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Friday January 29th, 7.30pm

Timbuktu (France/Mauritania 2014. Cert 12a)

dir: Abderrahmane Sissako

starring: Ibrahim Ahmed, Toulou Kiki, Abel Jafri

sponsors: Paul and Helen Hancocks

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Abderrahmane Sissako's film *Timbuktu* takes place during the occupation of that city by Islamists. The occupiers want to enforce sharia law, but to their frustration they discover that the city is populated for the most part by quietly observant Muslims, which makes their jihad quite unnecessary - a local imam (Adel Mahmoud Cherif) says as much. But, like any organisational bureaucracy, the zealous occupiers must find a reason to justify their existence, and so they start to impose arbitrary dictates on their subjects, common sense be damned.

The occupiers are a polyglot group: many of them can't communicate with each other without a translator, and they are no more successful in communicating with the people they now rule. They are lonely, far from home and some of them are horny - like Abdelkarim (Abel Jafri), whose visits to Satima (Toulou Kiki), a Taureg woman living outside the town are a cause of concern to her and her herdsman husband Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed). They are awkward, these new rulers of Timbuktu, unaccustomed to exercising power and not confident enough to push their luck. One soldier fumbles through a recruitment video, blowing his lines. A motor cycle putters through town, its rider laying down the new law via megaphone: "No Smoking! No listening to music! No soccer!" Eventually, the bans will be shortened to include, simply, "Any old thing."

We see Abdelkarim sneaking a smoke and trying to learn how to drive a stick-shift, and he seems more a shy bumbler than a warrior of God: the occupying army appear to be a bunch of busybodies who surely must see that there's nothing to do here and move on. It is even rather funny, at first, to see the invaders quibbling with an incredulous populace trying to go about their affairs, telling worshippers at the mosque to shorten their trousers, or forcing a fishmonger to wear reeking gloves in the midday heat. What is not immediately obvious is that this is the behaviour of the bully who has already decided to hit you and wants to see how far he can push you before you finally give him a pretext to do what he wanted all along. The invaders are seen early on taking target shots at gazelles and pieces of looted statuary depicting unclothed females. They aren't likely to let that practice go to waste. But still, we can't quite believe it: these men are thoroughgoing mediocrities and something in us rebels at the idea of mediocrities being capable of anything spectacular - and acts of violence are, of course, spectacular.

And then the boom is lowered. An impromptu musical evening, shot in sweetly drifting style is suddenly broken up by soldiers -



such casual mixing of the sexes is banned - and the female singer receives 40 lashes in the public square the next day. A local girl is forced into marriage with one of the soldiers, who first comes calling under the guise of courtship but who rather quickly lets it be known that his request will not be denied. A couple, buried to their necks in sand, are stoned to death - we see only a little but it is enough. Kidane too will stand accused - for a real crime, as it happens. That Sissako can show that the fate of a murderer is no less unjust than that of an innocent in this anarchic environment, is a testament to his moral intelligence and his faith in his audience.

Synopsis: *Timbuktu*, Mali, 2012. Jihadists have taken over the city, an ancient capital and centre of learning, and have begun to impose Sharia Law. As the inhabitants are, for the most part, a pious people, this imposition is redundant, though the occupiers busy themselves snuffing out sport, song and any activity involving fun or leisure. The local imam chides them for blundering into his mosque and interrupting services. Kidane, a Taureg herdsman, lives in a tent outside the town with his wife, Satima, their daughter and an orphaned boy. Kidane is alarmed when one of the occupying fighters, Abdelkerim, begins skulking around his residence and his wife. Back in town, the emboldened occupiers have begun to punish transgressions with lashings and stonings. Zabou, a local madwoman who may be a witch, puts up a one-woman resistance. When one of Kidane's cows is killed after wandering into the net of a fisherman, he goes to settle the score. In a struggle, he kills the fisherman. Unable to pay the necessary compensation to the family of the deceased, he is sentenced to death.

Credits

Kidane	Ibrahim Ahmed	Director	Abderrahmane Sissako
Satima	Toulou Kiki	DoP	Sofian El Fani
Abdelkarim	Abel Jafri	Screenplay	Abderrahmane Sissako
Singer	Fatoumata Diawara	Editing	Kessen Tall
Zabou	Kettly Noël	Music	Amin Bouhafa
Jihadist	Hichem Yacoubi	Sound	Philippe Welsh, Roman Dymny, Thierry Delor
Issan	Mehdi Mohamed	Art direction	Sebastian Birchler
Toya	Layla Walet Mohamed	Costume	Ami Sow
Imam	Adel Mohamed Cherif		
Chief Jihadist	Salem Dendou		

France/Mauritania 2014. 100 mins

They rape and pillage, these invaders, though they don't do so in a forthright way, as proper barbarians, but rather cloaked in the guise of righteousness. Watching this gradual shift from merely symbolic displays of power to bloodshed, the effect is something like being caught in a nightmare that you recognise as such but can't wake from or control. Essential to Sissako's accomplishment is his underlining of the extraordinary *strangeness* of these goings-on, making one think, "Surely this can't be happening" even though we know full well that such things happen all the time.

As has been widely noted in reviews of *Timbuktu*, these things do indeed happen; many have happened in the months since Sissako's film played in competition at the 2014 Cannes Festival, and will certainly continue to. But to make Sissako's film the sum total of its 'relevance' is to reduce it - as a political act, it is at best a lovely but symbolic statement of resistance, like the fabulously bedecked local witch, Zabou, blockading the street from the occupying army or the resourceful boys circumnavigating the football ban by pantomining a match in a dusty lot without a ball. The fact remains that there are few filmmakers alive today wearing the mantle of moral authority comparable to that which Sissako has taken upon himself; and if his film has been met with an extraordinary amount of acclaim, it is because he manages to wear this mantle lightly, and has not confused drubbing an audience with messages with profundity. I can't imagine the film being made any other way by anyone else - and this is one measure of greatness.

Interview with Abderrahmane Sissako

S&S: "What made you want to make *Timbuktu*?"

AS: It's always difficult to say what the real reason in. But one thing triggered the film, in July 2012, when the north of Mali was occupied by the jihadists. In one of the occupied villages, Aguelhoc, the jihadists arrested a couple, whom they accused of adultery, and stoned them to death. Now, even in those rare instances, when this story was reported in the press, it was treated as if it wasn't of any great significance, whereas on the very same day, a new mobile phone was launched, and the media all covered the story of the first person to buy the phone. We live in a world that's dumbing down day by day. Obviously, the new telephone may have been important for the man who bought it, but why would his story be deemed important for the rest of us? Since 2012, after all, several more new phones have been lunched.

To me, what's most repellent and shocking is not so much the stoning itself - which is quite appalling enough - but the fact that everyone seems to be so indifferent to it. It's easy to voice indignation about such things, but voicing indignation is not an especially valuable response in itself: instead of simply taking offence, one needs to do something about it, at whatever level

one can. There are many ways to act for the better - even something as simple as saying hello to a neighbour you've never bothered to acknowledge before. Or in my case, by making a film to bear witness to what is happening.

To do this allows us to understand certain things. We live in a world where suffering only seems to exist if it touches someone who looks like us. When someone slaughters (American journalist) James Foley or an Englishman or a Frenchman, there is an outcry. I too am enraged by such killings, but those same butchers are each and every day slaughtering a great many other people, and amputating the limbs of a great many others, but those victims are not mentioned, because of our indifference to those people who don't resemble us. The world behaves as if these events have only been happening in recent months, but that's not true. They've been happening for a long time, We shouldn't be indifferent to the suffering of others; apart from anything else, in time it will reach and affect us too.

People complain about Islam being a terrible religion, but that's not true; the people responsible for these atrocities have appropriated the religion for their own particular purposes and interests which have nothing to do with Islam proper. Islam is a religion of compassion, forgiveness, dialogue - in the film, you see those qualities in the imam. He also represents Timbuktu: it's a city I know well and have worked in, a city of encounters, exchanges and a total acceptance of difference, including religion. The city was taken over by outsiders who said you can't so this and you must do that. Every day for a year, people were humiliated and beaten just because they were singing; if they stole the slightest thing, they'd have their limbs amputated. But that tends not to get mentioned. Instead we speak about 5 French hostages whose ransoms were paid. Though 25 million euros were paid for a ransom, the 5,000 euros needed to buy a generator to provide the locals with electricity could not be found. That is the absurd situation at the heart of the world we live in today."

(Sight & Sound: extract)

Our next screening - February 5th, 7.30pm

Two Days, One Night (Dirs: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. Belgium 2014. Cert 15)

After coming out the other side of an apparently lengthy battle with depression, Sandra (Marion Cotillard) faces the prospect of losing her job if she cannot convince the majority of her colleagues to forgo a €1,000 bonus in favour of her staying with the company.

Cotillard's performance is exceptional throughout: the guilt she feels, pleading with people to give up money that most of them desperately need in order for her to keep a job she's not been at for months, her frustration coupled with her on-going struggles with depression and her own demons, are so believable that it's easy to forget that this an actress playing a role.

Two Days, One Night was BAFTA nominated as Best Film not in the English Language in 2015, while Marion Cotillard was Oscar nominated as Best Actress the same year.