

## Timbuktu, 2014

“Where is God in all this?”

### Major Credits

Director: Abderrahmane Sissako

Screenplay: Abserrahmane Sissako, Kessen Tall

Cast: Ibrahim Ahmed (Kidane), Toulou Kiki (Satima), Layla Walet Mohamed (Toya), Mehedi A.G. Mohamed (Issan), Abel Jafre (Abdelkarim), Fatoumata Diawara (La chanteuse), Salem Dendou (Le chef djihadiste), Ketley Noël (Zabou, the Haitian woman)

Cinematography: Sofian El Fani

Music: Amin Bouhafa

### Background

The ancient city of Timbuktu, in Mali, was occupied by Taliban jihadists for a year beginning in April, 2012, during which time many artifacts and manuscripts from the 600 year old libraries were destroyed. The film was shot in neighboring Mauritania, home of the director. Since there is no tradition of cinema or theater in either country, Sissako found most of his cast on the streets of his native land; two of the lead roles were people living in Madrid and Paris. Although Sissako had been contemplating the project for a while, he was inspired by the report of the stoning of an allegedly adulterous couple in Tibuktu during the time of Sharia rule.

Tibuktu has always been a cosmopolitan city, a trading post during the medieval period and a polyglot country today. Note that six different languages are spoken in the film—Arabic, French, English, Tamasheq, Songhay, and Bambara—necessitating the presence of the leader’s young translator and the occasional absence of subtitles. Sissako has said that he deliberately omitted subtitles for the woman’s song to underscore its subversiveness rather than its content.

The cinematographer, Sofian El Fani, has shot *Blue Is the Warmest Color* the year before *Tibuktu*.

### Cinematic Qualities

The film has been frequently described as “poetic” and “visually stunning,” terms that remain notoriously difficult to define. One reviewer described it as a “picturesque nightmare” (*Movie Nation*). Its special beauty seems to derive from two cinematic aspects:

1. Widescreen composition: Sissako consistently exploits the horizontal aspect ratio to depict the desert landscape, as in the magnificent telephoto long shot of the Niger River following Kidane’s confrontation with the fisherman, and in carefully composed 3-shots, as in the Holy Trinity created under Kidane’s tent as he peacefully strums his guitar.
2. Music: Despite the prohibition imposed by the Taliban jihadists, native music pervades the soundtrack, most notably in Kidane’s desert home and, as an instrument of resistance, within the domestic confines of the city. Although the music is credited to Amin Bouhafa, the acoustic guitar melodies seem derived from the original work of Mali’s most famous musician, Ali Farka Toure. Note as well the gorgeous orchestral score that accompanies the improvised football game.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Although the film unquestionably condemns the imposition of Sharia law on the local citizens, Sissako remains steadfast in portraying the jihadists as human (as opposed to humane), in some ways just like anyone else. What is the effect of this treatment?
2. What is the role of the wildly dressed Haitian woman—the film’s witch—in relation to the film’s political narrative? How does consideration of her character shed light on the other women in *Timbuktu*?
3. The film is framed by the image of a fleeing gazelle. Aside from providing a sense of closure, what significance attaches to this striking tracking shot?
4. How does the film synthesize the apparently incompatible tones of dread and lightness, the exotic and the mundane?
5. *Timbuktu* remains one of the few West African films to find widespread American distribution. It was nominated for an Oscar as Best Foreign Language Film. Several of its scenes and images (such as the man’s ritualistic dance as the unmarried couple is being punished) remain largely incomprehensible to Westerners. What is the impact of such “untranslatable” moments?