



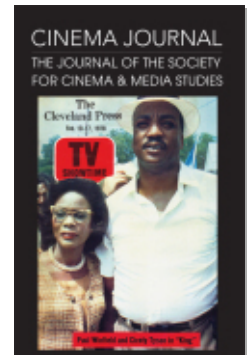
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The 21st Pan-African Film and TV Festival (FESPACO):
February 28 to March 7, 2009, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

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Cinema Journal, 49, Number 2, Winter 2010, pp. 125-129 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0185>



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Festival Review

The 21st Pan-African Film and TV Festival (FESPACO)

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submitted by CHRIS LIPPARD

Every other year, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival—Festival Panafricain du Cinéma de Ouagadougou (FESPACO)—takes place at the end of February and beginning of March in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. It is Africa's biggest film festival and one of the biggest in the world, a showcase for the continent's cinema. (In off years a somewhat smaller festival of African and Arab cinema is held in Carthage, Tunisia.) This year's event had a new director in Michel Ouédraogo, and a theme of African Cinema, Tourism, and Cultural Heritage. FESPACO 2009 was the twenty-first edition of the event, and, as usual, it presented a dizzying array of African features, documentaries, films from the African diaspora, retrospective screenings, and peripheral events. The screenings take place both in theaters scattered around the city—many of which are open-air—and in assorted screening rooms in cultural institutes and television stations. I was attending for the first time, but had little difficulty negotiating the event once I had been able to get my hands on a schedule the day before it started. I had arrived in Ouaga a couple of days early, wanting to explore FESPACO's building and to visit the Place des Cinéastes—a busy roundabout, on the central island of which stands a stylized sculpture of two huge reels of film (Figures 1–2). I was thus able to witness the transformation of the city as festivalgoers flowed in; I also observed the transformation of the central, indoor, well-equipped Burkina cinema—from its pre-festival guise, showing *Big Momma's House 2* (John Whitesell, 2006) into the festival's premier

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Figure 1. Place des Cinéastes in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (Chris Lippard, 2009).

screening facility, bedecked with red carpets for the opening screenings. These were preceded by a ceremonial opening event held at the city's sports stadium.

This year's jury was headed by Gaston Kaboré, perhaps the central figure in maintaining Burkina Faso as a center for African cinema over the last two decades. Kaboré is also a past winner of the Golden Stallion of Yennenga—FESPACO's chief prize, awarded to the best narrative feature in competition—for *Buud Yam* (1997), a kind of sequel to his earlier, better-known *Wend Kuuni* (1982). Winning the Golden Stallion—or Etalon—this year was Haile Gerima's *Teza*, about Ethiopian society under the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. It tackles issues of war, censorship, emigration, and the



Figure 2. FESPACO building in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (Chris Lippard, 2009).

place of women through the story of a scientist who returns to the country after an extended stay in Germany. Gerima is a US-based Ethiopian best known for *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (1976) and *Sankofa* (1993). His films are not easy to find, and unfortunately success at FESPACO will not guarantee *Teza* extensive or effective distribution.

Other films in competition for the main prize by relatively well-known and established filmmakers included Tunisian Kalthoum Bornaz's *The Other Half of the Sky*; *Whatever Lola Wants*, directed by Moroccan Nabil Ayouch, who won the Golden Stallion in 2001 for *Ali Zaoua*; and, also from Morocco, Latif Lahlou's *The Gardens of Samira*. Lahlou's film is a languorous study of a woman, Samira (Sana Mousiane, who won the best actress award), who is taken to the countryside by her new husband and expected to care for his ailing father, who suffers from advanced Alzheimer's. Denied satisfaction by her apparently impotent husband, Samira develops a relationship with his nephew. Through flashbacks we also witness Samira's previous relationship with an intellectual who has similarly been unable to satisfy her sexual desires. Indeed, the sense of sexuality (usually repressed) comes to pervade the bodies, furnishings, and overall look of almost every scene.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering the relative health of its film industry, Morocco provided the largest number of films at the festival, and Leila Kilani won the documentary prize for *Our Forbidden Places*, a collection of interviews and conversations about the disappearances and imprisonments of a range of politicians, students, labor activists, and others during the so-called Years of Lead under the reign of King Hassan II. The film is thus a successor to a number of narrative treatments of the repression, including Jilali Ferhati's *Memory in Detention* (2004) and Hassan Benjelloun's *The Black Room* (2004). Benjelloun's latest film, *Where Are You, Moshé?* also played at the festival.

Another narrative competition film, Ahmed Atef's melodramatic *The Devils of Cairo*, the first film I saw, at eight in the morning on the first day of the festival, proved to be a somewhat challenging start to the proceedings. The devils are Cairo's street kids, but this film lacks the fantasy and dream elements that made Ayouch's *Ali Zaoua*, about kids living rough in Casablanca, palatable to festival audiences. The children in *The Devils of Cairo* bathe in the Nile and, in a long tradition of Egyptian films, fantasize about life in Zamalek across the river, while in another scene, the inside of a luxurious apartment effectively juxtaposes the lifestyles of rich and poor. Unremittingly bleak, the film offers no hope that the characters can escape their circumstances. Atef presents a *mise-en-scène* of dire poverty, and a narrative of searing brutality that includes the slicing open of the belly of a pregnant woman. The animality of the characters' lives is emphasized throughout and is frequently tied to a discourse of humiliation.

Fantan Fanga (Adama Drabo and Ladji Diakite) is a thriller about a series of murders of albinos that mixes modern and traditional elements, represented by the female cop and the marabout, and comments upon the role of journalists in the fight to ensure democracy and justice in Mali. In contrast, *Mah Saah-Sah* from Cameroun, directed by experienced television and documentary filmmaker Daniel Kamwa, which was chosen as the official opening film, is a brightly lit and colorful comedy, set mostly in a rural village, in which a young man, whose virility had been questioned, finally wins the girl. It incorporates traditional ritual dance and also statuary that is hand-carved for sale to tourists, thus again raising the issue of the reconciliation of modern circumstances and

traditional practices. Boubakar Diallo's *Lion Heart* from Burkina Faso also has a rural setting, this time in the past. It emphasizes the villagers' connection to the land, with regular scenes of the harvesting of fish, rabbits, and plants. A lion's attacks on the villagers' cattle give protagonist Samba the chance to prove himself, though the primary challenge turns out to be from slave traders.

While I am pessimistic about the likely distribution of any of the above, *Triomf*, a black comedy based on a popular novel by Marlene van Niekerk, which had already appeared at Cannes and several other festivals, may well prove easier to distribute. Its subject is a highly dysfunctional family of poor Afrikaner whites living in the titular suburb of Johannesburg on the eve of South Africa's first multiracial elections in 1994. Its director, Zimbabwean Michael Raeburn, is best known for a comedy, *Jitu* (1991), and for a pair of films deploring the state of his country and forecasting change, *Rhodesia Countdown* (1969) and *Zimbabwe Countdown* (2003). Although *Triomf*'s producer claimed that it was not a film about race, in fact race relations inevitably provide much of the background and are explicitly addressed in many scenes. Indeed, this aspect of the film offers a sense of hope and progress, but apartheid is, indeed, largely irrelevant to its characters, and when a new day dawns over the city at the end, they view it from a rubbish-strewn hillside where cheap liquor helps to provoke a murderous finale after the true nature of the family's interrelationships is revealed.

Of the relatively few documentaries that I saw, Senegal-born, Belgian television anchorwoman Kay Ndiaye's *Waiting for Men* was outstanding. Similar in theme to her earlier *Traces: Women's Imprints* (2005), the new film consists of interviews with three women, who describe their relationships with men, intercut with images of the decoration of the walls in the ancient city of Oualata in the Mauritanian desert where they live. While, in more traditional documentary fashion, each woman has a quite different attitude to the men in her life, thus facilitating the exploration of a range of experiences, the scenes of painting, alternately delicate and in broader strokes, make an extraordinary elliptical commentary on their lives.

In addition to the large number of African documentaries and others with African or African diasporic subjects from around the world on show, the festival also included television work from across the continent and a collection of Afro-Brazilian films. Ousmane Sembene, who died in June 2007, and who is often seen as the father of African cinema, was honored with a retrospective, while a street in Ouaga 2000, a development to the south of the city center, was also renamed in honor of the great man; Sembene was a regular attendee and booster of the festival. Past winners of the Etalon were also showcased. These include well-respected works such as Idrissa Ouedrago's *Tilai* (Burkina Faso, 1991), Ayouch's *Ali Zaoua*, and Abderaman Sissako's *Waiting for Happiness* (Mauritania, 2003), as well as important films which have regrettably remained less seen, at least in the English-speaking world, such as Brahim Tsaki's *Tale of an Encounter* (Algeria, 1985), Med Hondo's *Sarraouinia* (Mauritania, 1987), and Kwaw Ansah's *Heritage Africa* (Ghana, 1989).

Workshops and panels with filmmakers and industry professionals, many held in the official festival hotel, the Independence, are another key part of FESPACO, while the African International Film and Television Market (MICA) focused on promotion and distribution was held concurrently, as it has been since 1983. The festival was

followed by a workshop on new directions in African cinema sponsored by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa. Among its goals the meeting attempted to address the explosive success of cheaply made straight-to-video Nigerian productions (often called Nollywood), an aspect of African popular cinema largely absent from the more highbrow festival, although a number of Nollywood stars were in attendance this year.

As with other festivals, part of the pleasure in Ouagadougou was seeing films that might prove very hard to track down otherwise. Some of the films shown will, in all likelihood, appear in France, but fewer will make it to the United States. In any case, the opportunity to watch them on the big screen—whether indoors or outside—was invaluable. *