirana meets Antonio, and they have a long, choreographed fight during which Coirana explains how he came to be a bandit. Coirana here takes on the aspect of the "good guy," St. George (the Catholic saint who slayed the dragon, also Ogum in the African pantheon that pervades Brazilian folk Catholicism.)

Coirana dies, transferring the role of St. George to Antonio, who then meets a band of millennialists he had wronged (they are in this film, unlike the earlier, a positive force) and takes their side. The colonel's mistress and her lover carry Coirana lovingly into a house, where he dies.

Antonio decides to bury Coirana in the sertao, and at the same time the colonel's mistress, who has murdered her lover for infidelity, drags him into the sertao. She passionately begins an affair with the teacher, symbolizing both life and death.

Antonio then crusades against the colonel's enforcer Mata Vaca, who has attacked the millennialists. He kills Mata Vaca (an aspect of his own past). Meanwhile, Antao, who has undergone humiliation at the hands of the teacher, also takes on positive aspects of the dead bandit, who has been represented as an incarnation of Ogum. The teacher flees the mythic world of the sertao to the historic world of the highway, but Antonio pulls him back. They discover Coirana lying in a crucifix position on the tree. The teacher seizes Coirana's weapon and undertakes his mission, killing the landowner.

In a spectacular ending that pays ironic obeisance to the American genre of the western, the old order passes. But Antonio is left to wander in the new Brazil, one of trucks cutting through the old regime's ways and bringing new problems.

Style: Rocha employs many techniques that are intended to distance the viewer from a simple acceptance of the melodramatic story line: excessive violence (sometimes so exaggerated as to be comic); theatrical gesture and staging; stop and repeat frame. (His style has often been called operatic, for its ritualistic theatricality). Background music includes traditional northeast songs (the cordel), sometimes commenting importantly on the action. The most excessive and delirious of his narrative films, the film is fiercely allegorical, and operates simultaneously on several levels. In his allegorical universe, characters do not stand merely for one characteristic or element, but in themselves exemplify contradiction and metamorphosis (here, the shifting figure of St. George, which inhabits different characters at moments of their transformation).

In this film, Rocha expressed a faith in the resources of traditional culture. As he explained, "...the most vital popular force in the Brazilian northeast is mysticism. Although it is a very negative phenomenon in sociological terms, I think that it is very positive from a subjective and unconscious point of view, because it signifies a

permanent rebellion of the people against the traditional oppression of that region." (Johnson, *Cinema Novo X Five*, p. 143)

Background on director/film: Glauber Rocha, born in a small town in the state of Bahia in the southern part of the Brazilian northeast (the town of Salvador da Bahia was the colonial capital, and the region was the original site of Portuguese settlement in Brazil) in 1938, was the undisputed genius of cinema novo. A critic, filmmaker and scriptwriter, each of his 11 directed works is distinctive. Rocha's objective was to create a cinematic expression of what he saw as the central dilemma of Brazilian culture: to find its identity, given the contradictions of a colonialist heritage and the realities of underdevelopment. He saw the goal of the filmmaker as finding new forms to express not only a unique reality but a transformative mechanism. He united political and aesthetic goals, saying, "If commercial cinema is the tradition, auteur cinema is the revolution. The politics of a modern auteur are revolutionary politics: and today it is not even necessary to qualify an auteur as revolutionary, because auteur is a totalizing noun...The auteur is responsible for the truth: his esthetics are his ethics, his mise-en-scene his politics." (Johnson, *Cinema Novo X Five*, p. 121.)

*Barravento* (1962), his first directed work, uses a realist style influenced by neorealism, to describe conflicts within a fishing village. *Black God/White Devil* (1964), was a kind of predecessor to *Antonio das Mortes*. Also set in the sertao, it has a similar cast of characters. The mysterious Antonio das Mortes sets out on contract to murder first a millennialist prophet, and then the bandit Corisco. In fact both are done in by their own contradictions. Rocha's *Land in Anguish* (1967), about the failures of the Brazilian left, reflected the bitter polarization of Brazilian politics at the time. Antonio das Mortes revises the role of the historyless Antonio, this time making him a brooding figure who inherits Coirana's mantle of opposition to the powers that be. This reflects a changed and more optimistic political perspective. Rocha went into exile, and continued to make films, revising and self-criticizing at every juncture. He died in Rio de Janeiro in 1981.

Film production context: Glauber Rocha participated from the early days of cinema novo, which began in the late '50s and whose veterans continue to make films today, although its heyday was in the '60s and early '70s. He articulated the goals of the movement in controversial statements, including one polemic calling for "an aesthetic of hunger" (1965). In it, he wrote, "...while Latin America laments its general misery, the foreign onlooker cultivates the taste of that misery, not as a tragic symptom, but merely as an esthetic object within his field of interest...For the European observer the process of artistic creation in the underdeveloped world is of interest only insofar as it satisfies a nostalgia for primitivism...From Cinema Novo it should be learned that an esthetic of violence, before being primitive, is revolutionary. It is the initial moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized...The love that this violence encompasses is as brutal as the violence itself because it is not a love of complacency or contemplation but rather of action and transformation...Wherever one finds filmmakers prepared to film the truth and oppose the hypocrisy and repression of intellectual censorship there is the living spirit of Cinema Novo; wherever filmmakers, of whatever age or background, place their cameras and their profession in the service of the great causes of our time there is the spirit of Cinema Novo...Cinema Novo is not one film but an evolving complex of films that will ultimately make the public aware of its own misery." (Johnson and Stam, 1982, pp. 69-71)

Rocha, although a spokesman for a movement, produced works that were distinctive within it, the most heralded internationally and the most relentlessly self-critical. He could be thought of as a counterpart to Jean Luc Godard, who also restlessly explored the limits of the medium, and acted simultaneously as critic and filmmaker. Although many Brazilian filmmakers of his generation and since have been inspired by his work, his style is inimitable and rooted in the historic moment of each of his works.

Importance: *Antonio das Mortes*, like others of Rocha's work, received wide international acclaim, and had a successful release in the U.S. It was not widely seen in Brazil at the time, because of the combination of political censorship and economic resistance from distributors. It is now seen in Brazil as one of the great classics of cinema novo.

#### Further Reading:

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## **Borom Sarret**

**Plot:** The camera travels with a poor cart-driver through a day's work as he struggles to make a living. As he picks up and drops off passengers, including a man carrying his child's body to the cemetery, the harsh terms of daily life for the poor are dramatized. Crisis strikes when he drives his cart into the old colonial sector, where horse-carts are prohibited, and he suffers a seemingly unpayable fine.

**Style:** The black and white film, among Sembene's first, was filmed with an old camera capable only of a minute's shooting, which he brought back with him from film school in Moscow. There is no synch sound. It makes its statements--on the lives of the poor and the enduring legacy of inequality left by colonialism--through a neorealist, non-narrated, dialogue-less portrayal of a slice of life.

**Background on director/film:** Ousmane Sembene, perhaps sub-Saharan Africa's most noted director, sees himself as a modern incarnation of the griot, the tribal storyteller, king's "jester" and obstreperous voice of the people. Sembene describes his art as influenced by independence movements as much as by film movements. "We had to see, feel and understand ourselves through the mirror of film," he told Françoise Pfaff in *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene*. "For us, African filmmakers, it was then necessary to become political, to become involved in a struggle against all the ills of man's cupidity, envy, individualism, the nouveau-riche mentality, and all the things we have inherited from the colonial and neocolonial systems."

Born in 1923 into a Muslim fishing family in Senegal, he dropped out of school in Dakar for lack of funds, and got involved both in union and theatrical activities in the city. After fighting in the French colonial troops during World War II, he worked as a longshoreman in Marseilles. In France, he participated in the politico-cultural activities of the international community, including the international Negritude movement and anti-colonial protest.

Determined to create politically engaged art, he began writing novels, drawing for his first on his political activity on the docks. His writing career sent him on international travels, including to the Soviet Union (where he met W.E.B. DuBois). Upon publishing the novel *God's Bits of Wood*, about a Senegal railroad strike he had participated in, he became one of the stars of the international creative community cultivated by French intellectuals such as Sartre.

Returning to Africa and observing the small circulation of his own novels, he became convinced that film would be a more powerful medium. His search for funds to study film netted him only one offer, in the Soviet Union, and he studied film for a year there.

Since then, Sembene has at several-year intervals produced narrative dramas typically drawn from his own novels and the tensions of Senegalese society, including *Mandabi* (*The Money Order*, 1968), *Emitai* (1971), *Xala* (1975), *Ceddo* (1976) and *Camp de Thiaroye* (1989). Sembene's style has evolved from the straightforward neorealism of *Borom Sarret* and *La Noire de...* to a style that has been called "disenchanted fables" (Pfaff) and "African realism" (Turvey and others). His films are narratives with highly defined and socially-exemplary characters. His films never carry a simple denunciation of white colonialism or a cheerleading endorsement of an officialist "African culture." Rather, his theme is the struggle to create an authentic national culture.

**Film production context:** Cinema has been an embattled cultural front in postcolonial, largely neocolonial black Africa. The few films produced per year (for instance, in the first half of the 1980s, some 68 features were produced in 13 countries) are supported in part by politically unpredictable governments, nurtured by their individual creators, and challenged by international distributors whose hold dates from colonial times. The founding fathers of African cinema have their roots in the Paris-based, pan-African Negritude movement, and have struggled to float several international projects, including film distribution and exhibition.

**Importance:** *Borom Sarret* demonstrates the influence of neorealism on international cinema in the developing world, and shows what can be done with minimal resources. It also serves as contrast to Sembene's more complex works. Finally, it offers a close-up view of the harsh contrasts existing within an African city, where horse carts and luxury cars co-exist but do not (except in violation) cross each others' paths.

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Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in Richard Dyer McCann, ed., *Film: A Montage of Theories*, Dutton, 1966, pp. 216-228 (on neorealism)

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## **The City and the Dogs**

**Plot:** Drawn from Mario Vargas Llosa's famous novel of life in a military school, the plot features several boys at the Colegio Militar of Lima, where the corruption that (it is implied) is typical of the military is learned and practiced. Theft, cheating and brutality are common.

In this enclosed world, Alberto is well-intentioned, a poet who dreams of escape. Ricardo is a romantic who has a crush on a heedless local girl. Jaguar is the scarred, rebellious macho who constantly challenges but also imitates the authorities, and who leads a school gang of thugs. The plot plays out the consequences of these characters in conflict, regulated by their brutal commander. Ricardo is murdered under mysterious circumstances after trying to escape; Alberto tries to help solve his murder, implicating Jaguar. Jaguar, to his horror, is labelled by his peers not a murderer but a snitch--a much worse fate.

**Style:** Francisco Lombardi's mature style is on display in this well-crafted narrative drama with high production values. As suits its subject matter, the film is dark in its production design and lighting, and grimly paced. Unlike the novel, the film features uncomplicated narrative, a single dominant protagonist and straightforward chronology.

**Background on director/film:** Francisco Lombardi's first feature film, the 1977 *Death at Dawn*, was a huge internal success, the first Peruvian film to recover its costs inside Peru. Drawn from tabloid headlines, it went behind them to chart the social reasons behind the acts of a child murderer. Lombardi has continued to be the most successful and commercial filmmaker in Peru. He went on to make several feature films, of which he 1986 *The City and the Dogs* was the most successful nationally and internationally--helped undoubtedly by Mario Vargas Llosa's endorsement and reputation. His 1988 *La Boca del Lobo*, also critically well received, situated military cadets in a mountain village under attack by Sendero Luminoso.

**Film production context:** See Gregorio.

**Importance:** Lombardi is possibly Peru's best-known filmmaker, and this is widely seen as his most successful film. It is also a film that evokes without sentimentality the roots of a brutal military culture.

**Further reading:**

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## **Distant Thunder**

**Plot:** A Brahmin, Ganga (Soumitra Chatterji), and his wife Ananga (Babita) arrive in a small lower-caste Bengali village in 1942, where the husband works as resident intellectual (teacher, doctor, priest). The war goes on in the sky, but daily life proceeds as if it weren't. But then a rice shortage brings the war home, and the crisis precipitates desperate behaviors. It also awakens Ganga to the cruelty of the caste system he has always taken for granted. However, even cross-caste generosity cannot deal with the massive famine, as the end title suggests: "Over five million people in Bengal starved or died in epidemics because of the man-made famine of 1943."

**Style:** Satyajit Ray, India's best known filmmaker internationally and much beloved at home, is justly noted for his ability to evoke interior crisis in human relationships, and to find the human experience behind large events. *Distant Thunder*, perhaps his most explicitly political film before his much-later interpretation of *Enemy of the People*, also unassumingly enters the lives of its characters without arch reflexivity or expressionistic indulgence.

**Background on director/film:** Born in 1921 into an immensely creative and artistic Bengali family long involved in the cultural reform movement Brahmo Samaj, Ray was a pioneer of India's "new generation"--filmmakers who eschewed the gigantic mainstream entertainment film industry in Bombay for a regional focus and authorial approach. With his *Apu Trilogy* films, made between 1950 and 1959, he paid respect to his mentor Jean Renoir, the great French humanist and filmmaker, and to the cultural traditions, including the literary traditions embodied in the novels by Bhabuti Bhusan Banerjee, of Bengal. The first in the trilogy, *Pather Panchali*, about a boy growing up in a Bengali village, was heralded, after some controversy, at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. Ray has experimented with form but never diverged dramatically from his focus on character in the crucible of circumstance; nor has he been fascinated with the potential of the form to comment on itself. Satyajit Ray was given an honorary Academy Award in 1992.

*Distant Thunder* was his second color film, and the first film on a rural subject in ten years. He had apparently harbored guilt about his wilful ignorance of the famine at the time it occurred, and was moved by the novel, also by Bhabuti Bhusan Banerjee.

**Production context:** India is a major worldwide producer of entertainment films and has been since colonial times, not only dominating the screens at home but also in many places of the middle East, Asia and Africa; Indian videos do a thriving business wherever there are Indian communities in the world. The "new generation" that grew up in the '60s benefitted from government subsidies, from the growth of regional intellectual elites and participation in an international culture of art films.

The subject of the film, the 1943-44 famine, was a grim aspect of late colonialism and world war. The war disrupted economic patterns, and hoarding and corruption ensued.

**Importance:** *Distant Thunder* was praised by western critics, but also seen as a touch melodramatic. In India it was heralded and also controversial. Bengali social critic and filmmaker Mrinal Sen's *In Search of Hunger*, about a film project on this subject, was widely seen as a savage critique of Ray's filmic liberalism.

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## Erendira

Plot: Erendira (Claudia Ohana), a young girl in a nameless Latin American land, lives with her witch-like grandmother (Irene Pappas) in a ruined mansion. One night she accidentally sets the place on fire, and her grandmother says she must work to pay back the damage. She and her grandmother set out on the road, where Erendira becomes a travelling whore. An itinerant photographer accompanies them. Episodes with a nunnery and a political campaign demonstrate the repression of the Church and the charlatany of politics. Erendira meets a young idealistic man, Ulisses, who decides to rescue her and slay the grandmother. The grandmother proves harder to slay than expected, Ulisses' idealism is daunted, and Erendira's newfound freedom leaves her with an uncharted path across the desert.

In an interview with Pat Aufderheide on the film's 1984 release, Guerra said, "This is a story about the liberation of a human being. What is left open at the end of the film is what she will do with it. There are subsidiary themes--the refusal of love, because love can be repressive if it is not exercised responsibly. The grandmother is simply selfish in her love.

"Their relationship also reflects the terms of underdevelopment. The girl only has her sex and the grandmother uses that asset cynically. She, the grandmother, believes that the ends justify the means, that the conquest of power is enough. Ulisses is a 'prince charming,' but he's really empty. His love is about three oranges and a pistol. The photographer is someone who is limited to seeing what is happening in front of him. And he ends up getting eliminated. It's not safe on the margins. He doesn't want to get his hands dirty, but an artist has to get his hands dirty, more than anyone else."

Style: This is an explicitly allegorical film, made in an attempt to bring the "magical realist" style of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who wrote the script, to the screen.

Magical realism is a term used to capture the living contradictions of societies in the active process of underdevelopment and neocolonialism, although it originated in Weimar Germany, where it referred to the mystery in the mundane. The great Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier refurbished the term as "our marvellous American reality" in the '50s, and in the heated days of '60s militant cinema in Latin America, filmmakers tried to put it on screen. "The fiesta of metaphors, of allegory, of symbols is not a carnival of subjectivity; it is the attempt at a rational analysis of a deformed reality, deformed by European culture and suffocated by American imperialism," said the late, mad but brilliant Brazilian cinema novo director Glauber Rocha. (For more in video on magical realism, see *La magia de lo real*, including an interview with Garcia Marquez.)

The tale, which is fabulous in style, is told with fairy-tale intensity--bright, symbolic colors; acting and mise en scene that abjures the psychological; deliberately cheap special effects.

Guerra explained in interview, "I wanted to portray the fantastic as normal. All the special effects are the simplest possible--the butterflies, for example. I wanted for the spectator to take off in his own imagination, from the material, not to resolve the fantasy for him. I've heard criticisms that these were simply bad special effects, but the goal was to create special effects that fit in with the reality we were trying to describe. Magic is false, but it exists. That is the great contribution of Garcia Marquez. He shows us that the most fantastic is very close to us.

"Magical realism is appropriate to a culture where technology hasn't yet dominated the life of man, where mankind still has the capacity to grant the unknowable as real."

Background on director/film: Ruy Guerra, who was born in 1931 in Mozambique, educated in Europe and has worked most of his creative life in Brazil, was one of Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha's foremost compatriots. *Erendira*, like his later films such as *Malandro* and *Fable of the Beautiful Pigeon-fancier*, has impressive production values, differing dramatically from his earlier work as a practitioner of "poor" cinema committed to Brechtian distancing. But there are continuities, embodied in Guerra's search for the 'irrational magic,' as Rocha once put it, of Latin reality.

His first feature, the 1962 *Os Cafajestes*, putting front and center of the frame violent thugs and tracing their coming to self-awareness, shocked audiences so much the film was banned at home and in the U.S. In the internationally-heralded *Os Fuzis* (*The Guns*, 1964), the army arrives in the desert northeast where millennial prophecy is as common as hunger to suppress a peasant movement; the film coolly documents the event--from both sides. It's two films in one, colliding with each other in a brutal motion that replicates the social reality. After years of suppression under dictatorship, Guerra's next film, *The Gods and the Dead* (1971) plunged frontally into the magical world where allegory expresses a higher reality. He was making, among other things, a bold filmic answer to stern leftists who demanded a cinema verite of misery. Guerra spent some time in Mozambique after independence, making among other things a re-enactment of a ritual drama in which villagers recall a famous massacre, *Mueda*.

He continues to produce features with an international market, although his latest films have not been received well.

Film production context: This film has a 16-year long history. Garcia Marquez wrote *Erendira* as a film script, which was then lost. He then wrote it as a novella, and worked with Guerra on the new script. He was pleased with the result, claiming that it was the first film that truly captured the magical realism of his prose. (Many films have been made of his scripts, starting perhaps with the Mexican Arturo Ripstein's *Tiempo de Morir* in the early 1960s.)

The film was made as an international co-production, with some help from the Brazilian government film agency and with private international money. The international cast, including Irene Pappas as the grandmother, helped to raise finances. This is an example of an international co-production that does not lose its cultural integrity.

Importance: *Erendira* is an example of a filmic style that imaginatively expresses felt cultural reality. It is also an example of sophisticated production on themes of underdevelopment.

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## **Video in the Villages (Espirito da TV, Festa da Moca, Pemp)**

Plot: The subject matter of these three short (two 18 and one--Pemp--27 minute long) documentaries, produced by the Centro de Trabalho Indigenista in conjunction with various indigenous groups in Brazil and directed by the Center's head, Vincent Carelli, is shaped by each indigenous group's way of using video.

Espirito da TV is an essay about the way the Waiapi, a small and recently contacted Tupi-speaking group in far northern Brazil, have used television to document their own cultural practices, to discover the existence of other Tupi-speaking groups they had not known about, and to receive the experience of other indigenous groups that have confronted common problems such as land rights. The work unfortunately does not refer, except in credits, to an anthropologist who worked with the Waiapi during this time and who provided some on-camera translation.

Festa da Moca showcases the way that the Nambikwara in Brazil's far northwest used video to revive waning cultural practices. The Nambikwara is a once-huge group, savagely reduced by disease and cultural collapse in the 1960s as a result of the opening of a major road (the 364) for mining, logging and colonization in the Amazon. Led by one of the group's leaders, aided by Carelli, they recorded a lengthy girls' puberty ritual, and then watched it as a group. The viewing produced much criticism of the ritual for nontraditional practices in it, and when the opportunity came up, this group united with another to perform the ritual more traditionally. Thus encouraged, the group went on to restore a male puberty ritual of nose piercing, a hallmark Nambikwara practice that had not been practiced for a generation. In the video, the Nambikwara leader is described as a co-director.

Pemp documents the recent history of the Gavião tribe in the eastern Amazon. In the 60s, the Gavião were widely considered so decimated by contact that their continued survival as a group was impossible. As the video shows through interviews, oral histories and scenes of people at work, the group has not only survived but has pioneered some approaches to living on the interface with Brazilian culture. The group has resisted the pressures of development (specifically hydroelectric dams and the massive Carajás mining project), invested monies given for use rights on the land, begun a marketing cooperative for Brazilnuts (peculiarly translated as "chestnuts" in the video) that properly manages the tropical rain forest, and begun tribal cultural reclamation projects with the Help of video. As in Festa da Moca, a tribal leader is both a co-producer and a major spokesperson.

Style: Each of these videos has a self-reflexive aspect because of the self-conscious reference to television itself and the indigenous groups' use of it. Much indigenous use of video clearly does not look anything like these videos, as we can see from the sight of Indians closely examining their ritual practices on camera. When producing for themselves, Amazonian Indians appear to highly prize complete documentation of rituals that may take days to complete, as Turner has noted. This is not merely reproduction, albeit in a different form, of tradition; it marks a new awareness by indigenous groups of their cultural practices and heritage as a culture among others, and it makes cultural preservation an explicit issue.

Although a Brazilian, Carelli, is the director of these projects, these videos are also artifacts of indigenous use of video. Indigenous groups have become acutely aware of the power of mass media, and the need to intervene in the shaping of their own images in the outside world. These videos were produced for an outside audience, both in other indigenous groups and in the wider national and international communities concerned with indigenous affairs and human rights. They are all typified by a representation of indigenous groups as organizations that want to and can survive on their own terms, and can incorporate modern technology (such as video) toward that end.

Background/Production Context: The Video in the Villages project is part of the Centro de Trabalho Indigenista, a non-governmental organization. The project began in the 1980s and receives funding from a variety of sources including U.S. foundations and Brazilian non-governmental organizations. These videos are only a small part of the project's function; a far larger part is being of technical assistance to indigenous organizations who want to use video, and developing archiving systems for recorded videotape.

Importance: This is one example of burgeoning work with and by indigenous groups worldwide. It is part of the practice that is changing the terms of what was once known as "ethnographic cinema."

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## Perfumed Nightmare

**Plot:** Kidlat Tahimik is a young man living in a small Filipino village. As the film opens, we see him in three stages of life (symbolized by toy and then real "jeepneys," the elaborately recrafted and decorated vehicles that have their origins in the Jeeps left by the Allies in World War II) crossing the bridge--"the bridge of life"--to his village. Narrating in voiceover, Tahimik explains the patterns of daily life in the village. He has a fascination with the Voice of America broadcasts, and particularly with the space program. He longs to be part of the developed world, and forms the Werner von Braun fan club. When an American arrives for an aborted international conference, he gets his chance. The American asks him to come to Paris, to run his chewing-gum-ball machine concession on the streets. In Paris, and on a trip to Germany, he makes friends and discovers that progress in the developed world sacrifices important values. Backgrounded by footage of a summit meeting in Paris, and unable to return to an idealized image of his past, he stubbornly refuses to capitulate to the terms of progress, resigning from his post as head of the Werner von Braun fan club and maintaining that he will find his own way.

**Style:** This film has very crude production values, and they are part of its charm and message. It is intended to look very much a "home made" film, improvised, much like jeepneys are, from available materials and made into a distinctive statement. It melds found footage, stock footage and narrative footage, tied together with voiceover. There is a strong narrative line, with occasional magical touches. The central character, seemingly authorial, is clearly a fictional creation (see below, Background on director/film). The naivete of the character serves as a disarming device for Tahimik to put forward a critique of Western progress. The film is explicitly allegorical, and full of metaphors, puns, sly ironies and jokes.

**Background on director/film:** Kidlat Tahimik, whose real name is Eric de Guia (Kidlat Tahimik means "quiet lightning" in Tagalog and is also the name of his first son, born before completing this film), grew up "eating French fries and burgers" in Baguio, The Philippines. (Baguio is a summer resort, influenced by American culture from longstanding U.S. bases.) A restless and ambitious person with an idiosyncratic and sometimes mystical vision, he began this, his first film, more or less by accident. He had come to Europe to sell Filipino-made trinkets, but a typhoon delayed the shipment. (Some of this history was later reworked in a later film, Turumba.) Stranded, he made some contacts with filmmakers, including Werner Herzog. On \$10,000, using outdated film stock, found and stock footage, and donated in-kind resources through Herzog's network, he spent years simultaneously making this film and learning how to make film. The film was released in the U.S. through Francis Coppola's now-defunct studio Zoetrope (again, through Herzog's connections, with Coppola's producer Tom Luddy).

Tahimik returned to the Philippines, but lives an international life. His later films are in some ways simpler than this one, which depend for its effects on elaborate pastiche. He has been working on a film called Memories of Overdevelopment (a takeoff on Tomas Gutierrez Alea's Memories of Underdevelopment) since 1983. It is to be the story of the first man to voyage around the world--not Magellan, but one of his slaves, bought in the Philippines.

**Film production context:** Film production in the Philippines is prolific and sophisticated. The national industry produces between 150 and 200 entertainment films a year, depending heavily on romance and action, capitalizing on scandalous current events, and often richly sentimental. The Filipino film industry has spawned whole genres and subgenres of its own. It has been under one or another form of censorship for many years, first under Marcos and then under Aquino. Even more powerful than government censorship is the profit motive. The industry is concerned with profits, not prestige. As one of the leading Filipino filmmakers, Lino Brocka, said to Pat Aufderheide at the Toronto Festival of Festivals in 1987, "When my producer tells me about a new film, she always says, 'Now Lino, no awards, please.'" (Lino Brocka died in a car accident in 1991.)

Perfumed Nightmare was made entirely outside this production universe. Made in Europe, it has been shown in art houses in the Philippines, never even threatened with censorship. Tahimik told Pat Aufderheide in 1987 at Duke University that he thinks his work has never been censored because he works in 16mm, which is not a mass medium, since commercial theaters show in 35mm. Later work by Tahimik has gotten European support, for instance from the German cultural channel ZDF for Turumba. He gets little support from within the Philippines, where he is correctly perceived as a noncommercial filmmaker.

Importance: Perfumed Nightmare has won a cult reputation in the U.S. and Europe, where it is often seen in repertory or educational contexts. It was highly praised on its first appearance here, but remains a cult phenomenon. It is significant as an example of integration of form and content. Tahimik's critique of progress is built into his film style. It is also significant as a rare example of a film from a developing country about development that is executed with humor.

Further Reading:

Pat Aufderheide, "The joys of an imperfect film," In These Times Sep. 2-8, 1981

Kathleen Hulser, "Jitney Tour of Soft Illusions," The Independent, December 1982, pp. 9-10

Kidlat Tahimik, "Cups-of-Gas Filmmaking vs. Full-Tank-cum-Credit Card Fillmaking," Discourse, XI:2 (Spring-Summer 1989), pp. 81-86

## Portrait of Teresa

**Plot:** Teresa is a Cuban woman who exemplifies the problems of Cuban women under the revolution: They have done a lot for the revolution, but what has the revolution done for them?

Teresa (Daisy Granados, the director's wife and one of post-1959 Cuban cinema's most prominent actors since its origins) has three sons (Granados' and Vega's own) and a traditional, rather suspicious husband (Adolfo Llaurado, another prominent actor). She also has a factory job, and is a dedicated, harrassed revolutionary worker who takes on the job of cultural secretary at the factory despite misgivings that she won't be able to handle her many responsibilities. The responsibilities of the latter position increase her husband's jealousy and infantilism, and make her feel increasingly inadequate. She throws her husband out after an ugly scene, and he returns to his mother's house. She is left shouldering the day-to-day burdens of managing life under the revolution.

**Style:** Vega said, in interview in Havana with Pat Aufderheide in July 1983, that among filmmakers he most highly esteemed Robert Flaherty, for his ability to reveal with deceptive simplicity the drama of daily life, and also the Italian neorealists. He chose, in his earlier work especially and quintessentially in *Portrait of Teresa*, to use a style reminiscent of documentary, carrying with it the truth claims of documentary, while developing narratives of psychological crisis and evolution. "You can't film the hearts of men with a candid camera," he said. "The things that most influence daily life are the unconscious ones--the neorealists knew that." A scene of Teresa waking up and going through her morning routine is exemplary; it is conducted in what appears to be (but isn't) real time, and is meticulously detailed, giving the viewer a sense of the myriad responsibilities Teresa faces.

**Background on director/film:** Pastor Vega, who came to be one of the most influential figures in ICAIC, throughout most of the '80s heading the international division including the film festival, began his work at ICAIC, as many did, in documentaries. He made several sharply pointed film essays, including the 1967 *Song of the Tourist*, a 15 minute film comparing underdevelopment ad revolution. *Portrait of Teresa* was his first feature and widely acknowledged still to be his best. The film was co-scripted by renowned writer Ambrosio Fornet.

**Film production context:** See *Memories of Underdevelopment*.

**Importance:** This was one of Cuba's all-time most popular films in Cuba, because it so graphically and empathetically addressed a pervasive problem. (Other Cuban documentaries and fiction features have dealt with the subject, but none with the combination of emotional appeal and sociological boldness.) Internationally it has become one of the handful of Cuban films regarded as emblematic of the best in Cuban cinema.

**Further reading:**

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John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America*, London: Verso, 1990

B. Ruby Rich, "Portrait of Teresa: Double day, double standards," *Jump/Cut* 22 (May 1980), pp. 30f.

## Saaraba

Plot: The "paradise" of the title quickly gains an ironic flavor in this first feature, a bitterly passionate message of disillusionment.

The hero Tamsir (Abdoul Aziz Diop) has returned to Dakar from 17 years in Paris, scornful of the West and eager to return to tradition. But he's immediately put to work on his uncle's plan to build a factory, where corruption is endemic. Returning to his village, he finds his traditionalist rhetoric battered by a love affair with a neighbor girl (Fabienne Joelle Felhio) who's been promised as a third wife to the local big man, and who can't marry him even though she becomes pregnant by him.

Tamsir isn't the only one whose dreams of paradise are illusory. There's the village character (Diankou Bakhyokho), who stubbornly clings to the belief that he can ride on his motorcycle (inherited from the European priest) to the "paradise" of the big city--until he tries it. Tamsir's cousin (Cheikh Seck) is a sulky rastaman who thinks smoking hash and boycotting his father's business is enough of a statement of resistance, and he's got plenty of friends in town who help him. He finally flees the contradictions of his class to, of course, Paris. (The film uncomfortably prods as well those who take refuge in anti-colonial and anti-Western rhetoric, without attempting to address local complicity.) Finally, there is the older generation, shocked out of complacency by the actions of their children, but unable to come up with an alternative.

The failed dream of paradise plagues everyone: the farmers struggling with exhausted land and dying cattle; the villagers chafing under arbitrary local authorities; the village daughter who wants to both obey her parents and her heart.

Style: Saaraba's disquieting theme unrolls in a style that unprotestingly uses many of the conventions of European television narrative, from the camerawork featuring many closeups to the editing to the efficient pacing.

But given the film's theme, stressing the impossibility of a blind return to tradition and the dilemmas of development, the stylistic choices do not ring false. This is a film about people trapped between epochs and worlds. Neither Tamsir nor his creator Seck can deny the intermixing of cultures. The film's opening shots, alternating between hectic, tightly-shot scenes of urban technology and wide-pan tableaux of rural countryside, set the scene and foretell the drama to come.

Howard University professor Mbye Cham notes, in the catalog for the Library of African Cinema, that although Saaraba is part of a post-1980 "new wave" of angry-young-men films, it still participates in the filmic tradition, established by Senegalese master film artist Ousmane Sembene, of using cinema as a platform for political and spiritual self awareness. The film's hybrid heritage, evident in its style, may reflect, says Cham, not only its funding and Seck's training, but "that Seck and the disillusioned, fragmented generation he represents seek a more personalized, subjective and ethically-based vision of the future."

Still, it's clear this is a first feature. The narrative thread sometimes gets tangled or lost--for instance, we never see Tamsir discover that his girlfriend is pregnant, nor do we know how he reacted. Psychological motivation takes second place to the filmmaker's thematic exposition. Transitions are sometimes mechanical, and mise-en-scene at times textbook, even cliched.

Background on director/film: The 38-year old Senegalese Amadou Saalum Seck made this film with mostly German technicians, after studying film in Germany and making several short documentaries. He produced the film with funds from German television channel ZDF's "Das Kleine Fernspiel" (the experimental wing of ZDF, with a track record in Third World productions). This was his thesis film.

Film production context: For general background, see Borom Sarret. Senegal has now benefitted from several generations of filmmakers, some documentarians and some fiction storytellers. Seck takes his place among the sharply critical, sometimes cynical newer generation of cineastes.

Importance: Saaraba, while winning a modest festival showing, was not distributed commercially in the U.S. It represents a rising voice of alienation and despair at the fulfillment of promises of development and of independence.

Further reading:

Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West*, esp. 214-225

*Library of African Cinema: A Guide to video resources for colleges and public libraries*, catalog, California Newsreel, 1991.

## Sugar Cane Alley

Plot: Jose (Garry Cadenat), a young boy who lives with his grandmother (the native Martinican Darling Legitimus, one of the two professional actors in the film and a veteran actress in France, where she was limited to demeaning roles) in the cane fields of Martinique in the 1930s, wins a scholarship to attend high school in Fort-de-France, the capital.

Life in the village has already been rich in lessons. He has learned the shadings in race relations through friendship with a mulatto boy, the bastard son of the Creole plantation owner. He has learned about exploitation and resistance when a neighbor woman offers him lunch in exchange for servant work, which makes him late for class. He defies his angry teacher and the woman, running away from school to throw rocks at her precious dishes. And he has learned about the African roots of his culture from his village mentor, Medouze (Douta Seck, a noted West African actor).

In Fort-de-France, grandmother drags her old bones from door to door in the rich sector of town as a laundress (Jose only won a partial scholarship), while Jose not only struggles to meet the demands of his new professor, but also discovers the class, race and colonial divisions of city life. His moment of glory seems to come when the professor reads his essay to the class--a paean to the life of poor blacks, drawn in part from the ancient tales of slavery told him by Medouze. But the professor accuses him of plagiarism, and Jose flees. Later the professor tracks him down at home, to tell him he's changed his mind and congratulate him. It's a turning point for Jose, who is launched on the road to a future that can acknowledge its roots, even as his grandmother dies. A harsher fate awaits the mulatto boy, whose white father has died without acknowledging him.

Style: The film has high production values, despite a less-than-a-million-dollar budget, and is executed with deceptive grace and simplicity. It comfortably uses the conventions of psychological realism in which traditional international fiction features are made. The acting by child non-actors is of particular note, an achievement not only of the children but of Palcy's directing. The film maintains close focus on the psychological experience of the boy hero, but packs the screen and the scenes with illuminating and contextualizing material. It carries a message without reducing the story to the message.

Background on director/film: Palcy, who is black, began work in the French National Radio and Television station FR3 in Martinique, and made three films working with children before this. She won a grant for a third of the production funds from a French government grant for young directors. She wrote the script, drawing it from a well-known Martinican novel by Joseph Zobel, of the same title. Martinican officials including the noted poet of negritude Aime Cesaire, the mayor of Fort-de-France, backed the production as well. (Cesaire's friendship with Seck had much to do with his agreeing to play the role.) The film was made in French, not the Martinican creole, in part to satisfy the grant requirements; however the film was not, as is traditional with such grants, first shown in France. It premiered in Martinique, where it broke all box office records for any film ever shown there, and as a result of a post-card campaign from Martinique to France also became a hit in France.

Because the film was controversial and because the white Creole elite continues strong in Martinique (which continues to be an overseas province of France), Palcy had wondered if there might be local criticism. However, she told Pat Aufderheide when it came out, in an interview in Chicago, there was no elite outrage. "Partly it's because they have less power than they once did, because French overseas investment now has more control over the economy. And partly it's because they were relieved to see the final result. They had been afraid that the film would be much harsher in its portrayal of whites, in fact a racist film. I however had never wanted to make a racist film. I wanted to make a film that could touch people, awaken their consciences to a sense of change--a revolt in a positive sense--and move them to struggle peacefully for a better life, to come to see themselves as people with dignity."

Palcy went on to study with noted French filmmaker Jean Rouch and completed a film with him before working in Hollywood on *A Dry White Season*, an anti-apartheid thriller set in South Africa, which she directed.

Film production context: Film production throughout the Antilles is very much an individual and personal affair. Small and impoverished populations create no adequate mass base to finance commercial production. French

government grants both to its overseas provinces and its ex-colonies (not just in the Antilles but in Africa) have been critical in spurring film production.

Importance: The film swept the French Cesars (like the Oscars), and won two awards, including the Silver Lion, at the Venice Film Festival. It was a smash hit at home, and well-received in France. It had a successful commercial release in the U.S., with Orion, and continues its life on commercial video shelves. One of the reasons for its international success is its winsome hero and the story that can be interpreted as a boy pulling himself up by his bootstraps. However, that reading is belied by a more careful look at the central dilemma of the film: that colonial education provides no way for someone from the lower rungs of the society to honor their own and their culture's experience of struggle. The enduring success of the film is its ability to allow the viewer to enter into the boy's central problem without becoming didactic.

Further Reading:

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Joseph Zobel, *Black Shack Alley*, Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980

Aime Cesaire, *The Collected Poetry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983

Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972

## **The Time to Live and the Time to Die**

**Plot:** A coming of age story, pointedly autobiographical, this film recounts a childhood in a family that moves from mainland China to Taiwan after World War II. Superficially a series of small incidents that define the various lives and the way they intertwine in one family, it is also a film dominated by loss. The boy's coming of age involves taking care of and finally saying goodbye to family members, perhaps most prominently the grandmother--as a person who frequently loses track of time and self, a source of trouble and also a tie to the never-to-be-returned-to past.

**Style:** Hou Hsiao-Hsien employs a style that appears casual, documentary-like, neorealist. His camera keeps us at a slightly greater distance from the characters than we might be accustomed to, although he is far from the first Asian director to so position the camera; and he has long, sometimes static takes in which the viewer may "browse" the scene for meaning. Pacing is deliberately anticlimactic, both within and between scenes, but the accumulation of uncommented, self-revelatory vignettes from childhood (told in the third person) adds up to a mood of an era.

**Background on director/film:** This was the first internationally heralded feature of Hou Hsiao Hsien, born in 1947 in Canton province, China. Hou Hsiao-Hsien's family moved to Taiwan in 1948 and settled in the south. As was reported in the major retrospective of Pacific Rim cinema in 1987 at Toronto Film Festival, his father died when he was 12, and his mother when he was 18. After military service (where he served in a film unit) and studying film and drama he began working in the film industry. He made the claim that *The Time to Live and the Time to Die* was his last autobiographical film, although a later film, *Dust in the Wind*, seemed similar in tone and subject matter. His most recent film, *City of Sadness* (1990), was intensely controversial in Taiwan, because it dealt with the way the lives of a Taiwanese family were disrupted and transformed for the worse by the arrival of mainland Chinese immigrants. That history, from the Taiwanese perspective, had long been off-limits. He said in interview (quoted in the Toronto festival catalog), denying a political agenda, "I am not trying to express any special ideas. What really interests me is people. I am emotional about people. Only people move me."

**Film production context:** Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China are all competitors for the same audiences; all produce prolifically for avid audiences of movie goers. Until its market in Vietnam collapsed and Hong Kong competition undercut it, in Taiwan action-adventure films dominated production. In 1982, the government in desperation backed young, relatively uncommercial directors whose work explored the personal meaning of Taiwanese identity, and won awards and profits. These younger Taiwanese directors have created a subgenre of personal, sometimes touching and sometimes brooding, films of daily life that have evoked parallels with directors as diverse as Satyajit Ray and Antonioni. The most celebrated of them is Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Other names include Edward Yang, who like many younger Pacific Rim Chinese filmmakers trained at the University of Southern California; Wan Jen; and Yu K'an-P'ing. In the later '80s, the Taiwanese government withdrew subsidies and the incipient movement foundered. However, production continued, with over a hundred films produced annually.

**Importance:** Widely praised and awarded in film festivals, the film had a small repertory circulation in the U.S. Hou Hsiao-Hsien is recognized as a leading Asian film artist, and this is his own coming of age film professionally. This film is also important for revealing a subjective version of a bitter and many-faceted period of post-war reorganization on the Pacific Rim.

**Further reading:**

John A. Lent, *The Asian Film Industry*. Austin: University of Texas, Press, 1990.

## **La Vie Est Belle**

**Plot:** Zairian singing star Papa Wemba plays a bumbling poor boy who looks for love and respect in the big city (Kinshasa), and eventually, after many farcical mishaps, finds it. A country bumpkin, he gets a job in a luxury home with a powerful, bossy wife, who flounces out of town. Left alone in the house, the hick chauffeur pretends to be the man of the house. In a nightclub-hopping spree, his masquerade works to impress the girl of his dreams. He dreads the dawn and discovery, but love conquers all except the temper of his boss.

**Style:** The style of *La Vie Est Belle* is reminiscent of both French farce and broad Hollywood comedy (it was co-directed by a Belgian, one of the conditions of its funding). Made both for a pan-African and a broadly international market, it is cheerfully vulgar and leans heavily for jokes on unflattering stereotypes of powerful women. While atypical of the African cinema on the international festival circuit and of the objectives of the first generation of African cineastes (see Borom Sarret), it is typical of a genre of African-for-Africans entertainment films, also reflecting tastes of the region, and is a particularly successful example. The star, Papa Wemba, is a pan-African celebrity, and internationally moderately well-known.

**Background on director/film:** Ngangura Mweze was trained in cinema in Belgium, taught film at the National Institute for Arts in Kinshasa, and was chief of the audio-visual section of the National Museum of Zaire. *La Vie Est Belle* is his first feature; earlier he scripted and directed two documentary mid-length films, *Cheri Samba* and *Kin Kiese*.

In an interview with Pat Aufderheide at Filmfest D.C. in 1988, Mweze addressed the controversial question of whether *La Vie Est Belle* is an authentic African film or an example of co-production tainting cultural values: "So what is an African film? Not a marginal cinema, I hope. This is the first African feature a public has gone to the trouble of paying the same money for that they would have for a Rambo, or a kung fu film. Most African films are shown at cultural centers, practically free." (The film was a smash hit in Zaire, widely popular in Africa, and was widely seen in European television.)

"I was also very pleased that in Belgium and in Canada, I could show it to people who had come to see something 'from Africa,' and by a quarter of the way through, they had forgotten that and were just watching 'a movie.'"

Mweze disagrees with those who see African cineastes as modern-day griots, or storytellers: "People don't know really what they are talking about when they say 'African cinema.' Cinema is a language that does not exist in traditional African culture. Cinema is an urban art. The griot in one part of Africa is not the same as in another part of Africa. The public to whom one addresses oneself may not know what a griot is. In Kinshasa, they don't exist."

**Film production context:** Zaire has little film production but lively television production. Most Zairian filmmakers--although not Mweze--learned their technique in television, which primarily produces variety shows and documentaries. Television's potential to foster indigenous cultural expression is limited by the fact that it receives low-cost product from international sources, particularly European.

**Importance:** *La Vie Est Belle* is significant because it demonstrates a different side of African cinema from the sober, often didactic films probing social, economic and political realities of newly independent nations. It is frankly populist and showcases African entertainment.

**Other reading:**

"Special Report: Evolving African Cinema," *Black Film Review* (Washington, D.C.), 4:4 (Fall 1988), including articles by Pat Aufderheide, Leigh Jackson and Manthia Diawara  
Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West*, University of California, 1987

## Wedding in Galilee

**Plot:** A Palestinian patriarch must invite a Jewish Israeli official to his son's wedding, in order to hold it properly. The decision rankles with the groom and his friends, who variously direct their rage against both authority figures and concoct a plot against the visiting Jewish soldiers. The plot is quashed by the elders. In the middle of the ceremony, a horse escapes into a field mined by the Israeli government, and it becomes a symbol of oppressed Palestinians as the soldiers fail to recover it by firing shots but the Palestinian patriarch lures it out. The wedding night culminates in crisis, as the groom, caught in the conflict between the younger and older generation, discovers he cannot consummate the marriage.

**Style:** The film has state-of-the-art production values, and a strong, taut narrative line. The film's powerful and frank political theme is well-dressed in the ritual pageantry of an old-fashioned village wedding, filmed with canny appeal to the cinema sophisticate's idea of rustic color. Several lush scenes feature women bathing and dressing, but Khleifi buffs over any hint of exploitation.

**Background on director/film:** Michel Khleifi, a Palestinian born in Nazareth who now lives in Belgium, made the film for \$800,000 (less than a low-cost made-for-television movie) with private financial support from France and Belgium, and from German TV. The film came out before the intifadah, and Khleifi, in an interview with Pat Aufderheide at Filmfest D.C. in 1988, commented on its treatment of violence in the young boys' terrorist plot: "The problem of violence, of the legitimacy of violence, is an issue today. It's a question of the purity of revolt; that's what I'm dealing with. The young man is the same age as the Israeli soldier, the one who fires on the horse. The film is prophetic of the current uprising."

Asked about the film's political implications, Khleifi said: "Wedding in Galilee is a personal film. I think a film only works that way. The characters should not stand in for political concepts. I stand for a cinema that decolonizes life, and I don't like neat distinctions between entertainment and politics. Decolonization supersedes simple politics. Politics, sex, social life, dreams, the psyche, work, and the relationship with the land--all of these interact. If I didn't understand things this way, I would be a propagandist, not a cultural creator. My heroes are artists like Pasolini, Godard, Fassbinder, Ozu, Kurosawa, Tarkovsky, Arthur Penn. I am striving to unite liberty, dignity and pleasure.

"But the film deals with several issues nonetheless: There is a problem in the relationship between the individual and the collective; there is the political question; and there is the question of modernity vs. archaism."

Khleifi went on to make a film in 1990 called *Canticle of the Stones*, interweaving documentary and fiction footage, about the intifadah, which was widely seen as fiercely polemical.

**Film production context:** Within Israel, where the state has a variety of support mechanisms for filmmakers, a few Palestinians have made films. However, their work occurs within careful political bounds. Outside Israel, many films, particularly documentaries, have been made on Palestinian issues, some by Palestinians in exile. International nongovernmental organizations as well as PLO entities and supportive Arab organizations have contributed to this production. Khleifi's film is a rare example of a feature entertainment film that features Palestinian culture, not merely political issues. It is also a rare example of a privately-funded production.

American University has one example of an Israeli film: *Beyond the Walls*, by Uri Barbash. It makes an interesting comparison with *Wedding in Galilee*.

**Importance:** *Wedding in Galilee* is important for the way that political issues become part of a culture that is changing within its own terms (e.g. the challenges to the patriarch) as well as being threatened from without. Without proposing solutions or creating villains in the Israeli soldiers (who are shown as just doing their job), it dramatizes a social as well as political crisis. It also raises questions of gender relations, in the patriarch's role and in the portrayal of women's culture as offering powerful support for the women as well as being a separate realm from the men's. The finished film was not shown in Israel, because censors disagreed with several specific items, including the use of "Galilee" in the title, although it was filmed without incident in Israel. It was distributed in the U.S. successfully on a repertory and festival circuit.

Other reading:

Coco Fusco, "Allegories of Palestine," *Afterimage* November 1988, pp. 14-16

Lisa Hajjar, Mouin Rabban and Joel Beinin, "Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict for Beginners," in Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, *Intifadah: The Palestinian uprising against Israeli Occupation*, Boston: South End Press, 1989, pp. 101-112

Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representatation*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989

## **Wend Kuuni**

**Plot:** In a timeless preindustrial past, a mute young boy is found abandoned by a peddler, who takes him back to the village. There the winsome child is adopted by the village and named "God's gift," or Wend Kuuni. When the child sees a corpse hanging from a tree, he remembers and we see in a series of flashbacks the series of tragedies that left him orphaned. After his father had disappeared while hunting, his mother refused to remarry (violating tradition) and was banished, dying and leaving her son alone. Without social context, the boy forgets how to speak.

The movie demonstrates how cooperation and caring can overcome bigotry and intolerance.

**Style:** Simply and charmingly told, the film uses a minimum of attention-getting filmic devices and attempts to mimic in film the storytelling traditions of the Mossi and the pace of African rural life.

**Background on director/film:** See [Zan Boko](#). Further, it is important to note, as Howard University professor Mbye Cham did in the catalog for the Library of African Cinema, that *Wend Kuuni* was the first prominent feature film produced in Burkina Faso, and a pioneering attempt to "Africanize" film language. Dialog was kept at a minimum, to maximize understanding among different language groups.

**Film production context:** See [Zan Boko](#).

**Importance:** Mbye Cham notes, "*Wend Kuuni* is one of the most universally accessible and immediately appealing of African films. Its influence on post 1982 African films, most noticeably his fellow Burkinabe Idrissa Ouedraogo's popular *Yaaba* (1989), has been enormous."

## World of Apu

Plot: In the third in the Pather Panchali trilogy that established premier Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray's name, Apu finally grows up, through the seasoning of tragedy. Apu (famed Indian actor Soumitra Chatterjee), an aspiring writer, takes a trip to the country on a lark with a friend. They attend a wedding in which the groom goes crazy; the family, eager to save face, presses Apu into service as the groom.

Apu resists but finally capitulates, and only reluctantly allows his bride to share his life. They grow ever closer until she goes home to her village to have their baby. She dies in childbirth, leaving a son that Apu is too bitter even to visit. Apu's bestfriend convinces him finally to visit his by-now preschool son, who rejects his friendship, unaware that Apu is his father. Finally, the son relents and both return to Calcutta. Apu the would-be author is finally learning how to live and love.

Style: The film is clearly marked by Ray's debt to Italian neorealists and to Jean Renoir, who so prized film's ability to create the illusion of reality and reveal the ambiguities of the human condition. In that sense it has a "western" feel, perhaps most easily seen in the long take that was also a hallmark of Renoir. His framing, some have noted, also partakes of his experience as a painter and his study with the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Background on director/film: See [Distant Thunder](#).

Film production context: See [Distant Thunder](#).

Importance: World of Apu crowns some of the best known and beloved Indian films internationally. (The first in the trilogy, Pather Panchali, won a special prize at Cannes. With psychological warmth the film describes a crisis both particular to Apu's class, his locale, and his era, and also universal.

## **Woza Albert!**

**Plot:** Drawn from a play, the film features two actors in roles of various black South Africans--a vendor, barber, servant, manual laborer, soldier--receiving the news that Christ (Morena) has arrived in South Africa, where a Calvinist white elite imposes apartheid. Christ's arrival precipitates a crisis, and the government launches a nuclear bomb against the peacemaker. In the ruins, great South African leaders in resistance to apartheid such as Albert Luthuli, assassinated president of the African National Congress, are resurrected.

Interwoven with segments from the play are documentary sequences from daily life scenes in South Africa, showing viewers the raw material from which the sketches are drawn. As well, the film includes interviews with the writers, who explain the reality from which they drew their skits. So viewers get, for each scene, the social and aesthetic background.

The film ends with two codas. After the actors begin the process of resurrecting black leaders, a clip of Albert Luthuli lecturing the great western powers--and implicitly the western audience, is shown: "It is these big nations," he says with graceful dignity, "that must do big things."

And then, as credits rolls, the film travels into the foyer of different South African theaters, interviewing blacks and whites about their very different reactions to the play.

**Style:** The film, interweaving documentary with performance footage, is an example of an international collaboration that successfully explains to a foreign audience the felt experience of an oppressed group. It is not, and is not intended, as a South African film. But it is an excellent showcase for a South African art form of resistance: agitprop and social theater, which in the 1980s became an important element of self-expression in the townships. (Although fixed theaters were not permitted, travelling performances were.)

**Background on director/film:** The original play and the film were written by and star the now-celebrated team of Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngeni, who are former travelling theater performers. They got the idea for the play when they were on the road one day, and a show was cancelled for lack of a permit. They asked each other, "What if Christ come to South Africa?" and this became the hook for the production. They began researching by interviewing township residents, and developed the style of the play, influenced by Grotowski's Open Theater. Inspired by Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Banze Is Dead*, which had been produced by Barney Simon, director of the Market Theater in Johannesburg's financial district, they sought out Simon. He advised them that it would be politically delicate, but encouraged them. (Indeed at one point in their rehearsal in 1980, all three were jailed for a month without charges.) Simon later commented that the play is "very much reflective of my vision, which is a positive vision. It talks about the horrors of South Africa, but also the strength of the black people there. It talks about the gift of life and the abuse of life."

The play was a smash success, running 18 months in South Africa. It was never banned or censored. A BBC-TV team, led by David M. Thompson, undertook the filming of the movie while in South Africa to film elections. Equipment was scant, as was time, but nonetheless the film captured the performances that are the core of the film.

**Film production context:** The film treats the social and economic reality of racial division, as well as the legal divisions of apartheid. (In a country where whites are less than a quarter of the population, Africans are zoned into 13 percent of the land, and much of that unproductive land. Their average wage is a fifth of white wages, and social statistics such as infant mortality reflect these inequalities among others.)

Black film production within South Africa--around three features a year--is focused almost exclusively on lowest-common-denominator entertainment (usually action-oriented), aimed at the male working class. There is modest state subsidy for such ventures, and they are typically extremely low budget, usually distributed on trucks with portable projectors. Scripts must be approved by a censor, as must films by and for whites. (See Mapantsula.) Along with grassroots theater, grassroots video has grown up in the later 1980s.

Woza Albert!, of course, was made outside this context. Its primary audience is outside South Africa, where it has been widely praised and seen.

Importance: Woza Albert! showcases a grassroots artform among people who do not have access to major media, while it also locates the issues for those not familiar with them.

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## Yeelen

**Plot:** In this epic drama drawing on Bambara culture, which echoes mythic legends in an invented tale, a hero undergoes ordeals that allow him to renovate a decaying society. A young man must penetrate the secrets of the Komo cult (a real caste of specialist knowledge among the Bambara), whose members have abused their spiritual powers. Niamankoro suffers his father's wrath as he travels throughout the Bambara empire and Dogon and Peul societies.

He is in search of the Kore, a long wooden icon that mysteriously holds the key to his search. (Cisse likens it to the tablets of Moses.) His mother gives him one part and explains he must find his father's twin brother, a prophet who has the other part. On his journey, he is challenged by another of his father's brothers, whom he kills, and he spends time with the Peul, where he finds a wife and fathers a son. After a long journey he encounters his father's twin, who explains that the Kome cult has become corrupt.

His father finally catches up with him, and in a showdown they both die, although the boy's wife and son live on, symbols of the purified society he has sacrificed himself for.

"Brightness," the title of the film, resonates with the beginning and closing images of the film, which critic Manthia Diawara in the Library of African Cinema catalog has interpreted as bringing "us face to face with the Big Bang of our own creation. Past and future are reunited; only we in the present must remember and search."

**Style:** This film diverges sharply from the heretofore social realist style and subject matter of Cisse's work. In a 1988 interview at the DC Filmfest, Cisse explained to Pat Aufderheide, "At the beginning of my work, I didn't have technical material means or the money, and I had a strong desire to make films...So I adopted a realist style. I worked with nonprofessionals, I located my stories in the contemporary period, I chose situations where I would not need artificial lighting." After three successful features, "I allowed myself to dream." The fantasy he envisioned was tempered by the possibilities of filmmaking in Mali, although he managed nonetheless to give the film an epic, even ageless look and tone with its precolonial (even pre-Muslim) setting, animist religion, vast rural landscapes and iconic characters. Indeed, Cisse was striving for a kind of universality. In interview he commented, "I used the Bambara and Dogon people in Yeelen. But I could have used Zulu people or American Indians. It's something we're able to express for any society. The bad father, for instance, is selfishness." He saw the film having a universal appeal as a result: "People [who don't know Bambara culture] go beyond, they see the history of mankind in that film."

**Background on director/film:** Cisse has made three earlier feature films, each of them openly concerned with social issues, e.g. the tensions of modernization, workers' organizations and rights, human rights. This film was funded by Burkina Faso, France, German and Japanese TV.

He has also been a leading spokesperson for the importance of African cinema as an expression of cultural autonomy. But for some, Yeelen catered too much to an international audience. In interview, Cisse explained, "The cinema is universal for me. It's not because cinema was created by Europeans, by 'whites'--a term I don't like to use, because I like to talk about mankind, not to refer to color. The person who had the genius to create cinema didn't do it just for himself or his people but for all humanity." Dwelling upon the Africanity of African films, he argued, was a sign of the art's immaturity in Africa: "The day when African cinema reaches the level of the other cinemas, we won't be talking in these terms."

**Film production context:** Landlocked Francophone West African nation Mali's greatest claim to cinematic quality is Souleymane Cisse, who shares with Senegalese Ousmane Sembene and, increasingly, Burkina Faso's Idrissa Oudreaougo, the prestige and burden of representing African cinema to the world. It is also home to Cheick Omar Sissoko (see Finzan), another increasingly important filmmaker. Malian government both supports and controls cinematic production.

The Bambara, still the most powerful ethnic group in Mali, ruled a river valley empire for more than 200 years until the late 19th century, as Hilary Bonta described in a student paper at American University. The Dogon, a small but

well-known sedentary ethnic group and the nomadic Peul are important minority groups. Each maintains its distinctive culture. The vast majority of the country practices Islam, but animism continues a vital and pervasive belief system. Although Cisse himself is not Bambara, he was able, he asserted, to penetrate Bambara culture because his family had strong ties to the Bambara group.

Bambara religion is referred to throughout Yeelen, as Bonta notes. The supreme deity, Ngola or Bemba, is creator of the universe, with the Help of three spirits, representing respectively air, wind, and fire; water; and earth. In several versions of a Bambara myth, Bemba destroys the earth in order to create it anew.

Bambara society features ancestor worship, and initiatory brotherhoods, two of which are the Komo and Kore. Komo, explains Bonta, is associated with human knowledge, a powerful and dangerous tool; Kore is the final step in learning, promising transcendence. Initiatory societies bring their members closer to a connection with cosmic reality, says Bonta.

Importance: Yeelen won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival on its release, as well as the British Film Institute award for most imaginative and innovative film of the year. It garnered near universally positive critical reviews in the West, with some calling it the greatest African film yet made. A festival success, its release in the U.S. foundered on the fortunes of Island Pictures distribution, which went bankrupt on the verge of its broad release. It forms part of the Library of African Cinema.

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## Yol

**Plot:** The film is based on a simple, even simplistic metaphor, stated at the outset, that the state is a prison. But the most powerful prison in the film is that inside the heart of its characters, in custom, morality, in sex-roles, all caught in clash between tradition and progress.

A handful of Kurdish prisoners are given a week's family leave, and all but one cross the country to visit homes and families in Kurdistan. The film interweaves their stories, each exemplary of social crisis. One man discovers that his wife has committed adultery, and that he must, according to tradition, avenge the family's honor by killing her. His moral struggle only heightens the inevitable tragedy. Another returns to his wife, whose in-laws hold him responsible for the death of their son in the robbery in which he was caught. His attempt to reunite ends in a brutal public humiliation. Another returns to a small village on the Syrian border, in the midst of a battle between Kurdish nationalists and the Turkish army, in which his brother is killed. He by custom must marry his brother's widow, not the village maiden he is captivated by. Another spends time with his fiancée in a city, where it's clear that rural expectations for women's roles clash with urban habits. Finally, one member of the group, who carries (significantly) a caged bird, is caught without proper papers at a checkpoint and interned for the duration of the stay.

**Style:** Yol uses many traditional gambits of entertainment cinema in the Western and Turkish tradition to draw the viewer into the story. It has, for instance, a powerful narrative line, observes the conventions of psychological realism in shooting and editing, and provides spectacular scenery and action sequences. It distinguishes itself from a typical potboiler because it deploys these engaging mechanisms to raise questions about political issues (Kurdish nationalism, for instance), cultural issues (the treatment of women), economic issues (the rural-urban migration), always locating these issues in a specific and personal context. On the film's release, Guney issued a long statement in the distributor's press materials, including two illuminating passages. The first describes his political perspective:

"Basically in Yol I wanted to talk about the oppression people live through. I never intended to depict it as though the government alone were to blame. At any rate, that wouldn't be telling the truth. Oppression arises not only from the government but also from the fact that in their lives people are ruthless among each other (and that's closely linked with the social and economic conditions of life). That ruthlessness stems from a feudal background that western countries experienced in the Dark Ages. In concrete terms I mean the traditions, mores, way of life and obsolete ethics. When you consider both these forms of oppression simultaneously, you can comprehend the general coercion of the system. On the one hand the social pressure people exert on one another and which is due to feudal remnants and on the other, government pressure from the top by force of arms. Those two forms of oppression are part of a system and we must consider the system as a whole."

The second describes his approach to film as an artform: "I'm a politicized person but I have a different approach to art. I don't consider cinema as a tool meant to express a theoretical truth. Me, I talk about people's suffering at the heart of life. I'm against a cinema based on slogans, a cinema reduced to the role of a propaganda machine. I'm against a didactic concept of cinema. However, I strongly believe that my art has a political content. That it has a powerful impact on the masses. I owe it to myself to use an artistic language. For political reasons I write articles and hold conferences. But a movie theater isn't a conference hall. One must distinguish between those two different languages."

**Background on director/film:** Yilmaz Guney, Turkey's leading movie star and foremost director until his death in 1985, was born in 1937, the son of Kurdish peasants. He grew up fascinated with the movies he saw in travelling cinemas, especially with epics such as *Gone with the Wind*. He landed a job with a film distributor, and studied law and economics in Istanbul.

He began writing screenplays, succeeding with a big hit, *Handsome Omar*, which set the tone for his later career. It features an underdog peasant hero, who singlehandedly fights off his many enemies.

Guney, who consistently maintained a fierce political perspective, was jailed for writing what the regime called "Communist literature" in 1961. This was the first of Guney's prison terms, during some of which he was immensely productive.

By 1963 he had established himself as Turkey's leading actor, and made more than a hundred movies, most of them on the heroic-underdog model he had established. He was famous as "The Ugly King," playing characters who first are humiliated and then wreak vengeance. He became so popular that posters of the film star rivalled those of Turkey's national founding hero Kemal Ataturk.

Aspiring to make movies that "move the masses," he parlayed his success into directing and produced several thrillers with a social edge after his 1970 *Hope*. The film was a clash of neorealist and melodrama styles in story of a horse-cab driver, and was, effectively, a critique of the melodramatic hero he had so often played. Banned in Turkey, it was sneaked out to Cannes, where it was a critical success.

In 1974 he was imprisoned again, sentenced to 18 years hard labor. He began to make films by "remote control", smuggling out scripts and shooting directions to allies such as his longtime friend Serif Goren. In 1980 a new government banned all his films, and he started to make films for foreign audiences.

*Yol* was also produced by "remote control," and was directed to a foreign audience. The negatives were smuggled to Europe, and Guney edited the film there after escaping from prison on a personal leave much like that his characters get in *Yol*. The film premiered at Cannes, where it won the top prize, the Palm D'Or, as well as two others (it went on to win others and become a commercial success in the small world of international film distribution in the U.S.). He came to Cannes, but did not wait to accept it, because he only had temporary papers. Escaping again to another European locale, he began to work on a film about life in a Turkish prison, but he died of a heart attack without finishing it.

Film production context: Turkey is a nation typified by uneven development and deep ethnic and political rifts. Rapidly industrialized after World War II, thanks in great part to heavy contributions from the Allied nations and particularly the U.S., Turkey nonetheless remains a nation of great inequalities. Among them are those caused by the disenfranchisement of the Kurds, who until recently were referred to officially as "mountain Turks," and whose language was not allowed in public discourse, including in film, where use of it (as in *Yol*) was punishable with five years imprisonment. Religious fundamentalism has grown with political and economic polarization. Rapid industrialization has also posed many cultural challenges for people who have moved from an urban to rural economy in one generation.

The Turkish film industry is commercial, and has been extremely prolific, producing up to 200 films a year for local audiences, typically melodramatic, sentimental and action films. The films get a wide distribution, even in rural areas, with travelling cinemas. The industry also imports many international films, especially action films. Turkish production is often shamelessly imitative of international hits. There is government censorship from the script onward.

Importance: The film after winning its three Cannes awards went on to successful international release. *Yol* is fascinating because shows so clearly its roots in international entertainment film, and simultaneously exposes the social and psychological tensions behind the headlines.

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## Zan Boko

Plot: Zan Boko's title is evocative of its central theme, the crisis of traditional culture. The term refers to the place where the placenta is buried at the birth of a baby among the Mossi in West Africa, a place that marks the baby's ties with the earth and with the ancestors. It is this connection that the film celebrates; the ways in which that connection is threatened are heralded with alarm, both in the bricks-and-mud facts of urbanization and in the attitudes that ignore its consequences. A rich landowner decides to build a palatial European-style home smack up against its walls. Soon villagers are selling their plots to the landowner, who has plans for a swimming pool. One of the villagers uses the money to buy a cart and donkey, to be able to pick up garbage to support his family. Only Tinga (whose name means "the earth" in the More language) refuses obstinately.

Meanwhile, in the bowels of the city's information bureaucracy, a journalist labors under the assumption that his job doesn't end with doing government public relations. Suspended from his job in print journalism for undue truthfulness, he becomes a TV producer for the Ministry of Information (where Kabore has worked for the last 11 years). His first job there is to host a forum on urbanization.

In the TV studio, in front of a ghastly backdrop of high-rises under a smog-filled sky, several functionaries gather to pontificate on development plans. Suddenly the fifth guest arrives--and it's Tinga, who the journalist has met in a bar. That's the signal for a hasty series of phone calls that pulls the plug on the show. The journalist faces expulsion, while Tinga sits alone in the studio, the last and still-unheard from speaker.

Zan Boko is as much about problems of articulating the problem of urbanization as it is about the problem itself. Most boldly, of course, it puts the problem of government censorship on screen. But more powerful in the film is self-censorship and the will not to perceive issues that touch one's own self-interest.

Style: Zan Boko addresses its issues with a gentle respect for the rhythms of those on the front lines of urbanization, with sharp wit and humor, and with an occasional savage poke at the pretensions of the powerful. Alternating as it does between the story of the villagers, the aspirations of the urban bourgeoisie and the struggles of the journalist, and ending without a cathartic resolution, the film refuses to conform to classic Western dramatic structure. It also demands a certain patience in the viewer to accommodate the dignity of rural customs. But it thus also commands a viewer's respect, and forces us to recast familiar (and unhelpful) ways of thinking. Appropriately, it leaves us realizing that the social drama it portrays goes on after the credits.

The director, in an interview with Pat Aufderheide at Filmfest DC in 1989, said,

"Throughout I tried to respect the social time of the village. People take time to greet each other, to take a chair to sit together, to get the news from a neighbor. It was very important to me not to kill that sense of time--the generosity it implies, to give time to another. I didn't want to erase it by being 'efficient' with the narration.

"Sometimes the film looks like a documentary, and that's not accidental. I wanted to give the feeling that these people may be living their last days like that.

"The film violates the classic structure of Greek tragedy, it's true. In fact, at every point where the film goes toward a climax, I cut it off. I didn't want it to be spectacular or melodramatic. I rarely show the height of action, and focus on building toward those moments and the denouements. I didn't want people to say, 'Oh, the poor farmer, thrown off his land, isn't it revolting,' and be satisfied with that reaction. I also wanted audiences to realize that these are not passive victims. They will keep true to themselves, as Tinga says at the end of the film."

Background on director/film: Burkina Faso filmmaker Gaston Kabore debuted with his winsome and award-winning historical drama of rural life *Wend Kuuni* in 1982. Indeed, the village is the same one where *Wend Kuuni* was shot. Having followed this with a short film and a video, he completed in 1988 a long tenure as head of the National Film Center and launched *Zan Boko*. Encouraged by Sankara to make the film as a critique of corruption, he sees the film as an auto-critique: "We ourselves have contributed to this new style of life with its negative aspects. I experience

this myself. All of us [professionals] are one generation at most from the village, and we still have our extended families there. And when we go home, we become like strangers.

"But each of us is a farmer still in some part of himself, if for only this generation. In our minds, there is still hope, because we still have those values."

Kabore began working on the script for *Zan Boko* in 1979, before he shot *Wend Kuuni*, and it took six years to raise the \$4 million French francs, which came from the Ministry of Cooperation in France, German TV network WDR, English TV Channel 4, as well as a non-governmental organization in Italy and a token amount from a small company in Belgium. The National Company of Film Distribution (CIDC) in Burkina Faso offered material and equipment.

Kabore avoided censorship issues by first delaying a request for authorization until he was ready to shoot; conveniently for the subject of the film, the current elite can regard it as a critique of the former regime. He described walking a delicate political line:

"I started writing the script because I happened to go to the headquarters of the national film consortium, and from the balcony I could look down and see a farmer's house, just like you see in the film. Once I had this image, behind it I knew I could put questions of politics, culture and economy.

"I didn't write the script in order to make a scandal about censorship, but to raise questions about how urbanization policy doesn't take the farmers into account. I included the problem of censorship because everyone 'knows' the problem of urbanization, but everyone also says it's inevitable. I created the journalist in order to say that we have to be vigilant about what this process is killing at the cultural level.

"Consciousness has increased, through the revolution, of many issues. But state policy doesn't change overnight. The discourse is different, and the will is different from before. It's still true that no regime wants this kind of criticism. "But if you want liberty of expression, you must fight for it every day. It's not a given, once and for all. If I have had courage, it was the courage to conquer my own self-censorship."

Film production context: Landlocked Burkina Faso in West Africa has long been an important site of Francophone African film production. Support for cinema has been government policy since 1969, with the first week of African cinema held in Ouagadougou, which became the African film festival FESPACO in 1971. The government nationalized distribution and exhibition of cinema in 1970, after a fracas with foreign companies over taxes on exhibition. When Lt. Thomas Sankara came to power in 1982, cinema was already well established. Sankara had been a secretary of state in the Ministry of Information, and he paid particular attention to culture. After his murder, the regime continued to support cinema.

Importance: In its interweaving of economic crisis and problems of perception, *Zan Boko* breaks new ground and marks an impressive sophistication in filmmaking. It was shown at many festivals and included in California Newsreel's Library of African Cinema. Scholar Manthia Diawara reports, in California Newsreel's catalog, "When *Zan Boko* was shown in Niger, Mali and Senegal, journalists thanked Kabore for telling their own story."

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