

Bamako

Reviewed by Yvonne Egan

A shot rings out across a dusty wasteland. The shot ends a wasted life. The driver of a luxury car passing by hears the bang, halts his car, and checks his tyres, so oblivious is he of the desolation of his surroundings and so protective is he of his acquisition.

A Malian bride gasps for breath as she is trussed into an ill-fitting, white lace bridal gown, as she sits beneath a Tannoy relaying an impassioned voice bemoaning the crushing of the African by the white world economy.

The words of a young man relating the loss of his journeymen as they crossed the Sahara to enter Europe are interspersed with the blood-red runoff from newly dyed sheets spiralling down a drain.

These are the images which remain with you from *Bamako*, a new film by the Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako. The film is set almost entirely in a typical Malian courtyard – the same courtyard where Sissako grew up. In the yard people come and go, fetch water, celebrate a wedding, chat, argue, children play. In the rooms on its fringes, a couple are breaking up; a man is dying; a child lies ill with fever; a woman chats on her mobile with her mother. Intermeshed with these tableaux of ordinary Malian life are court proceedings which, despite their extraordinariness, are enmeshed with these lives just like another storyline, treated with the same amount of concern to some and indifference by others. The International Finance Institutions (IFIs) and the Group of Eight leading industrialised countries (G8) are on trial, accused by African society of being the cause of its woe.

Dressed in full regalia, a judge hears evidence against the IFIs from Malian intellectuals, writers, peasants and activists. As one would expect in a courtroom, where the machinations of persuasion frequently eclipse truth, the testimonies are eloquent, passionate and convincing. Yet the arguments are most powerful at the points where language breaks down. A former teacher, his school closed by the World Bank's policies, is rendered literally speechless at the witness stand, his *raison d'être* taken from him by the loss of his vocation. And by far the most powerful moment in the film – of almost any film I have seen – is where Zegué Bamba, an aged chief, half-sings-half-speaks his testimony: a lament for Africa. This extraordinary moment is not subtitled, as the rest of the film is. Instead, one is forced to focus on the emotion, not the words: the grief, the anger, the bitterness, the passion, the love for his homeland, the sense of loss, the resentment. The sense of injustice. It is by far the most eloquent statement on Africa I have heard. It spoke to me as no words could have done. The film is worth

seeking out if only for this one moment.

This, then, is a film about the power of images over word. In some senses, the film thus undermines its own conceit. Despite the passion and righteousness of the rhetoric, in the end, convoluted arguments rehearsed in cloistered courtyards, relayed through tinny loudspeakers to an indifferent audience only in the immediate vicinity, are meaningless. The wrangling of Western-style legalese is made irrelevant even at its most relevant. Lives lived out in poverty in the periphery of the courtyard take centre-stage in the moral landscape. As Zegué Bamba says, ‘Words are something that can seize you in your heart. It’s bad if you keep them inside.’

How can this film be used for global education? My first reaction is, with difficulty. The film is long, and paced according to African conventions of narrative, a long way from Hollywood formulas (a distinction cleverly made explicit in the film, by the interjection of a Spaghetti Western style intermission, *Death in Timbuktu*, in which African cowboys kill meaninglessly, catching civilians in the crossfire). I feel the average school-age audience would struggle to engage with the film. Moreover, the courtroom discourse requires a high degree of familiarity with IFI policy, and the sophisticated language comes at you quickly. So I would tend to use extracts from the film as a springboard for other activities. The film’s website (<http://www.bamako-themovie.com/home.html>) has some excellent ideas, and includes Zegué Bamba’s lament (click ‘open testimony click’ at http://www.bamako-themovie.com/fe_05_legal.html). Opening a lesson with this clip, asking students to write down adjectives which describe the testimony and then asking them to speculate on what he is speaking about, would be a powerful introduction to a class project staging its own trial of the IFIs.

Bamako (2006) [Film]. Sissako, A. Paris: Archipel 33.

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