EDITED BY MICHAEL W. THOMAS, ALESSANDRO JEDLOWSKI, AND ABONEH ASHAGRIE

CINE-ETHIOPIA

THE HISTORY AND POLITICS OF FILM IN THE HORN OF AFRICA



Cine-Ethiopia

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CINE-ETHIOPIA

The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa

Edited by **Michael W. Thomas, Alessandro Jedlowski, *and* Aboneh Ashagrie**

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Introduction

Alessandro Jedlowski, Michael W. Thomas, and Aboneh Ashagrie

This collection of essays constitutes the first systematic attempt at describing and analyzing the history and current developments of film production and circulation in Ethiopia. As such, it is a necessary and overdue attempt at filling a significant gap in the scholarship about cinema in Africa. It is indeed striking to note that despite the dynamism of the Ethiopian film sector during the twentieth century, in most if not all the key reference books on African cinema published in English over the past three decades Ethiopia is almost absent (Barlet 2000; Diawara 1992, 2010; Ukadike 1994; Harrow 2007, 2013; Tcheuyap 2011).

The exception that confirms the rule is the abundant number of essays that analyze the work of the Ethiopian born director Haile Gerima (Cham 1982; Pfaff 2004; G. Thomas 2013; M.W. Thomas 2014), whose experience as a filmmaker, however, took off while he was a student in the United States and remains until today profoundly connected to the North American independent film production environment (but see Tekletsadik Belachew's essay in this book for an analysis of the traces of specifically Amharic and Orthodox Christian elements in his work). Similarly, some scholarly attention has been devoted to the work of other notable Ethiopian filmmakers who produced the core of their work in the Unites States,

such as Yemane Demissie (Cham 1998; Leclercq 2002) and Salem Mekuria (Petty 1999; Woubshet 2010).

While the importance and quality of these authors' work is indisputable, it is equally true that this analysis alone cannot make us understand the complexity, historical depth, and aesthetic and narrative specificities of the cinema production that has emerged in the region throughout the past century. As a number of recent publications have highlighted (Ashagrie 2013; Barlet 2015; Tadesse 2016; Jedlowski 2015; M.W. Thomas 2015), over the past two decades Ethiopia has experienced a boom in video film production that has attracted much international interest. In order to fully understand the long-term dynamics that influenced it and rightly contextualize its specificities, however, a larger, overarching perspective is needed. If, then, the core of the present book analyzes the past fifteen years of digital film production, a substantial effort is put into highlighting, through a few introductive chapters, key moments of Ethiopian film history, from the early film screenings under the rule of Emperor Menelik II to the impact of Fascist policies and representations during the Italian occupation, from the first Ethiopian celluloid productions at the crepuscule of Haile Selassie's government to the articulated film policies enforced under the authoritarian administration of the Derg regime—moments that have received little scholarly attention but whose analysis can help us gain a much better understanding of film production and circulation in Ethiopia.

Furthermore, as we will better discuss below, while putting together this book we understood that a focus limited to the production happening in what constitutes today's Ethiopia would limit our understanding of what is taking place in a region, the Horn of Africa, in which frontiers have been porous and movable for centuries, and where cultural productions circulate well beyond the boundaries of today's nation-states. If then, the key focus of the book is the analysis of films produced in Ethiopia and by Ethiopian nationals in the diaspora, the chapters by Aurora Massa and Osvaldo Costantini and by Daniele Comberiati discuss also Eritrean and Somali films. These productions circulate also in Ethiopia, and the analysis of the history of cinema in these two countries, while significantly different from the Ethiopian one, can provide a number of important insights to better understand the current developments taking place in the whole region, including Ethiopia.

The Missing Link with the African Cinema Scholarship

The history of Ethiopia and of the Horn of Africa more generally presents a number of specificities that had fundamental impacts in shaping filmmaking practices in the region. These specificities are explored in detail in Michael W. Thomas's first chapter of this collection and there is no point in rehearsing them here. However, it is important to underline that the peculiar historical itinerary of Ethiopia as a country had an important role in making Ethiopian cinema distinctly different from other cinematic traditions that emerged around the continent, somehow also contributing to its marginalization. Three aspects come to mind as the most relevant: the linguistic insularity of Ethiopian cultural production; the web of international connections derived from the peculiar trajectory of Ethiopian history; and Ethiopia's specific experience of colonialism and nationalism. We will briefly discuss the first two points here, and then develop the third more extensively in the next section of this introduction.

As David Turton has underlined, discussing Willa Kymlichka's work,

> Nation-building in Africa has typically been based not on the culture and language of a dominant subnational group, but on the spread of the colonial language and the attempted creation of a pan-ethnic national identity. . . . Ethiopia, which owes its existence not to European colonialism but to "Western-style" dominant group "nation-building" by an "ethno-national" group . . . , is an obvious exception to this rule. (Turton 2006, 4; see also Kymlichka 2006)

The consequences of this exceptionality are numerous and affected the historical trajectory of Ethiopia as a nation in multiple ways. We will focus more closely on the internal consequences of this historical specificity in the next section of this introduction, when analyzing the applicability of the concept of national cinema to Ethiopian film production. What is important to underline here is the impact that this trajectory has had on Ethiopia's integration into the larger world of African cultural production. Despite colonialism's violence and brutality throughout sub-Saharan Africa it has been a powerful accelerator of globalization processes (Geschiere, Meyer, and Pels 2008), and colonial languages have played an important role in this dynamic, creating a bridge among the political, intellectual, and artistic elites of different countries, be them Francophone, Anglophone, or Lusophone. Furthermore, colonial powers invested in the creation of a number of media

infrastructures that, in some countries, provided the basis for the development of local film production after independence (Diawara 1992). France's administration, in particular, after the end of colonial rule invested significant political and economic resources into supporting the emergence of Francophone African cinema, helping it to gain better pan-African and international exposure. These strategies were obviously aimed at maintaining a strong hold on the intellectual elite of the newly independent African countries (Hoefert de Turégano 2005), but they equally had an important role in making the cinema production emerging from these regions of Africa more visible internationally than that of other African regions.

In Ethiopia the adoption of Amharic as national language (including the use of the Amharic script) had a series of important consequences for the development of Ethiopian cinema as well as for its international recognition. Bitania Tadesse (2016) suggests that the fact that Ethiopian films were made in Amharic limited their circulation if compared to films produced in other Francophone or Anglophone countries, but this is only partly true if we consider that most of the best known African films produced in the 1970s and 1980s by filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambéty, Ola Balogun, or Idrissa Ouedraogo were in African languages. What, in our opinion, ended up being more influential is the fact that local intellectual production, including the studies and press coverage about emerging visual culture practices in Ethiopia, was produced strictly in Amharic and thus remained inaccessible to most scholars of African cinema, who tended to adopt comparative approaches and could hardly speak any of the languages of the regions they were working on (apart from, in the case of African scholars, that of their native ethnic group).

If Ethiopia remained somehow excluded from colonialism-driven processes of modernization and globalization, its different ruling elites pursued long-term efforts to achieve state-driven modernization (Tibebu 1995; Donham 1999). This also implied that, while looking for alternative models, Ethiopia entered very early into non-Eurocentric global networks that eventually connected it to non-Western countries such as Japan (Clarke 2011), Mexico (Savarino 2004), Cuba (Valdés 1979), and Russia (Korn 1986; Patman 1993). As for many other African countries, the interaction with Russia was undoubtedly the one that had the most consequences on the development of cinema and television in Ethiopia (Jedlowski 2015; see also Woll 2004), and Russia remained implicitly an important reference for young filmmakers until today, as the editors of this book have experienced how the Pushkin Center (the Russian Cultural Center in Addis Ababa, one of the oldest

foreign cultural centers on the African continent) plays host to the weekly meets of the association of young Ethiopian filmmakers (Alatinos). If these transversal, non-Eurocentric connections make Ethiopia a particularly interesting case study for understanding the development of non-Western models of modernity, they can equally be seen as one of the causes for the marginalization of Ethiopian cultural production (and cinema in what interests us more closely). In fact, combined with the linguistic isolation discussed above, they participated in making Ethiopian cinema less visible to mainstream scholars based in Western universities or working in European languages.

Ethiopian History, Cinema, and the Nation

One of the key specificities of Ethiopian history if compared to other African countries is Ethiopia's experience of colonialism, characterized by the short and extremely violent Italian occupation (1936–41) under the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2016). Despite the deep economic, social, political, and cultural consequences of the occupation, thanks to its long-term resistance to the Italian invasion and its steady reunification after World War II, Ethiopia remains the symbol of an idealized free and independent Africa, particularly among the members of the African American and Caribbean diasporas. International discourses about the country, as well as early visual representations, were significantly influenced by these idealizations and by essentialized understandings of Ethiopian history connected to them (Moses 1998; Scott 1993, 2004). The idea of a land, Ethiopia, with a millenary Christian tradition and free from the yoke of Western colonialism also influenced the way Ethiopia was represented in the large number of Western documentary films produced in the early twentieth century (see Haars et al. 2014). The legacy of these visual archives, together with the later repertoire of images of war and famine that emerged from the 1970s, is still strongly felt and constitutes the ground for recurring stereotypical representations of Ethiopia in the international media. Until today, the omnipresence of such contradicting images as eternal monuments of the imperial past and its splendor, celebrations of African warriors who fought against Western colonialism, and images of war-torn regions and starving children in need of humanitarian aid have participated in hiding the vibrant, independent visual culture that emerged within the country, making it almost invisible to international audiences, even within Africa itself.

At the same time, the complex historical trajectory of the Ethiopian nation did not have an impact only on the international representation of the country; it also contributed in fragmenting the internal discourse about the country's past. In Alessandro Triulzi's words, Ethiopia is a country "overburdened" by its past (2002, 280), in which the writing of history has become one of the major battlefields among the different ethnic groups that compose the nation. While some are prone to emphasizing the resistance to colonialism and highlighting the glorious past of the Ethiopian Empire, others point to the same processes to denounce key moments of territorial and political affirmation of one ethnic group over the others.

> One should not be surprised therefore if the very name Ethiopia has come to signify different things to different people. For Teshale, Ethiopia is "the second oldest Christian polity in Africa. . . ." To opponents of the Ethiopian state, the country is said to have increasingly identified with its basic feudal "Abyssinian nature." Hence the name Ethiopia is rejected by Oromo nationalist historians today as the embodiment of a foreign "colonial" imposition which subverted the canons of Oromo civilization and cut short its national history. (Triulzi 2002, 284; quoting Tibebu 1995; Ibbsa 1990; and Jalata 1993)

Conflicting visions of the past inevitably ground contrasting projections into the future, creating political tensions that are reflected by the trajectories of film production and circulation both within the country and throughout the diaspora. These tensions pose a major challenge to the project this book itself wants to pursue: how to speak about an "Ethiopian cinema" when there is so much disagreement about what "Ethiopia" as a nation is or is supposed to be.

The concept of national cinema is a disputed one (Hjort and Mackenzie 2000; Williams 2002). Much of the existing scholarship takes Benedict Anderson's (1982) analysis of nations as "imagined communities" as a starting point to discuss the way in which cinema participates in shaping discourses about national identity. But after closer scrutiny, Anderson's notion seems insufficient to analyze the complexity of the social and cultural processes involved in the formation of national cinema canons and discourses. As Rick Altman argues, "Anderson concentrates on the moment when a nation was formed and stops there, failing to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the process he has described" (Altman 1999, quoted in Williams 2002, 3). As the Ethiopian case shows extremely well, nation building is a fluid, conflicting, and never-ending process. Nationhood is thus "not merely established, it must be

maintained; its definition, therefore, will inevitably shift over time" (Williams 2002, 3). By adopting a historical approach, this book then highlights, through the diversity of the case studies explored in each of the chapters, the complex negotiations and changing conceptions of nationhood, identity, and belonging that have appeared on Ethiopian screens over the years.

As Andrew Higson highlighted in a seminal essay on the concept of national cinema,

> There are perhaps two central methods, conceptually, of establishing or identifying the imaginary coherence, the specificity, of a national cinema. First, there is the method of comparing and contrasting one cinema to another, thereby establishing varying degrees of otherness. Second, there is what might be termed a more inward-looking process, exploring the cinema of a nation in relation to other already existing economies and cultures of that nation-state. (1989, 38)

As we proceeded in assembling this book, the second of the options suggested by Higson became more and more relevant for us, as the discussions we had with the different contributors were helping us in better understanding the inherent complexity of what constitutes "the national" within Ethiopia. Following Higson again, it became evident that

> In considering cinema in terms of cultural identity, it is necessary also to pay attention to the processes by which cultural hegemony is achieved within each nation-state; to examine the internal relations of diversification and unification, and the power to institute one particular aspect of a pluralistic cultural formation as politically dominant and to standardise or naturalise it. Historical accounts of national cinemas have too often been premised on unproblematised notions of nationhood and its production. The search for a stable and coherent national identity can only be successful at the expense of repressing internal differences, tensions and contradictions—differences of class, race, gender, region, etc. (1989, 44)

The overall structure of this book is informed by these preoccupations and thus adopts an approach to the study of Ethiopian cinema that focuses not only on the films produced in Ethiopia, but also on the variety of films that circulate within the country and its diaspora—films that are able to "speak" the diversity of languages spoken in the country and address the different ethnic constituencies that compose

the Ethiopian mosaic, despite and beyond the central (hegemonic) role of the Amharic language in the history of the country. This approach is reflected in the structure of the book, as well as in its title, which points at the geographic spaces of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa (within which the films discussed in the book are produced and/or circulated) rather than at the disputable definition of what would constitute an "Ethiopian" cinema, to go beyond any essentialist understanding of "Ethiopianness" that the definition of a national cinema could implicitly convey.

Chapter Outlines

After the first three chapters provide valuable historical scope, the following four chapters discuss the most well-known and established experiences of cinema emerging from Ethiopia (films made in Amharic). The final four chapters then reflect Ethiopia's cultural porosity and transnational reaches, discussing films made in languages spoken in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa (Oromo, Tigrinya, and Somali) as well as diaspora filmmakers making films in European languages. In order to further augment this scholarship, the chapters are followed by three interviews, with actor and director Debebe Eshetu, scriptwriter and director Behailu Wassie, and filmmaker and producer Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn, offering firsthand accounts of cinema's past and present in Ethiopia.

We open the conversation with Michael W. Thomas's chapter acting as a comprehensive historical introduction to the study of cinema in Ethiopia, weaving together the history of cinema exhibition with that of film production and consumption over the past century. This work maps the complexities of cinema in Ethiopia, tracing its changing nature and relationship with the country and its peoples. Acting as a guide to important historical sources and bringing together the small but important publications in the field allows the piece to be our springboard into the greater expanse of Ethiopian film and screen studies.

Shedding more light on film in Ethiopia during the Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941, the second chapter by Giuseppe Fidotta explores the role films and Italian film producers played in the Fascist attempt at colonizing the Horn of Africa. Italian Fascist cinema is then considered with regard to its political and ideological espousals and in turn how Italian films projected Ethiopia and the other Italian-occupied territories as experimental places where fantasies of Fascist power and identity were played out.

In the following chapter, Kate Cowcher focuses on the critical role film and the moving image played in the rise and fall of the military Derg regime. Harnessing a vivid narrative to explore this era in Ethiopian history, Cowcher intertwines the turmoil of the revolution and analyses of various documentary and feature films to highlight their crucial impacts on events. Grounding the chapter in film history and theory draws our attention to the often neglected role screens, both big and small, play in the mediating and unfolding of revolution.

After Cowcher makes reference to how the Derg-era film policy failed to commandeer Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3,000 Years* and cinema of liberation, Teklet-sadik Belachew gives us a detailed analysis of Haile Gerima's Amharic films. With a particular focus on the religious and culturally specific symbolisms, often overlooked by film scholars and commentators outside of Ethiopia, Tekletsadik's analysis moves from a broader biography of Haile Gerima to close readings of films such as *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (1976), *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999), and *Teza* (2008). Tracing much of the aesthetic roots of these films to Amharic oral traditions, the analysis nuances the long-standing characterization of film festival films made by Africans (and members of the diaspora) as harnessing the narratives, structures, and styles of oral folklore with a particular emphasis on songs and their structural and symbolic meanings.

With Tekletsadik's chapter acting as a transition into the contemporary era, we refocus the lens to look at the emergent commercially oriented film industry based in Addis Ababa. Michael W. Thomas charts the commercialization of these locally produced Amharic films through a frame of contextually grounded genre criticism, discussing the significance of theatrical releases, melodrama, and the prevalence of the Amharic term *fiker* (love) in the naming of local genres. This chapter reconstitutes genre criticism into a tool for observing localized generic regimes and their evolution and relationships with each other and local/foreign sources that leads to explorations of how the form and style of this commercial cinema is underpinned by a specific Ethiopian "melodramatic imagination."

Eyerusaleam Kassahun and Bitania Tadesse respectively harness firsthand interviews with local film and TV practitioners to underpin research centered on the less charted areas of female participation in cinema in Ethiopia and the impacts of the recent successes in Amharic TV series and sitcoms. Eyerusaleam, herself a filmmaker, considers the important role women have played and currently maintain in relation to cinema in Ethiopia. This chapter offers a cross-section of the film industry by harnessing personal interviews with actresses, directors, producers,

and distributors along with an analysis of female representation in films directed by women filmmakers.

Bitania's research draws our attention to the significance of the smaller screen as her chapter chronicles the rise of television dramas and comedies in Ethiopia. As practitioners of cinema and other cultural productions often crossover in Ethiopia, this chapter helps broaden the parameters of our book to help better appreciate the diverse spectrum of performance arts and audio-visual media and their intertwined relationships in Ethiopia. With particular attention afforded to issues emanating from the relationship between producers of television content and the TV stations, the chapter maps the differences between the production and distribution models of the state-run broadcaster and its competitors at home and abroad.

The four chapters that come after are all concerned with decentralizing the Amharic-centered narrative that the volume has traced in its central part. Alessandro Jedlowski constructs a comparison between the local Amharic film industry in Ethiopia and emerging diaspora filmmakers scattered across the globe. Analyzing the recent trend in making films on the theme of migration, Jedlowski compares the contexts of production and reception of the films of Italian-based Dagmawi Yimer and Tewodros Teshome, a major film producer, distributor, and cinemaowner in Ethiopia. The framing of migration and diaspora filmmakers by Jedlowski gives rise to the remaining chapters that trace the experiences of films made in other languages spoken in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa region.

Oromo films, their position within diaspora communities, and their conscious attempts at reviving Oromo traditions through narrative device are discussed by Teferi Nigussie Tafa and Steven W. Thomas. The essay analyzes the recent emergence of Oromo cinema in a transnational context and examines both the historical conditions that Oromo filmmakers had to overcome both within Ethiopia and in diaspora in order to produce their work, and the specific formal qualities of Oromo cinema as an experimental art that places their ethnic traditions into conversation with a rapidly changing world.

This investigation into discovering an Oromo-centered film style is then juxtaposed by the ethnographic research that has informed the chapter by Aurora Massa and Osvaldo Costantini discussing two films made by members of the Eritrean diaspora in Ethiopia and America respectively. The migratory experience, political challenges, and global desires are all key themes that inflect on the filmmakers and their films, raising the issue of the role films play in the construction of imaginaries

and narratives that impact on experiences of migration as much as political, economic, and historical causes.

Drawing together the historic and diasporic narrative strands and once again broadening the reach of this volume, the final chapter by Daniele Comberiati discusses the impacts of Italian colonialization and recent efforts by members of the Somali diaspora on Somali filmmaking. The chapter explores how Somali cinema from the 1950s until contemporary times has contributed to a rethinking of the colonial past and the independence era. In particular, with reference to colonial and postcolonial films, the chapter sheds light on how the brief but intense Italian Trusteeship Administration of Somalia (1949–60) changed the flow of Somali cinema history and its lingering effects today. In its final part, the chapter also analyzes the emerging phenomenon of film production in the Somali diaspora and the Somali-language film industry (dubbed "Somaliwood," and based in Ohio) to understand and pose questions relating to the film industry's role in forming the idea of a "new" Somali nation.

The book then concludes with three interviews with influential figures in the film industry in Ethiopia. With these, we return to the source of the study, offering interesting firsthand accounts of the contemporary moment cinema in Ethiopia finds itself in, filled with useful information and insights for future studies.

NOTE

Whenever Ethiopian authors' works that have been published in English are cited, their names are referred to the way that they are printed in source materials, with their last name coming first in the reference list. This rule is also applied to filmmakers who live and/or are well known in the West. The two most prevalent examples of these in this volume are referring to Gabriel (for Teshome Habte Gabriel) and Gerima (for Haile Gerima). Whenever other Ethiopian names are cited they appear in the native standard, with the first name being the name a person is known by and referred to (the second name being that of their father and the third name that of their grandfather, etc.). The Romanization of Amharic/Ethiopic script and names has been standardized to limit the use of accents readers of English are otherwise unaccustomed to. Finally, all quotations from Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya, Somali, or Italian sources have been translated (unless otherwise stated) by the respective chapters' author(s).

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From *Yeseytan Bet*— Devil's House to 7D

Mapping Cinema's Multidimensional Manifestations in Ethiopia from Its Inception to Contemporary Developments

Michael W. Thomas

Roughly 115 years from the time when the first attempt was made to establish a cinema in Ethiopia, in 2012 a seven-dimensional movie show simulator opened in the capital city, Addis Ababa (billed as the first 7D cinema in Africa).[1] The time in between the establishment of these fantastical exhibition spaces has borne witness to a long and complex history of cinema in the country. Indeed, Ethiopia has been a site for multiple and diverse experiences of cinema, barely touched upon by scholarship but deserving of as much attention as other significant global cinematic contexts enjoy. Despite much recent scholarship lauding the success of the Nigerian and Ghanaian video film industries, there has been no systemic research on the recent growth of the film industry in Ethiopia. Ethiopia presents a case that deserves attention, not only due to the rapidly growing size of its potential internal market but also because, unlike the rest of Africa, European languages are not widely spoken in Ethiopia. This has meant that while Nollywood profits internationally from the global power and status of English (Adejunmobi 2002), Ethiopia remains relatively untouched by the Nollywood phenomenon. Instead, the local Amharic-language film industry has recently grown to fill the gap in demand for a locally produced and locally comprehensible film industry that has proliferated primarily within Addis Ababa.

In terms of film culture, Ethiopia offers an alternative case study compared with other African countries that have favored a "straight to VCD" distribution model.[2] Cinemas in Ethiopia still play a central role in society with the commercial Amharic films favoring theatrical releases in the fifty-odd cinemas that populate Addis Ababa and other urban centers throughout the country.[3] Larkin's influential study on cinema and cinemagoing in Kano (northern Nigeria) and other recent studies highlight the need to broaden the parameters of film studies in order to properly understand the social and cultural impacts and meanings of cinema, moving beyond assumptions of cinema as a "universal language," to explorations of cinema as a hybridized site of distinct global and local exchanges and meanings (Dovey and Impey 2010; Garritano 2013; Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings 2003; Jedlowski 2012; Larkin 2008). At a time, then, when scholars note the demise of cinema across the globe due to the onset of the digital revolution in the new "information age," it is important to ask why it is that cinema building, movie making, and cinemagoing are enjoying a local renaissance in urban Ethiopia.

Cinema is understood here as an inherently modern phenomenon wherein the spectacle of the movie, traversing space and time, constitutes a social event in a translocal space (a space in which global exchanges in goods, ideas, and people occur). Cinema is imbued with intrinsic features of modern society (for example the commodification of leisure time). Cinema in Ethiopia began life being vehemently opposed by antimodernizing sectors in a largely conservative society while remaining an important trend setter and facilitator between global cultures and forward-thinking Ethiopians. With the advent of local productions dominating the big screens in the early 2000s, the position of cinema within society shifted dramatically, shedding its risqué status in order to speak specifically to the growing urban populations in the country. After licensing stipulations that prevented the screening of DVDs and VHS tapes in Ethiopian cinemas were lifted in 2002, local digital film productions in Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, proliferated exponentially. This popular, low-budget, and commercially led cultural phenomenon has radically changed the meaning of cinema in the country, usurping the once ubiquitous foreign (mainly Hollywood and Bollywood) movies. The popularity of local productions has inspired increased numbers of cinemagoers, which has in turn fueled the construction of cinemas in the country at a rate not seen since the Italians sought to use cinema as a tool of conquest and subjugation during their brief five-year occupation of Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941.[4]

The extensive research focused on other media industries in Ethiopia—such as Meseret Chekol Reta's *The Quest for Press Freedom: One Hundred Years of History of the Media in Ethiopia* (2013) and studies by Gagliardone (2011, 2014) and Gartley (1997)—omit cinema and film from their focus on mass media. As will become evident, there is little work published on cinema in Ethiopia that is based on systematic, academic study. The following historical overview of cinemagoing and film production, framed as a modernizing moment in Ethiopian history, brings together what little scholarship there is on the subject in an attempt at curating scattered writings and mapping a more coherent history. The various works of historians Richard Pankhurst (1968, 1998) and Paulos Ñoño (1992) have been crucial in explaining the introduction of cinema in Ethiopia, along with information provided in a publication by the Addis Ababa Cinema Houses Administration (AACHA 2007), which administers government-run cinemas. Ruth Ben-Ghiat's (2003, 2015) works on cinema in Italian-occupied Ethiopia are captivating and detailed studies that address cinema's capacity for entertainment, propaganda, and even subversion during this turbulent period in Ethiopian history. Anecdotes from Michael Lentakis's memoir (2005), recalling going to the cinema during this period, have proved insightful and support Ruth Ben-Ghiat's more rigorous research. The contributions titled "Cinema" and "Film: Ethiopia and Eritrea in Film" in the various volumes of *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Bonnano 2003; Haars et al. 2014) have helped nuance the early history of cinema in Ethiopia and are key sources that discuss the first film productions in the country. The majority of the history from the Derg period has been drawn from the Ethiopian Film Corporation's Derg-era publication, *Kefilm Madaberiyana Mekotateriya Wana Kifil Eske Ityopya Film Korpreshin/From the Film Development and Control Board to the Ethiopian Film Corporation* (1986/1987), with other information made available during interviews. The more recent history of video/digital production is also greatly indebted to interviews with industry insiders and professionals and the work of Tesfaye Mamo (2006) and Fikadu Limenih (2013) in particular. This research has also been influenced by a few unpublished BA and MA theses (in Amharic and English) at Addis Ababa University along with the many articles and blog posts that are helping to fuel the contemporary debate surrounding the film industry in Ethiopia today. Most recently, there have been a few publications in academic journals that have contributed foundational work and important preliminary studies on filmmaking in Ethiopia (Jedlowski 2015a, 2015b; Jedlowski and Thomas 2017; Thomas 2015; Tadesse 2016).

Cinema in Ethiopia until the 1960s

Cinema was introduced into Ethiopia through the modernizing aspirations of Menelik II. Menelik attempted to establish a modern Ethiopian nation-state after the victory over the Italians at the Battle of Adwa and subsequent recognition of statehood in the Treaty of Addis Ababa, 1896 (Marcus 1995). Ethiopia's position as the only free native African state, surrounded by colonizing European regimes, urged Menelik to modernize, establishing a telephone network, railway, piped water system, radio, modern hospital, bank, newspaper, and parliament, to mention a few of the modern developments under his reign. Despite it being difficult to pinpoint the exact time cinema started in Ethiopia, Menelik's curiosity about cinema allegedly arose after he held discussions with a merchant by the name of Stévenin, a Frenchman who was one of only a few European traders to operate in Addis Ababa in the 1890s (C. Michel 1900, 95–101). The first film screening in Ethiopia, mentioned by Paulos Ñoño (1992) in his seminal work on Menelik II's reign, was shown to Menelik and his ministers in the great hall of his palace on the first of Miyazya, 1889 E.C. (April 9, 1897).[5] This film is said to have depicted Jesus walking on water, which provoked the ministers to pay homage to the images by bowing in veneration (Paulos 1992, 337).

Paulos (1992, 336) goes on to explain that Stévenin was concerned with how the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church would react to cinema, but Menelik was unfazed in his admiration and promotion of the new technology. The first attempt at establishing a commercial, public cinema was on the outskirts of Addis Ababa in around 1890 E.C. (1897/98), by a Frenchman from Algeria (Pankhurst 1968, 1998; Paulos 1992; Bonnano 2003).[6] His endeavor, however, is said to have been unsuccessful precisely due to the negative reaction stemming from the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy, associating cinema with the Devil's work (Mérab 1921; Pankhurst 1968, 1998; Paulos 1992; Bonnano 2003). The Ethiopian public dubbed cinema *yeseytan bet* (Devil's house), and the Orthodox clergy were quick to warn people not to attend, leading to the subsequent bankruptcy of the proprietor who, before leaving the country, sold his projector to the Italian minister, Major Ciccodicola (Pankhurst 1998; Paulos 1992). Ciccodicola promptly presented the projector as a gift to Menelik in an attempt to improve Italy's status within Ethiopia after the recent defeat at Adwa (Paulos 1992). Menelik's enthusiasm for cinema increased as he took it upon himself to project religious films in his great hall at his palace, slowly accustoming influential guests to cinema, making it more difficult for them to speak of it as an invention of the Devil (Paulos 1992, 337).

Unlike the mainly entrepreneurial beginnings of cinema in Euro-American histories as a commercialized entertainment product of vaudevillian shows and fairground spectacle, in Ethiopia, cinema's origins can be understood more in terms of its use as a pedagogical tool, upheld by the emperor to persuade Ethiopian society, and the powerful Orthodox clergy in particular, to accept modern technology. The literal demonization of cinema, its high costs, and the immoral aura attributed to it, however, only made it accessible to the few modernizing elites of the country such as *Ras* Mekonnen and Tekle-Haymanot of Gojjam (and later his son, Haylu Tekle-Haymanot) who, along with the emperor, were reportedly sedulous cinema-goers (Pankhurst 1998).[7]

The religious dimension of cinema is significant in the Ethiopian context, both as a tool used for visualizing religious episodes and with the technology being deemed the work of the Devil. Through the projected visual image, cinema can be seen to be a revelatory instrument used to instruct and enlighten. These visualizations are not too dissimilar, according to the renowned Ethiopian-born film scholar Teshome Habte Gabriel, from the oral stories told in Orthodox churchyards when he was a child. Teshome recounts that he was "treated to 1- to 2-hour long verbal visualization of 'revelations' as experienced by such prophets as Ezekiel, Elijah or Jeremiah (incidentally, 'revelations' in Ethiopic [Amharic] stands for *ra'ey*, literally meaning 'seen with the mind's eye')" (Gabriel 2001, 97). Unlike in other African experiences, such as in Ghana, in which Brigit Meyer (2003, 2015) and Lindsey Green-Simms (2012) explore the religious aspect of video films as they visualize the triumph of evangelical Christian forces over traditional occult specters, in Ethiopia, cinema's introduction reinforced the entrenched Ethiopian Orthodox Christian beliefs of the ruling classes.[8] Despite the apparatus of cinema being stuck in the quagmire of Christian dualism, Menelik's tactics of harnessing cinema's revelatory powers, exposing to cinema the same conservative Orthodox clergy who had previously associated all foreign technologies with the Devil, is testament of Menelik's conviction in the visual power of cinema.[9]

According to Paulos, it was not until 1901 E.C. (1908/9), when Menelik encouraged the Baicovich brothers to install a Pathé projector in Addis Ababa, that a second attempt at establishing a commercial, public cinema was made.[10] Whilst Paulos (1992, 337) mentions that this business failed after a year due to projector malfunction, Pankhurst (1998) cites Mérab's 1921 account that the business was abandoned due to a lack of public interest after the first month. There was not only caution surrounding the perceived devilish magic of the cinema, but the concept

of paying for something you cannot physically consume or use was perceived as money-spinning chicanery (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987).

Pankhurst (1998) mentions that a Greek migrant made a third and more successful attempt at the original site of *yeseytan bet* (also at this time known as Pathé Cinema) near Tewodros Square, which was quickly taken over by the proprietor of the Hôtel de France, M. Terras, while Cinema Empire was later established in Piassa where the current Ethiopian Electric Power Corp. building is (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987).[11] The Hôtel de France also had a cinema hall and, as well as in Addis Ababa, M. Terras gave cinema shows in Dirre Dawa and Djibouti (Pankhurst 1998). The train link between Djibouti and Addis Ababa allowed M. Terras to easily access the French distribution network, meaning that most films in this period originated from France (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987). Between 1924 and 1925, AACHA (2007, 40) notes that M. Terras screened silent films at a rate of one *alad* (old money, half of a Menelik thaler) for a chair and one *mahalliq* (old money, one-sixteenth of a Menelik thaler) to sit on a stone, making cinema accessible only to the wealthy new urban population of traders, skilled laborers, and university students, as well as accommodating the aristocrats, intellectuals, and foreigners of Addis Ababa (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987).[12] The high price of a single ticket was the equivalent to buying a sheep, which meant the cinema was unaffordable for most but keenly enjoyed by those who could afford it (be they male or female, Christian or Muslim) even though many still perceived cinema as posing a cultural and religious risk, as was apparent when women would regularly be seen covering half their face during screenings as a defense mechanism (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987). The popularity of cinema in Addis Ababa also began to increase around this time due to the attraction of the first talkies, screened in 1927 along with the opening of two more cinemas in the 1920s around Arada and Menelik Square called Le Perroquet and Mon Cinéma (AACHA 2007; Reta 2013).

Cinema became more established in Addis Ababa during the period of Teferi Mekonnen's regency beginning in 1916 due to the continued commitments to modernize Ethiopia. Along with the rapid urbanization and development of a thriving cosmopolitan capital city and the general customization of urban Ethiopians to other modern inventions such as the train, motor vehicles, and cameras, cinema steadily developed a devout following. According to Arefaynie Fantahun (2006), the first Ethiopian-made film was shot by an Ethiopian by the name of Tedla in this same year, documenting Empress Zewditu's coronation. Foreign dignitaries and film crews were invited to the more regal coronation of Teferi Mekonnen as

Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1930, the same year that the population of Addis Ababa passed one hundred thousand (Pankhurst 1968). Due to the rise in foreign migrants, especially from Greece, Armenia, India, and France, and the establishment of foreign diplomatic missions, there was also an increase in demand for modern entertainment such as the cinema.[13] The increased commodification of leisure time further led to a tax on entertainment set out in a decree by Haile Selassie on August 5, 1932, regulating cinemas, theaters, concerts, and meetings (Pankhurst 1968, 533). Although Haile Selassie was said to be "fascinated by film and cinema and understood how important film could be" (Haars et al. 2014, 317), particularly in constructing his image as a modern and benevolent leader, the emperor explicitly supported the theater, believing it more viable as a tool of propaganda and for educational purposes. As it was fashionable at the time to follow the trends of the emperor, and as the local theatrical productions were in Amharic and celebrated Ethiopian culture, thus being more accessible than the foreign images, sounds, and mechanisms of cinema, the theater (and not the cinema) established itself as the favorite and most successful art and entertainment form among most of the wealthy urban population (see Ashagrie 1996).

The cinema landscape in Ethiopia experienced a tremendous upheaval (along with much of the country) in 1936 after all the cinemas were burned down (along with most of downtown Addis) when Fascist Italy took control of the city (AACHA 2007; Lentakis 2005). Despite the city suffering severely, the Italians sought to make Addis Ababa the capital of their new colony, Africa Orientale Italiana, as it symbolized the birth of a new Italian Empire while inheriting the apparatus and high stature of the old regime.[14] By this time, however, Addis Ababa was much more than the "non-urban city" or even "nearly blank slate on which they [the Italian planners] laid out their grand designs" (Fuller 2007, 197). On the contrary, as we have seen with the early history of cinema in Addis Ababa, the city had grown and cautiously adapted to social changes brought on by Ethiopia's engagement with modernizing ideals. Indeed, Menelik and his successors (particularly Haile Selassie) had encouraged and integrated a mix of populations from all over the Ethiopian Empire and Europe; these people spoke a wide variety of languages, such as Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya, Gurage, Greek, Arabic, French, English, Italian, and Russian; and many religious groups were represented in Ethiopia, including Ethiopian, Greek, and Russian Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and nonmonotheist religions. This all created a far more cosmopolitan city than most European capitals. Addis Ababa was hardly the static social entity Italian

planners had supposed it to be in 1936 when the city fell, failing to comprehend "the city's boomtown atmosphere" (Fuller 2007, 199).

It was at this time that the dynamics of cinema and cinemagoing in Ethiopia changed radically as the Italians adopted the large-scale use of cinema as a crucial instrument of propaganda, aimed at their own nationals as well as the "natives" (Bonnano 2003). The Italians rebuilt the old cinemas, and such was the proliferation and strict state control of new cinema building by the Italians in occupied Ethiopia, as Mia Fuller explains, that cinema was promoted in Addis Ababa "as though they [the Italians] had first brought it there" (2007, 198). Salvatore Ambrosino's seminal research on the subject describes the Italian obsession with promoting cinema as films became "boom business in Italian Africa" (cited in Ben-Ghiat 2003, 54). Ruth Ben-Ghiat furthers this research, explaining,

> By March 1939, there were forty cinemas in Ethiopia with a total of 30,000 seats; by 1940, this number had grown to fifty-five cinemas with 60,000 posts. The Supercinema Teatro Italia in Addis Ababa held 1,200 people alone, and by 1940 plans were under way for structures that held up to 2,400 people. Racial politics dictated separate seating areas for Italians and Africans, and as the number of theatres grew, colonizers and colonized increasingly saw films in separate venues, although local notables had places reserved for them in Italian cinemas. (Ben-Ghiat 2003, 54–55)

The built space of cinema, therefore, became imbued with an aura reflecting the power dynamics of colonial supremacy, with even the infamous Italian collaborator, *Ras* Haylu Tekle-Haymanot, building his own cinema, Cinema Ras Haylu, in the Addis Ketema district of Addis Ababa (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987; AACHA 2007).[15] Cinemagoing was popularized by the Italians throughout Ethiopia in this era, not only due to the increased number of urban, built cinemas but also because the Italians provided state-funded traveling cinemas that toured rural Ethiopia, projecting their propaganda where the majority of the Ethiopian population lived, drawing crowds in their thousands (Ben-Ghiat 2003, 2015).

Ruth Ben-Ghiat's (2015) work explores many impacts of cinema under Italian-occupied rule. She highlights the contestation between the Italians' concept of the power of cinema as a tool of conquest, Fascist propaganda, and white supremacy and the interpretation of cinema by Ethiopian spectators positioned in an alternative sociocultural context, enjoying the spectacle and even subverting the narratives of films (Ben-Ghiat 2003, 2015).[16] Ben-Ghiat concludes that because

of the Fascist Italian film policy being underfunded and unrealistic, "films would be ineffectual agents of collective change" (2003, 59). This idea resonates with Lentakis's experiences of cinema in Italian-occupied Addis Ababa as he mentions being shown "films of *their* army and industry, but *we* were most interested in watching the cartoons. These [cartoons] of course were a tremendous improvement over what we had been watching" (Lentakis 2005, 58; my emphasis).

Despite the Fascist Italian regime's intentions for cinema as propaganda, it seems that, along with other Italian legacies in Addis Ababa, it had a greater impact on furthering the modernizing mission by reaching more urban and rural audiences. Lacking the financial commitment to set up a local film industry in Ethiopia and due to the popularity and cost-effectiveness of Hollywood films compared to the relatively small size of the Italian film industry, the Italians opted to screen a majority of American films (Ben-Ghiat 2015). These films, as a result, had a greater influence on Ethiopian society than did Italian films. It is perhaps the influences rooted in American materialist society, deemed immoral and "un-Ethiopian," that dominated the understanding of cinema within the Ethiopian cultural imagination in the years that followed.

After Haile Selassie returned from exile in 1941, cinema and the Italian-controlled distribution and exhibition structures suffered near collapse as it was no longer supported by state sponsors. Furthermore, in 1943 Proclamation No. 37 was passed and became the Entertainments Censorship Law that granted government legal power to censor and collect fees from films and theatrical works. The two main criteria on which censors judged works were "public security and decency" (Reta 2013, 158). Cinema in Ethiopia was, once again, left to private business-minded foreigners who had to forge links with global distribution circuits that at this time became dominated by English-language films due to the influence of the British in aiding Haile Selassie during World War II.

Despite cinemas being run by foreigners, tickets became much more affordable, helping to sustain a strong Ethiopian cinemagoing culture that was reflected in the previous Italianized names quickly being replaced with Ethiopian ones; for example, Cinque Majo (situated in the building now occupied by the Addis Ababa University Science Faculty) became Cinema Ijersa Gorro while M. Edo (the first proprietor of Cinema Empire) returned to revert Cinema Italia to Cinema Ethiopia (AACHA 2007). M. Edo later left for Djibouti, leaving the cinema in the hands of Djibouti nationals Hussein Kassim and his son Nadin, who continued to screen films from 1949, while Cinema Empire was administered by Armenian nationals until 1966

when an Italian couple from Asmara took over the cinema's management (AACHA 2007, 40). The Cinema Marconi, which had been planned by the Italians, was later completed in 1955 by Haile Selassie's administration to mark the emperor's silver jubilee and named Haile Selassie I Theater (changed to the Ethiopian National Theater in 1974), predominantly used for theater and the promotion of Ethiopian music (and today a popular venue for film premieres). The other major cinematic spaces built during Haile Selassie's reign were the 1,447-seat Ambassador Theater, Cinema Addis Ketema, Cinema Addis Alem, and Drive-in Theater (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987). The renovated Hager Fiker Theater (1954) and other theaters that primarily hosted stage plays also, on occasion, screened films (AACHA 2007). By 1978 there were eight permanent built cinemas operating in Addis Ababa with seven operating throughout other large urban Ethiopian towns (with an extra seven in operation in Asmara); all of these cinemas screened the popular American and Indian films, and to a lesser extent Egyptian and European films (Warren and Warren 1978).

The Early History of Film Production in Ethiopia

It was only during the 1960s that feature film production began within Ethiopia. Prior to this, newsreels and documentaries were shot predominantly by European film-workers traveling in Ethiopia; the earliest on record was shot by Ralph P. Cobbold in 1901 (Haars et al. 2014). Other reels by international film crews from British Pathé and Italian Instituto LUCE (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa) were produced in high numbers in the 1920s/1930s with a few Italian feature films in the late 1930s partly shot in Ethiopia/Eritrea.[17] The important Soviet documentary *Abissinija* (1936) was also shot around this time by Vladimir Yeshurin and Boris Zeitlin of Soyuzkino Chronika, depicting Fascist Italian war atrocities, including a mustard gas attack and its victims and the bombing of a Red Cross field hospital, while also capturing an Italian bomber falling at Kakala.

The first Ethiopian-produced feature-length film was *Hirut, abatwa mannew?*/*Hirut, Who Is Her Father?*, by Ilala Ibsa (who, as well as purportedly adapting Mamo Widneh's novel of the same name to the screen, also produced the film) and the Ethiopian-born Greek director Lambros Jokaris in 1964. The film tells the story of a rural girl's journey to Addis Ababa in search of her father and her consequential employment and life as a prostitute, trapped in the Ethiopian capital (Ilala 1964). On

his return from Europe, Lambros Jokaris, in partnership with Ilala Ibsa, established the National Film and Publicity Company, which was forced to cease its activities after the distribution of *Hirut* due to bankruptcy and the company's inabilities to repay the debts it incurred in producing the film (Bonnano 2003). The film's high costs stemmed from the hiring of a foreign technical film crew and postproduction being carried out in Italy. *Hirut*, however, was hugely popular within Ethiopia (its only known area of distribution), being seen by an estimated one hundred thousand people (Warren and Warren 1978).

The lack of production facilities and trained technical staff in the country began to change with the introduction of television in 1964 as it fostered technological infrastructure investments and training opportunities (Reta 2013). Haile Selassie used these developments to promote Ethiopia as a location for foreign film productions in the 1970s, culminating in a mixture of disparate, foreign feature films partly or fully shot in the country. There was the epic *Una stagione all'inferno*/*A Season in Hell* (Nelo Risi, 1971), depicting French poet Arthur Rimbaud's later life in Ethiopia with acclaimed Ethiopian actor Debebe Eshetu playing Menelik II. Debebe also features with Zewditu Asla in the surreal murder-mystery, shot completely in Ethiopia, called *Afrika* (Alberto Cavallone, 1973). Debebe plays a crucial supporting role in *Shaft in Africa* (John Guillermin, 1973), which also prominently features Addis Ababa and the Ethiopian highlands. *Shaft in Africa* proved to be a big hit in cinemas throughout Ethiopia despite Haile Selassie walking out halfway through its Ethiopian premiere due to perceived obscenities. Roughly a third of Pier Paolo Pasolini's critically acclaimed *Il fiore delle Mille e una note*/*Arabian Nights* (1974) was shot in Eritrea. Apart from *Shaft* it is unlikely any of these other aforementioned films were screened in Ethiopia. Instead it seems that Haile Selassie was keen to promote Ethiopia as a location for foreign films to maintain Ethiopia's mythical image but also for economic gain. Indeed, many of these films cultivate a representation of Ethiopia to outsiders as a land of mythical beauty steeped in exoticism. In Ethiopia at this time, however, American adventure films were said to be in high demand by distributors, justified as being suited to their distribution network; circulated "through several countries with different languages, adventure films present clear-cut action that conserves the plot and entertains" (Warren and Warren 1978, 57).

As well as Hollywood action films, Bollywood films proved popular in Ethiopian cinemas over the decades, with the first being screened during the Italian occupation in what is now Cinema Ethiopia, which built its reputation on being

the only cinema to show Indian films on their first run in the country. Cinema Ethiopia primarily screened Indian films up until the early 2000s, with the Indian importer of Bollywood films in Ethiopia, Ramendra Harjivan Shah (2007), explaining that both young and old were drawn to films such as *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957), *Gunga Jumna* (Nitin Bose, 1961), *Waqt* (Yash Chopra, 1965), *Aradhana* (Shakti Samanta, 1969), *Don* (Chandra Barot, 1978), *Laawaris* (Prakash Mehra, 1981), and *Disco Dancer* (Babbar Subhash, 1982). Shah (2007) recalls the popularity of these films was such that the security forces had to be called in occasionally to stave off the swathes of crowds trying to enter the cinema. As in Tanzania, it can be noted that Bollywood films were as popular as, if not more popular than, Hollywood films (Fair 2009). If the popularity of martial arts films from China in the late 1980s and 1990s is also taken into account, it can be noted that there has not simply been an "Americanization" (Zeleza 2003) in Ethiopia and Africa but multiple cultural influences from both within Africa and further afield, which prompts deeper investigations into the cultural hybridity of films and the cultures they represent.

The second Ethiopian-made feature film, Michel Papatakis's *Gumma/Blood Money* (1974), also featuring Debebe Eshetu, was a popular success in Ethiopia, billed as "the first Ethiopian color film" on its posters. The film, set in rural Ethiopia, follows the story of a young man who, after accidentally killing his closest friend, is condemned to forfeit his life to the bereaved family. In keeping with tradition, he sets out in search of "blood money" in order to compensate the family for the loss of their son. The technical aspects of the film's production and the postproduction of the film were carried out by Europeans, highlighting the lack of professionally trained film personnel in the country at the time. Emperor Haile Selassie himself was in attendance at the film's premiere with the film positively received due to its exploration of Ethiopian traditions.

Michel Papatakis was among the first of three generations of Ethiopian film professionals to train in the Soviet Union, while Solomon Bekele Weya, maker of the short film *Rotten Existence* (1968) and who became prolific in this period, was trained in France. After Haile Selassie was toppled in 1974 by the communist Derg regime, cinema again became a key tool of state propaganda. Unlike under the Italian occupation, however, the Derg regime nationalized all aspects of the film industry, showing a commitment to produce their own films from within Ethiopia. The minister of culture, Desta Tadessa, one of the few Moscow-trained film professionals in the country, established the Film Development and Control

Board (FDCB) within the Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs in 1976 (Abebe Beyene, interview, Addis Ababa, July 28, 2014).[18] The FDCB was created solely for propaganda purposes; it sponsored personnel to be trained abroad and focused primarily on screening documentaries in the cinemas throughout the country. The first and only major project to be completed by the FDCB was the 16mm color docudrama *3002: Wondimu's Memories* (1976), directed by Teferi Bizuayehu who, like Desta, was trained in the Soviet Union. The film was made in homage to the 1974 revolution and was the first fully Ethiopian-made film (in terms of crew and funding).[19]

The Derg's rise to power brought about strict censorship, for a time banning all foreign films apart from a few Russian documentaries, which spelled financial disaster for cinemas as attendance numbers plummeted. After meeting with film importers, the Derg quickly lifted the ban, which opened up cinemas to American and Indian films again while Chinese kung fu films also arrived due to their communist sympathies (Dilalew 2008).[20] Despite this U-turn, the Derg maintained strict censorship aimed at rejecting and restricting films that depicted criminal acts, strong violence, subversive political messages, and debauchery (Shah 2007). The tight controls the Derg maintained over cinema signaled Ethiopia's participation in the Cold War iconography and reinforced the Soviet Union's attempts to create a "socialist cinema," which had the effect of promoting Ethiopian films on a global stage.

The Ethiopian Film Center was later established in 1978, which moved the FDCB's center of operations to Ambassador Theater, creating an institution entirely dedicated to film production for the first time in Ethiopian history (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987). The Ethiopian Film Center was equipped with both production and postproduction equipment, with the final editing and printing of film completed in London (Abebe Beyene, interview, Addis Ababa, July 28, 2014). The Film Center produced around twenty-four documentaries including Michel Papatakis's feature documentary *Tiggil Dil, Dil Tiggil*/*Struggle Victory, Victory Struggle* (1978), which was awarded "the honorary diploma of the 11th International Film Festival in Moscow" (Nikolayeva 1986, 158).

Later, in 1986, the Ethiopian Film Corporation was established, adding feature film production to its mandate, while also gaining full postproduction capabilities, apart from the printing of films, which was still carried out in London (Abebe Beyene, interview, Addis Ababa, July 28, 2014). By the mid-1980s, the Derg alleged to have allocated around forty-nine million Ethiopian birr (around twenty-eight

million U.S. dollars according to the 1986 exchange rate) to film production, distribution, and exhibition, of which nineteen million birr was spent on capital expenditure (around eleven million dollars) (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987). This high spending is evidence of the regime's strong commitment to the production and power of films with around forty short/medium-length documentaries made and twenty-five cinemas operating in the country (Ethiopian Film Corporation 1986/1987, 19).

Only three feature-length productions, however, were produced by the Ethiopian Film Corporation from its establishment in 1986 until its liquidation in 1999. These films were *Behiywet Zuriya*/*Around Life* (1989), which was adapted by Birhanu Shibiru from an Ethiopian television drama, tracing the tragic life of its protagonist, Almaz,[21] and *Aster* (1991/1992) by Solomon Bekele Weya. *Aster*, like *Behiywet Zuriya* is a family drama that follows the ordeals of a female protagonist (Aster). When Aster's relationship turns abusive, it forces her to take drastic measures in order to escape. *Aster* is often noted as being the first truly Ethiopian-made fictional feature film as the cast and crew were all Ethiopian nationals (Fikadu 2013). Both *Aster* and *Behiywet Zuriya* were screened in cinemas and widely popular throughout Ethiopia (Abebe Beyene, interview, Addis Ababa, July 28, 2014). The third feature film, *Ferenj*/*European Foreigner* (director unknown, 1990/1991), a coproduction by the Ethiopian Film Corporation and a French production company known as Medaco, is more obscure. Little is written about the film apart from the fact that it is a 35mm bilingual (French and Amharic) color film starring two of the most prolific, early Ethiopian stage actresses, Asnakech Worku and Nigatwa Kelkay (Fikadu 2013, 185). Again the film centered on the life of Arthur Rimbaud and his life in Harar but was never screened in Ethiopia.

The Video Revolution

Foreign films have featured prominently on television since the formation of Ethiopian Television (ETV) in 1964. During Haile Selassie's reign, a slot in the daily service, which aired for roughly six hours every evening, was dedicated to foreign films mostly from America (Reta 2013). During the first eight years of the Derg regime, however, all Western films were banned, at which point films from the USSR and China were featured prominently (Reta 2013). As these films were often documentaries and in foreign languages, Reta states that the majority of the

"Ethiopian audience could not relate to them" (2013, 205). In order to combat this, ETV produced local dramas and programs that proved popular successes and were key to the development of production technicians trained on the job (Reta 2013). Reta also notes that the demand for films was finally realized when the Derg regime lifted an embargo on the import of certain films from the West "that were not considered subversive to the mission of the revolution"; these films along with the Soviet films made up 37 percent of the daily service's airtime (Reta 2013, 204). The high profile of foreign films featured in the daily programming of ETV is evidence of the strong demand and high exposure Ethiopian television audiences had to foreign films since the establishment of ETV.

The advent of analogue video technologies in Ethiopia in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the consequential successful distribution of pirated Hollywood and Bollywood films on VHS for rent, or for screening in informal video-viewing houses, created infrastructural and economic incentives for local video producers. As in other African contexts around the same time, local video and music distributors saw the economic potential of locally produced and commercially oriented video films (Garritano 2013; Larkin 2008; Haynes 2007, 2016). First attempts at local video film production were typically the recording of stage productions, such as *Yekitnesh* by Wibshit Werk-Alemahu (early 1990s), with one of the first video features, *Mesenakil*/*The Obstacle*, by Abreham Tsegaye and his theater group Afleñña Tiyatir/The Prime of Life Theater in 1982 E.C. (1989/1990). The early development of video film production therefore similarly mirrors events in Nigeria, mentioned by Karin Barber (2003) and Biodun Jeyifo (1984), with many of the first Yoruba video filmmakers drawing inspiration from the Yoruba traveling theater. Unlike in Nigeria and Ghana, with early videos suffering from low technical quality, local video film features in Ethiopia proved to be of relatively good quality due to collaborations with trained television and celluloid film professionals, who had gained experience working under the Derg regime.[22] This, however, did not last long as the biggest formal training institution, the Ethiopian Film Corporation, was dissolved in 1999. The few private training institutes that emerged in the following years (such as Tom Photography and Videography Training Center and Master Films and Communication) only gave short courses on a few technical aspects of filmmaking, typically directing, lighting, camera operating, and scriptwriting.

During this time cinemas suffered and even closed, due to licensing stipulations forbidding anything other than 35mm film screenings in cinemas, forcing cinemas to continually screen old celluloid Hollywood and Bollywood films (apart from the

occasional premiere of locally produced video films, which needed explicit government approval). There was, instead, a proliferation of cheap, one-birr-per-head video-viewing houses across Addis Ababa and other urban centers in Ethiopia that became instantly popular with the ever-growing numbers of rural migrants into the cities, on top of an already large population of unemployed/poor, largely male urban youth (Dilalew 2008). The Addis Ababa Trade and Tourism Bureau, charged with granting licenses to video houses, estimated that in the early 1990s there were roughly 250 such places.[23] These video-viewing houses showed a wide range of movies, from freely pirated local productions to pirated Hollywood and Bollywood movies, as well as accommodating the sudden influx of pornography in the country. In the face of the video-viewing houses and the licensing stipulation preventing screening of VHS and DVDs in the cinemas, locally made video productions and cinemas struggled for economic viability unless they had implicit government support (Tesfaye 2006).[24] Even when regional governments gave permission for certain films to be screened, as with Tesfaye Mamo's *Fiker Mecheresha*/*The Edge of Love* (1994), the lack of financial support and relatively low penetration of VHS players threw up more obstacles for local filmmakers.

The licensing stipulation that forbade screening digital films in the cinema was lifted in 2002 after a few early successful screenings of films by filmmakers who successfully lobbied the government. Particularly notable is the 2002 release of Tewodros Teshome's *Kazkaza Welafen*/*Cold Flame* and Tatek Tadesse's *Gudifecha*/*Adoption* (2002), which proved to be the first huge commercial successes, ushering in the first boom period in the local film industry and an era of successful *yefiker film* melodramas. The success of such films spurred cinemagoing in Addis Ababa in particular, with theaters and government-owned cinemas screening local productions (relegating foreign films to the most unpopular morning showtimes, if shown at all), progressively reconfiguring the cinematic experience in Ethiopia toward being dominated by local video/digital film productions.

Due to the rebirth of the Ethiopian film industry and the industry's hostile stance toward piracy (which it sees as being associated with the video-viewing houses), built cinemas and theaters presented the most legitimate space for screening features. The industry in Ethiopia therefore preferred cinematic (or theatrical) releases aimed at a narrower demographic (the growing urban middle classes, both male and female). This is unlike the mostly straight-to-video distribution models adopted in equivalent film industries in other parts of Africa, such as in Nigeria and Ghana.[25] After the success of the early *yefiker film* genre (melodramatic in

narrative and style) that often revolved around the dilemmas of love in urban families, the *assikiñ yefiker film* (romantic comedy) genre has also become notably prevalent in recent years. The large patronage attributed to romantic comedies has developed, in part, due to an increasing number of cinemagoers hailing from the younger generations of the growing urban middle class, including prominent numbers of women.

It is necessary here to emphasize the commercially oriented structure of the contemporary Amharic film industry. Interestingly cinemas assert a lot of power due to each private cinema having its own selection committee, which are in turn often "criticized for their lack of transparency" (Jedlowski 2015b, 177). Due to the romantic comedy genre being regarded as a blueprint for commercial success, cinema proprietors as well as producers, scriptwriters, and directors are made acutely aware of the economic risks involved in experimenting with other themes and genres (Jedlowski 2015b). Haynes's statement about Nollywood, that "individualizing a film takes both time and money, complicating a system that works fast because everybody knows what to do" (2011, 74), resonates with many Ethiopian experiences of film production in the mid-2000s, highlighting the significance of genre to the industry. More recently, however, this trend has begun to shift as a bigger variety of genres emerges and as groups of artistically committed and driven filmmakers (such as Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn, Paulos Regassa, Kidist Yilma, Sewmahon Yismaw, Abraham Gezahegn, and Hermon Hailay, among others) achieve critical acclaim for their features. Many filmmakers also offset the commercial risk of the film industry by profiting from documentary filmmaking funded by the many nongovernmental organizations that operate in Ethiopia.

Adding to the increased visibility of the Amharic film industry has been the creation of the Gumma Film Awards in 2014, which celebrates the industry, recognizing and nurturing a star system that has developed in the country. The Gumma Film Awards also crucially help raise awareness of cinema's history in the country by recognizing pioneers of Ethiopian cinema with the Lifetime Achievement award, which in 2014 was given to Michel Papatakis, in 2015 went to the aforementioned actor Debebe Eshetu, and in 2016 went to one of the first film actresses, Askale Ameneshewa. The growing media attention and wider public interest in Ethiopian productions is further fueling the industry with new television shows now dedicated to reviewing film releases as well as a couple of television documentaries discussing the significance of certain aspects of the movie industry. Furthermore, the proliferation of film festivals in the country is also a sign of the

increasing awareness and interest in issues relating to film and the role films can play within society.

Conclusion

As this historical overview has mapped out, cinema occupies a complex and unsettled position within the Ethiopian social and cultural imagination. The numerous regimes that have governed the country from the late nineteenth century up until the present have all been acutely aware of the power of cinema. In Ethiopia, as in most countries throughout the world, the debate concerning the position of cinema in society and its role in the country's culture has been highly contested since cinematic technology was introduced under Menelik II. Alternate regimes have presided over differing strategies concerning the control of cinema, ranging from heavy state intervention and strict censorship (as during the Italian occupation and Derg periods) to more nuanced relationships to cinema. Unlike in the common Euro-American trajectories of cinema, the commercialization of local movie production in Ethiopia has only recently flourished, while cinema (and in more general terms, media) has typically been valued by the state as a tool for propaganda (Reta 2013; Gagliardone 2011; Gartley 1997), limiting the space for filmmakers to experiment. Even more interestingly for future studies are two somewhat separate phenomena to that of the popularity and commercial success of locally produced Amharic films:[26] namely the ever-expanding catalog of festival films made (in the most part but not exclusively) by members of the Ethiopian diaspora and filmmaking in other languages spoken in Ethiopia such as Oromo and Tigrinya with interesting examples of filmmakers and films bridging apparent divides in artistic quality, cultural specificity, and popularity.

NOTES

1. This simulator seats twelve people per showing with each film lasting roughly ten minutes each.
2. Video CD (VCD), also known as compact disc digital video, was created in 1993 and came before the DVD. The VCD was the first format used for distributing films on 120mm optical discs. Each VCD can hold roughly one hour's worth (800MB) of audio/video content, which means feature-length video films are usually divided into two separate

compact discs.

3. In 2016 there were around thirty cinemas in Addis Ababa, with approximately an additional twenty in smaller towns and cities across Ethiopia.
4. From 2002 to 2015 at least twenty privately owned cinemas were established in Addis Ababa, in contrast to only three built in the sixty-year period after the Italian occupation from 1941 to 2001.
5. E.C. denotes where the date is in the Ethiopian Calendar. Where possible the corresponding date in the Gregorian calendar will follow in brackets.
6. This first cinema was located near where present Tewodros Square is today; the Wafa Cinema occupies the same site as this first cinema and is still referred to as *yeseytan bet* by many locals. Meseret Chekol Reta (2013), however, states that the first cinema opened in Addis Ababa was by an Armenian in the early 1900s, a reference corresponding more with the second attempt by the Baicovich brothers.
7. The term *Ras* literally means *head* and was used to signify the position of governors of provinces within the hierarchy of the Ethiopian aristocracy. *Ras* Mekonnin (also known as *Ras* Mekonnen Welde-Mikaél) was the governor of Harar and the father of Tafari Mekonnen, who later became Emperor Haile Selassie I. Tekle-Haymanot of Gojjam was the ruler of Gojjam and a famous Ethiopian war hero for his exploits in the Battle of Adwa in 1896.
8. Orthodox Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia in the fourth century when it was embraced by Ezana of Aksum (ruler of the kingdom of Aksum, located in present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, parts of Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan), long before Christian missionaries from Europe spread Christianity to other parts of Africa.
9. Even the first bicycles to be introduced into Ethiopia were named *yesaytan feres* (the Devil's horse). The morality and influences of cinema in Ethiopia are still often debated today; however it seems that Menelik and other modernizing elites were mostly successful in dispelling notions that linked the cinema and other modern technologies with the Devil.
10. Pankhurst alternatively puts this date a year later at 1909/10.
11. The Hôtel de France was one of the first hotels to be built in Ethiopia, soon after the construction of Taitu Hotel in 1898 E.C. (1905/6); these first hotels, along with their attempts at establishing cinema, were a function of the country's urbanization and modernization (Gebremedhin 2007).
12. The Menelik thaler was often regarded as interchangeable with the Maria Theresa thaler (dollar) of Austria formally used throughout Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Arabia, and Ethiopia.
13. This steep influx of foreign migrants coincided with the commencing of work on the

French-backed Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway in 1897, the brainchild of Menelik's Swiss adviser, Ilg. The high numbers of foreigners came as government and railway employees or private entrepreneurs, many of whom later came to settle in Addis Ababa (Pankhurst 1968, 309).

14. Italian East Africa was an attempt by Italy to combine its previous colonies, Italian Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, after it had occupied parts of the Ethiopian Empire.
15. *Ras* Haylu Tekle-Haymanot, son of *Ras* Tekle-Haymanot, conspired with the Italians when they entered Addis. His esteem with the Italians was such that he was awarded the Star of Italy among other honors by the Italian government, with *Ras* Haylu and his family being personally exempt from the repercussions of Yekatit 12 (a massacre of Ethiopians in Addis Ababa following an attempt on the life of Italian viceroy Rodolfo Graziani in 1937).
16. There have been similar analyses of African responses to colonial cinema particularly in relation to the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (Sanogo 2011).
17. Some of these films were *Il grande appello*/*The Great Appeal* (Mario Camerini, 1936), *Sentinelle di bronzo*/*Sentinels of Bronze* (Romolo Marcellini, 1937), *Sotto la Croce del Sud*/*Under the Southern Cross* (Guido Brignone, 1938), *Luciano Serra, pilota*/*Luciano Serra, Pilot* (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1938), *Abuna Messias*/*Cardinal Messias* (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1939), and *Piccoli naufraghi*/*Small Castaways* (Flavio Calzavara, 1939). These films often featured long shots of local peoples as well as the landscapes of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Despite many major characters being performed in blackface, the Ethiopian actress Birke Zeytu-Telke played a major role in *Abuna Messias*.
18. The Film Development and Control Board is an English interpretation by the author of the Amharic name: *film madaberiyana mekotateriya wana kifil*.
19. *3002* was also shown at Festac '77 enabling Teferi Bizuayehu to escape the Red Terror purge, carried out by Mengistu Hayle-Mariam, killing any and all political opposition in the country including Desta Tadessa and his family. Teferi Bizuayehu was granted asylum in the United Kingdom.
20. The first film to be screened after the ban was lifted was the 1973 Hindi film *Bobby*, which opened to a full house in Cinema Ethiopia and reinvigorated cinemagoing in Ethiopia (Shah 2007).
21. The plot follows the life of Almaz who throws her husband, Abebe, out onto the streets after she finds out he is having multiple affairs. Just when Almaz's life is beginning to improve, after she starts a relationship with a lawyer, tragedy befalls her family.
22. Many quality video films were made in the 1990s such as Demere Tsigie's *Yenekezech Hiywet*/*Her Worn-Out Life* (1992), Tesfaye Mamo's *Fiker Mechereshа*/*The Edge of Love*

(1994), Abreham Tsegaye's *Yejenber Tila*/*The Sun's Shadow* (1994) and *Yelib Kelebet*/*The Heart's Promise* (1996), Kidist Bayeliñ's *Hiywet Indewaza*/*Life as a Mockery* (1998), and Beminabu Kebede's *Fidda*/*Recompense* (1999).

23. This number was recorded at ninety-eight in 2008 due to forced closures for a myriad of offenses such as not paying taxes. The government's crack-down on video houses instead of cinemas may have also had an influence on the subsequent rejuvenation of cinemagoing in the country (Dilalew 2008).
24. In the early 2000s the cinema business in Addis Ababa was deteriorating to such an extent that there were only four cinemas in operation; all of them were state run, although at this time theaters such as Hager Fiker, Ras Theater, and the Addis Ababa City Hall would also occasionally screen films.
25. Although recently these industries are also preferring theatrical releases due to problems of piracy (Haynes 2014).
26. "Separate" due to these films' lack of commercial viability in Ethiopian cinemas.

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3002: Wondimu's Memories. 1976. Teferi Bizuayehu. Ethiopia: Film Development and Control Board.

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Ethiopian Film Centre.

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Yelib Kelebet/*The Heart's Promise*. 1996. Abreham Tsegaye. Ethiopia: Ambassel Music Video and Electronics.

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Fascist Imperial Cinema

An Account of Imaginary Places

Giuseppe Fidotta

"I am confident that cinema will play an important role in the future of Abyssinia. Once Italy and its victorious troops have fixed this country, it will be the task of cinema to help diffuse civilization" (quoted in W.T. 1935, 4). These words of Charles Gleyze, a French movie-theater owner working in Addis Ababa since the early 1920s, are excerpted from an interview made at the end of 1935 by an Italian journalist for a popular film magazine. Capturing the bewilderment of a section of Addis Ababa's population that had made the city one of the most cosmopolitan centers of the continent, this text presents the reader with a seemingly sincere and thus disturbing excitement for the possibilities for film culture and business in the event of Fascist Italian rule. As Gleyze reiterates throughout the interview, the new rulers had to come up with a cultural project in which cinema could be fully integrated, for it is the most impactful and communicative means at their disposal to get the Ethiopians on their side. A couple of years later, interventions pursuing the need for a specific film production targeting indigenous audiences (Rava 1936; Balestrazzi 1939; Orano 1939), as well as signs of moral and cultural panic provoked by the circulation of films threatening the rulers' racial prestige (V.M. 1939; Balestrazzi 1939; Mattia 1940), inspired heated debates. The values, potentials, and merits of cinema for the sake of the colonial project were thoroughly discussed in

op-eds, reportages, and reviews appearing in both film and colonial journals and also penned by prominent figures operating within the colonial administration. Nonetheless, the outcomes of Italy's colonial and later imperial film production do not bear the traces of any of these reflections, nor of any hint, even, of a short-term project encompassing local populations in any form. If these absences are to be considered as representative of the absence of any real common terrain between Italian imperial films and local realities, the fact that the former had never seriously treated the latter appears to be an astonishing element to be taken into account for assessing the meaning of Fascist imperial culture. The sheer presence of non-Italian people in Italian documentary and feature films set in the territories of the empire is in itself paradoxically surprising, for, as I will argue, these productions display an obsession with motifs, figures, and narratives all focused on Italian people fighting for, building, and praising the empire. Behind all colonial and imperial European cinema there is a sense of ambiguity and fabrication, if not of total delusion, but the Italian case stands out for its opacity, that is, for the fact of it being essentially a product of several imaginations at work to invent a fictitious reality responding to political and ideological imperatives. No wonder that according to Ruth Ben-Ghiat, these films were greeted by Ethiopian people with laugher, thus creating "a sort of parallel soundtrack whose audience was Italians, who in turn experienced the film through the screen of such mockery" (2003, 60). Although none of these films were expressly intended for colonial audiences, such reactions illuminate the failure of the imperial cinema, while also providing at the same time a powerful comment on the alleged, though seldom demonstrated, effectiveness of these films. Such a healthy exercise in "subversive reading" already suggests the main argument of this essay, that is, the legitimacy of reading Italian colonial cinema as a solipsist product of fantasy.

This chapter intends to provide an overview of the brief history of Fascist Italy's colonial cinema in the light of both opacity and fantasy, which I will argue should be regarded as its most peculiar features. The first section will address the issue of colonial representation through the notion of "scopic regime," and in particular of its "African" variety, a framework that helps in understanding the discursive regimes behind the first Italian films realized within the Ethiopian territory and more broadly the pre-1935 film production. Then, I will turn to wartime film production and to what was perceived at the time as its failure in providing appropriate representations of war. By focusing on the imperial film production, the third section will outline how the rhetoric of empire building meant translating governmental

policies and practices into fantasies of identity and fantasies of power. Finally, in conclusion I will assess how Fascist Italy's imperial cinema created the empire as an experimental space where these fantasies could be enacted.

The Place of Spectacular Sights

In the course of the early modern and modern periods, European cultural elites elaborated a set of discursive strategies and practices aimed at blurring the anomalous character of Africa by turning its radical otherness—and that of its inhabitants with their enigmatic features, cultures, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior—into codes of recognition and authenticity. Scholarly analyses of colonial knowledge, order, and stereotype have proliferated since the 1980s, but only recently have their theoretical approaches been expanded to include insights from the blooming field of visual culture studies. While addressing the question of otherness in terms of cultural assumptions and appropriations still proves productive, shifting the focus to the technics and technologies through which otherness has historically been produced, circulated, and consumed as well as on the protocols of looking and knowing behind them appears worthwhile in this context. By addressing the very question of vision and visuality, images and performances of Africa came into view in a more structured way. David Campbell and Martin Power have resorted to the notion of scopic regime, initially proposed by Christian Metz to distinguish the cinematic from the theatrical way of seeing the world, to describe "a repertoire of perspectival practices, embedded in a global visual economy" (Campbell and Power 2010, 169). The idea of a systemic structuring of the visual field combined with that of the existence of agendas and techniques of political visualization allow Campbell and Power to review the ways in which Africa has been produced through various technologies of observation, reproduction, and display. Cinema, in particular, has been held responsible for the broadest proliferation not only of misconceptions about Africa and Africans, but also of colonial modes of thinking. It had a consistent impact on the production of the scopic regime of Africa, which as a result "created a place in the world marked by either war and disaster or exotic natives and animal tourism" (Campbell and Power 2010, 188).

Fascist Italy's imperial cinema fits rather well those descriptions, and so does its colonial (or more generally, exoticist) forerunner. Darkness, mystery, exoticism, pristine nature, and unusual customs and rituals have been the subjects of a variety

of films spanning from ethnographic documentary to safari films, and from the 1900s to the present. For geopolitical and financial reasons, documentary was the form most films took, and Libya, Somalia, and Eritrea (the last two to a minor extent) were the locations favored by producers. Still, some of Italy's most famous African films were set in Ethiopia long before the country had been invaded by Benito Mussolini's troops. Curiously enough, they occupy a place in Italian film history much more relevant than that of the films set in the bordering colonies, a sign of documentary film's complicity with and contribution to the state-driven colonial project that the Adwa defeat of 1896 deferred. *Matrimonio abissino/Abyssinian Wedding* (Roberto Omegna, 1909), the only surviving film from the series shot by the father of Italian scientific cinema in his 1908 African trip, has been credited as the first Italian ethnographic film (Marano 2007). The travelogue *Aethiopia* (Guelfo Civinini, 1924) was the evidence used in April 1924 to convince Mussolini of the need for state-controlled documentary film production, a hazardous enterprise that eventually led to the creation of the LUCE Institute a few months after the film's screening (Laura 2000, 13–18).[1] LUCE's own *Spedizione Franchetti nella Dancalia/Franchetti's Expedition in Dankalia* (Mario Craveri, 1929), a chronicle of explorer and warmonger Baron Raimondo Franchetti's celebrated enterprise, is remembered for being the most vocal expression of Italian national cinema's imperialist vocation before 1935. An extraordinary example of the company's swashbuckling spirit so often obscured by monotonous and blatant propaganda films, this film was entirely made by the brilliant yet uncredited young filmmaker, director of photography, and operator Mario Craveri, who had to promote a positive image of a dramatic and largely unsuccessful expedition. Although his recipe included a sapient balance of adventure and daily life, documenting the challenges the party faced, an Italian film critic writing for the League of Nations's *International Review of Educational Cinematography*,[2] incapable of seeing anything but desirable vacant lands, observed that "this splendid cinematographic vision cannot fail to arouse in the people *the wish to expand towards the distant lands* lying under unknown skies, with dawns and sunsets blazing with purple and gold that fade into violets and blues of an intensity new and strange" (1929, 572; my emphasis).

The misreading is revelatory not only of a distinctly colonialist way of seeing, but also of a specific political discourse that began to resonate in Italy at the end of the 1920s and became more prominent over time. An exemplary case in point is *Abissinia/Abyssinia* (Anon., 1932), seemingly another innocent travelogue produced

by LUCE. Split in two sections, one shot in Ethiopia and the other in Italian Somalia, the film indulges throughout the first half in associating Ethiopian people with the land they inhabit and in describing both as belonging to the realm of nature (opposed to and outside of cultural, political, and historical existence). Despairing and revulsive in their representation, the conditions of Ethiopia are pitted against the work done by Italian colonialists in Somalia, the topic of the second half of the film. A direct comparison between two close and yet very distant social realities, in this context, downplays cultural and historical specificity in favor of a false universalism predicated upon equivocal ideas of progress, liberation, and civilization, and their material instantiations allegedly brought about by colonization. It achieves this in two ways very common for its kind of rhetoric: by presenting Ethiopia as a bad neighbor whose instability and grinding poverty could threaten Italian colonies, and by expressing persisting concerns about abuses, including slavery and human trafficking, committed by Haile Selassie's government (Falasca-Zamponi 1997). Although humanitarianism and modernization were common themes in colonial discourse (Bloom 2008), their Fascist declination cannot but sound preposterous given the real nature of Fascist colonial ideology.

Most tropes of the "scopic regime of 'Africa'" individuated by Campbell and Power (2010), such as surveillance, debasement, naturalization, and eroticization, had been massively deployed by Italian colonial films. Exoticism, in particular, stood out as a much more challenging element. The controversy and conflict generated by its overwhelming presence in colonial films revealed, in fact, the existence of distinct conceptions of colonial cinema, conflicting agendas, and high-stake political interests. More than a simple ornamental quality, this exoticism nourished filmmakers' imaginations to the point of painting an interchangeable portrait of a generic "Africa," as if such an undefined place of sensual fantasies and inspiring beauties actually existed. For many years, there had been no fiction film shot in Libya without camels, coconut palms, marabouts, and lions showing up from time to time in generally graceless and gratuitous ways. Titles such as *Maciste contro lo sceicco*/*Maciste against the Sheikh* (Mario Camerini, 1926), *Die weiße Sklavin*/*The White Slave* (Augusto Genina, 1927), or *La sperduta di Allah*/*Allah's Lost Soul* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1929) seem eloquent enough (Ben-Ghiat 2015). Even the more rigorous documentaries shot in Somalia and Eritrea were a catalog of picturesque marvels. Appealing to enjoyment and awe, exoticism proved itself able to domesticate places and peoples whose radical otherness could have intimidated domestic audiences. As such, it was an idiom common to most Western countries established to order

and master those foreign spaces, to appropriate them in different ways, and to turn them into sites of visual pleasure often polluted with para-scientific claims (Sartini-Blum 2003). The inherent contradictions of exoticism were so rooted in Italian culture that a review like that of *Spedizione Franchetti in Dancalia*, in which the film critic took pride in promoting his country's expansionist policy while identifying the territories to be conquered as nothing but a fantastic spectacle, would have hardly raised eyebrows.

Contradictions, however, came to the surface in the early 1930s as exoticism suddenly became contested ground. The idea of the colonies as sites of visual pleasure did not fit into the Fascist regime's new foreign policy, which sought to affirm Italy's position within the international community and, at the same time, to overthrow the order established after World War I, especially in the Arab region, in the Balkans, and in East Africa (Robertson 1977). With the appointment of Dino Grandi, head of the nationalist faction within the Fascist Party, as foreign minister in 1929, the colonial lobby's interests found a strong supporter, while colonial journals started to contrast the dominant discourses about Africa circulating in the public sphere and pleading for a more rational, economic-driven, situated knowledge of the continent. Encapsulated by the rallying cry of "less crocodiles and more mines," the set of discourses and representations urged by the colonial lobby was replicated through countless articles on exoticism as a counterproductive cultural practice, obsolete currency, and toxic waste. But while commercial film producers had to respond to market conditions and thus had to meet Italian audiences' exoticist appetite, LUCE had no such constraint due to its educational purpose and therefore could shape a more accurate and comprehensible image of the colonies without pandering to backward preconceptions. After all, LUCE was the official state agent for educational cinema and propaganda, two terms almost indistinguishable during the Fascist era. This benefited the organization, as it enjoyed a virtual monopoly on newsreel and documentary production that made it easy to adapt to the regime's contingent need at a particular time (Laura 2000; Argentieri 2003). As the reasoning of the colonial lobby grew stronger, the insistence on playing the exotic card became more and more detrimental for the company and even worse for the audience that had access to nothing but products of unabashed fantasy. After turning a prolonged deaf ear to these demands, LUCE was finally forced to shift its position in the spring of 1935.

The Place of the Fascist Ethos

Commenting on Mussolini's oft-quoted motto "cinema is the strongest weapon" (*l'arma più forte*), Steven Ricci argues that "Italian cinema is seen as an integral part of national political life in part because of the very importance ascribed to it by the country's national institutions" (2008, 47). The Ethiopian war represented one of the few instances in which the whole film industry was called to arms for the sake of the national interest; this became "the only fascist mobilization ever to occur in Italian cinema" (Bolzoni 1976, 34). Far from being disproportionate, the term "mobilization" hints also at the double meaning of the Italian word *arma*, which can be translated as *weapon*, but also *corps*. In October 1935, four weeks before General Emilio De Bono and his troops crossed the Mareb River, the LUCE Institute—"the most ostensible result of political involvement in Italian filmmaking" (Hay 1987, 205)—established (at Mussolini's request) an ad hoc section in Asmara, the Reparto Foto-cinematografico per l'Africa Orientale Italiana (hereafter Reparto), formed primarily to document the war. Usually, LUCE's cameramen ventured all over the country and sometimes throughout the world to capture on film the major news stories in the most direct way possible with little or no concession to aesthetic and formal concerns. Their mobility and relative freedom of action within an extremely centralized structure made the establishment of separate branches meaningless in normal contexts. Of course, given the importance attributed to the Ethiopian war, LUCE had to display exceptional skills in order to achieve the outcomes expected for the documentation of what is still considered "the largest colonial war ever fought" (Cerasi 2014, 430; Del Boca 1965). Accompanied by a select crew, some key figures in the company were sent to Asmara to coordinate such a composite division, the shape of which emulated on a smaller scale that of a military unit.

To every army corps was assigned a LUCE cameraman who had to act like a regular soldier, the only substantial difference being the weapon they used. Moreover, cameramen and technicians had to be enlisted, and four members of the Reparto's technical board (out of seven) were military functionaries. The Reparto's self-perception, in the words of its last wartime director, was that of "a *war machine* that clambered up mountains and steep narrow roads, together with cannons and all other weapons . . . and, guided by firm hands, reached the victorious goal along with the other corps" (Croce 1936, 13; my emphasis). As it has been accurately observed, the intertwining of civilian and military filmmaking reflected a very central aspect of Fascist imperial culture, that is, "the militarization of the cinematic

apparatus" (Ben-Ghiat 2015, 63), for nonfiction cinema's function became not only documenting the war but also helping to wage it.

On the frontlines, LUCE produced remarkable outcomes in terms of quantity: eighteen original short movies, seven thousand negatives, seventy thousand meters of film, plus a dozen war/colonial-themed films incorporating shots made by the Reparto's cameramen. Unfortunately for the company, quantity did not usually beget quality. Widely circulating also thanks to a law obliging all movie theaters in Italy and in the colonies to screen LUCE newsreels and/or documentaries before every feature film, these were welcomed with harsh criticism within the regime (but applauded by the consistently deferent press). According to the head of the General Directorate of Cinematography, Luigi Freddi, the Reparto's film production "never met the minimum technical, spectacular and social standards, but guaranteed to the spectators their daily dose of boredom" (1949, 228). Minister of Popular Culture Dino Alfieri intervened at the beginning of 1936 to prompt LUCE's president Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli to take control of the situation, for the Reparto's work was deemed lacking in pathos and spectacular appeal. In spite of an outstanding organization and a crew of some of the best film professionals in Italy, LUCE was provoking justified expressions of discontent. As combat films, these documentaries carried a glaring contradiction between epic narratives (of conquest, submission, and clamorous accomplishments) and unimpressive images (of military daily life, marches, and maneuvers against an invisible enemy) that even the war sequences could not resolve. At the same time, as documents of the Fascist ethos, they lauded and idealized violence as a redemptive force, celebrating every single success as a further demonstration of Fascist superiority over any other civilization and claiming that the whole country was expressing its deepest nature on the Ethiopian battleground (Labanca 2006, 2015; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005). The lack of pathos and spectacular appeal was tackled by LUCE in the postproduction stage without making any actual change to the Reparto's functioning: brilliant journalists who were able to liven up the commentary got hired, and some basic elements of the films, such as editing, rhythm, and music, were simply improved. As the special African section was established to record the course of the war but the war itself escaped the lens of the cameramen, LUCE could not but extol troops, corps, commanders, Fascist hierarchs, and Mussolini.

Other documentarists had the opportunity to make films during the Ethiopian war with LUCE's financial and organizational support but without the journalistic constraints (e.g., topicality, immediate political utility, ideological explicitness,

etc.) imposed on the Reparto. The most acclaimed colonial documentaries ever made in Italy, *Il cammino degli eroi*/*The Path of the Heroes* (Corrado D'Errico, 1936) and *Legionari al secondo parallelo*/*Legionaries at the Second Parallel* (Romolo Marcellini, 1937), are two compilation films heavily based on LUCE footage that occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of 1930s colonial documentary. Both films, like all Reparto films, struggled with dealing with "the fought war" (Caprotti 2014, 313–315), but succeeded in presenting appealing and inspiring depictions of the war as seen from the perspective of the Fascist regime. The opposition, though, is striking. *Legionari al secondo parallelo* is a sentimental portrait of a humble militiaman who volunteers for Ethiopia and ends up finding his "America" there, a place suitable to "bring my beloved Antonietta." Despite the soundtrack being constructed of martial music, aggressive sound effects, and Mussolini quotations, the overall tone accentuates the narrow perspective of its protagonist. The film, however, often seems to be snared by its own ambiguities, and so it wavers between the detached official rhetoric of Fascist war and the tedious routine of an anonymous soldier's life, dreams, and petty dramas. On the opposing end of the spectrum, *Il cammino degli eroi* is a depersonalized behind-the-scenes account of the war in twelve chapters (industry, logistics, infrastructure, and services), only one featuring war actions disguised as a "bloody aggression" carried out by "criminal and thoughtless savage hordes." Drawing on his knowledge of experimental filmmaking and on a keen understanding of the image the regime wished to project (Ben-Ghiat 2001), Corrado D'Errico composed a symphony dedicated to the Italian worker as an agent of civilization. Protagonists are, as the commentary labels them, "the gigantic machine working behind the army to assure its efficiency and strength" and the "harsh, tenacious effort of will, technique, and genius leading to the victory." The film bypasses the blind spots in war representations encountered by the Reparto by concentrating, quite paradoxically, on the unseen and hidden face of the war. Not only did D'Errico play with the distinctively futurist fascination with the intertwining of war, technology, and movement, but he also repressed every form of contingency and chaos inevitably associated with the war in order to create "a visually and ideologically overdetermined universe of hierarchy and structure" (Ben-Ghiat 1996, 133). D'Errico's and Marcellini's films challenged the idea of war representation and the very genre of combat film through a threefold displacement: from the battlefield to the rear and the home front; from the soldier to the emigrant and the worker; from the heroic to the everyday. The Ethiopian enemy kept being "more evoked than actually seen" (Celli 2006, 68), as it was for the

Reparto production, but this absence ultimately changed its meaning from a mark of menacing invisibility denouncing the inadequacy of modern Western warfare (and related representational strategies) to a symptom of a more general disregard toward every non-Italian entity. From then on, fantasy took hold.

The Place of Pure Fantasy

In the spring of 1936, when the Italian victory seemed near, two famous filmmakers and their troupes reached the Italian overseas possessions to shoot "the first films of the empire": *Lo squadrone bianco*/*The White Squadron* (Augusto Genina, 1936) and *Il grande appello*/*The Great Appeal* (Mario Camerini, 1936). Over the next three years, the others that followed always received favorable responses from audiences and critics alike, often because of the Fascist regime's investment in their production.[3] The mobilization of the film industry, ironically condensed in the image of colonial-themed scripts overflowing Luigi Freddi's desk (Ben-Ghiat 2015), ended up producing a handful of films. Fiction films followed a rigid narrative structure typical of male melodramas with minimum variations: a hero spoiled by a non-Fascist lifestyle gets exposed to Fascist colonial reality, understands the spiritual values of the enterprise through a traumatic encounter, and finally decides to redeem himself by sacrificing his own life, sometimes managing to pronounce the word "Italia" just before passing away. Utterly ridiculous to the point of generating audible laughter from Ethiopian audiences, as already recalled, these films also provide further demonstration of the idea that fantasy innervated any aspect of Italian imperial cinema.

An interesting attempt in this direction had already been made as early as 1974 in a landmark conference on neorealism by a group of young cinephiles destined to occupy leading positions in Italian film culture, who presented a paper on the legacy of 1930s cinema. Colonial cinema, they claimed, was "the real autarchic genre" that refused to recognize the Western film as its legitimate father (Casetti et al. 1975, 346). The association between Hollywood Westerns and colonial films has been explored in depth, especially in the American context (Shohat and Stam 1995). Yet, being a distinctively Hollywood product, in Italy the genre has been perceived (and then reworked in the very peculiar form of the Spaghetti Western) as quintessentially cinematic, not at all realistic. Themes and motifs resonating between the two genres, accordingly, have fantasy as their common denominator.

Like the Western film, the Italian colonial film was shaped by an array of cultural assumptions having little to do with the historical, cultural, and social realities it attempted to depict, as accuracy and verisimilitude never were real concerns for it. Like the Western film, moreover, it focused on a variety of myths and ideological metaphors that ultimately prevented the spectator from grasping the nature of the colonial/imperial project, let alone its everyday praxis. The extremely polarized narrative structures that the two genres share, though, presented a very peculiar appearance in the Italian case. What it portrayed in its full complexity were, in fact, the dreams and desires of an archetypal Fascist male, among which the greatest was to make the empire the expression of the so-called Fascist revolution.

Nonetheless, discourses about imperial cinema emphasized realist aesthetics, documentary strategies, on-location shootings, native casting,[4] and the filmmakers' declarations of intent as further evidences of how the genre wisely approached its two main goals—namely, disseminating knowledge of the empire and forming a full-blown "imperial consciousness" among Italian people (Courriol 2014, 131–137). Colonial cinema's mission, according to another popular film journal, is to document "the prodigious fertility of the shores of Lake Tana," "the richness of the still mysterious Kaffa and Jimma," "the geography of the Ethiopian highlands," and so on—but, first and foremost, to "demonstrate through the exemplary deeds of the Italian community that even a few thousand kilometers far away from home one works, lives, and prospers inasmuch as one feels the presence of the motherland" (*Lo Schermo* 1936, 12). Knowledge and awareness, once again, had been overshadowed by the widespread urgency to subordinate the empire (understood as a collection of natural resources and exotic settings) to purely nationalist purposes (embodied in the exemplary deeds of the Italian abroad). In Jean Gili's words, the Italian imperial film "did not express the reality of conquest or the empire-building process, but the phantasm of the colonial myth and, more broadly, the African dream as the unlikely *elsewhere* where all national problems find their solution" (Brunetta and Gili 1990, 108, my emphasis; Coletti 2004). In other words, the main trait of the genre was its own self-referential cosmos (Bertellini 2003).

An idea that cannot surely be overestimated, as it was repeated over and over in various forms, is that the empire stood for something else, or something more. As a matter of fact, the conquest of Ethiopia did not simply mean to include another country among Italy's colonial possessions—it gave birth to the empire. Though despicable and in retrospect almost ridiculously preposterous, the proclamation of the empire was a crucial moment for Italy, a nation whose history is deeply

saturated with relics of past defeats and invasions, poignant narratives of mass emigration, faint memories of long-gone days of glory, and the harsh reality of areas facing endemic poverty. The sheer idea of the empire alone boosted the Italian sense of identity and national sentiment. In this sense, fictional colonial cinema helped shape a distinctively Fascist, nationalist, and imperialist identity, which was not related in any manner to the colonized people, not even to establish contrasts and tensions between the two. It is not a coincidence, after all, that the sole strong unifying theme of these fiction films was not "imperial consciousness," "colonizing mission," or militarist ideology, but *masculinity*, the reconstruction of an "authentically fascist virile identity" that led many to see the colonies as a therapeutic haven (Bellassai 2005, 317; Stefani 2007).

Surprisingly, documentary films, as opposed to the imperial fantasy of fiction films, were not so attentive to the imperial reality. First and foremost, continually adjusting its strategies to the Fascist regime's agenda, LUCE simply lost interest in the empire soon after the main focus of attention shifted from Ethiopia to Spain, where the future of Europe was to be determined. Although LUCE's own Reparto, instead of being dismissed, was transferred to the newly proclaimed capital of the empire, Addis Ababa, it became so unproductive that the Ministry for the Colonies attempted to confiscate its equipment and hire its workers. After long negotiations that started in the summer of 1936, three years later all media, communication, and news agencies working in Italian East Africa were finally merged into a single, centralized propaganda office. During that time, the Reparto made no feature-length documentary, a half dozen short films,[5] and *Cronache dell'Impero*/*Chronicles of the Empire* (Anon., 1937–1939), an interesting series with a quite uncommon focus on technology as carrier of civilization (Fidotta 2016). The imperial documentary films of LUCE almost always failed to acknowledge how the Italian occupation changed Ethiopia's landscape through the construction of modern infrastructure and buildings but also through episodes of forced labor, segregation, deportation, and massacres that had consequences on the geography of the country. For instance, in the feature-length documentary *La fondazione della nuova Addis Abeba*/*The Founding of the New Addis Ababa* (Giovanni Martucci, 1939), one cannot have a clear sense of whether the radical reshaping of the city depicted in the film had already taken place or was still only on paper, for the film deceives the spectator with scale models, montage and mise-en-scène tricks, and footage from different epochs. Attempts at fabrication became endemic within the production of imperial documentaries as a whole.

Conclusions

All the documentaries and fiction feature films discussed so far indistinctly mirrored the Fascist regime's drives, complied with its requests, and contributed to colonial and imperial domination. They did so not only on an abstract level, but also through the concrete participation in everyday violence, surveillance, and exploitation of indigenous people. Recognizing the position of cinema within the fabric of the colonial/imperial reality means contesting the noninvolvement in the overseas activities that the film industry, as many other sectors, claimed after the fall of the regime. It has been noted that "the 'African films' authorized and sponsored by the Italian fascist regime celebrate not so much the actual colonization of the East African territory . . . but rather the colonizing power of cinema. The truth is that Italians were controlling Ethiopia only with and through cinematic fantasies" (Boggio 2003, 279). This remark brings together two distinct threads somehow related to the presumed power of cinema to master reality: the idea of a cinematic colonization and the association of propaganda, falsity, and deception. The most comprehensive account of Italian documentary film history to date, too, shares this belief: "the colonization was first and foremost cinematic, [for] the machine created by LUCE maintained the supremacy of imaginary over real actions" (Bertozzi 2008, 78). Sometimes film, literature, and postmodern historians tend to be so attentive to representations, constructions, images, and narratives to the point of overlooking basic historical facts; for instance, that if colonization had been cinematic and the presence of Italians limited to cinematic fantasies, the lives of thousands of people would have been radically different.

It is symptomatic that there are no pictures in circulation from either the Italo-Ethiopian war or the occupation period that have been granted iconic status in Italy today. In addition to this, there are no movies from this same time span known outside very specialized research communities (even *Il cammino degli eroi*, arguably Italy's major contribution to the European modernist documentary tradition, has, as of yet, failed to be recognized outside the boundaries of Italian film studies). That opacity has been essential for Italy in coping (or, rather, in avoiding to cope) with the colonies and the empire. On the other hand, the deception of imperial propaganda was not so dissimilar from the self-deception of the regime itself, which openly envisaged the empire as a halfway mark on the route to the Fascist revolution. That colonial reality was "an intermediate step," as Gian Piero Brunetta puts it, that "transpired from the screen, through symptoms and signs so mild that

no one seemed to take them seriously" (Brunetta and Gili 1990, 35). The symptoms and signs examined throughout this chapter, to which Brunetta refers, intended to make the empire a laboratory where Fascist civilization could develop—if not in full-blown form, at least in vitro—before being brought back home to regulate Fascist society (Wolfe 1997). The same symptoms and signs resonate today and are imperial cinema's most lasting legacies and what make it accountable, in part, for the longing and belief in such imaginary places.

NOTES

1. From then on, LUCE produced (and acquired from other companies) twelve thousand newsreels, nine thousand documentaries and three million photographs, most of which are openly accessible at http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/.
2. It is worth noting that the institute, despite its global influence on the internationalization of educational film culture, the establishment of film studies, and the homogenization of market and technical standards, was essentially a failed soft-power project of the Fascist regime.
3. It would suffice to mention that during the making of *Scipione l'Africano*/*Scipio Africanus* (Carmine Gallone, 1937), Mussolini visited the Cinecittà set and predicted "a great movie," and that statement was later reported by almost every review of the film as further evidence of Il Duce's clairvoyance and sensitivity.
4. At the risk of anticipating part of my conclusions, it should be emphasized that the practice of native casting is a vocal reminder of the film industry's complicity with and culpability in the injustice of the colonial project, as it was carried out through forms of forced labor, exploitation, intimidation, and even deportation of entire tribes. As Ben-Ghiat sharply observes, the production of these films "relied on and furthered a system of colonial labor that occasioned abuses and intimacies, displacements and dependencies, and ambivalence—that defining colonial condition—seemed to govern the attitudes of both filmmakers and indigenous actors" (2015, 158, 188–190).
5. A significant confirmation of the Reparto's troubled finances comes from the fact that it accepted private funding to produce short films that are hard to consider as anything more than advertisements; for instance, *Contributo all'autarchia: la mica*/*Contribution to Autarchy: The Mica* (1937), an educational documentary on the extraction of mica in Eritrea, clearly publicizes the activities and even the products of Magneti Marelli.

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The Revolution Has Been Televised

Fact, Fiction, and Spectacle in the 1970s and 1980s

Kate Cowcher

The twentieth century is replete with examples of film intersecting with the processes of political revolution. From Sergei Eisenstein's epic restaging of the October revolution as an unequivocally popular upsurge to what Timothy Garton Ash called the real-time "telerevolutions" (1990, 90) that accompanied the collapse of communism, screens, large and small, have played critical roles in effecting, amplifying, and mythologizing radical ruptures in the status quo. The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 is rarely remembered for anything more than ushering in a violent Marxist military dictatorship, led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Derg ("committee") on whose hands the blood of many thousands of Ethiopians remains. Without forgetting the great darkness that clouds the years between 1974 and 1991, it is, nonetheless, important to examine the revolution as more than simply a tale of oppression and of late Cold War maneuvering. It is the contention of this chapter, and of my broader research into Ethiopian artistic practice in the 1970s and 1980s, that the creation, dissemination, and provocation of images was at the heart of the break with the imperial tradition and that moving images, in particular, both dealt a seminal blow to the waning authority of Emperor Haile Selassie and shaped the subsequent course of the revolution.

Those familiar with the events in Addis Ababa in 1974 will know that the name Jonathan Dimbleby is synonymous with the emperor's fall. Many who lived through it still revere him as the man who exposed the depths of neglect to which Haile Selassie had sunk; his name features in the wall text of the Red Terror Martyrs' Museum in Addis. On September 11, 1974, the Ethiopian public was shown an edited version of Dimbleby's 1973 television documentary about the devastating famine in Wollo. The emperor, too, reportedly watched the film, and as the hunger-ravaged bodies of his rural subjects filled the screen he became "lost in thought" (Kapuściński et al. 2006, 161). The following day a military delegation arrived at the palace to arrest him, and he was, infamously, driven to his imprisonment and eventual death in the back seat of a VW Beetle. The South African journalist Colin Legum, then based in Addis and writing for the UK's Sunday newspaper *The Observer*, described the scene in an article entitled "The Night They 'Hanged' Selassie" (Legum 1974). "Things were arranged rather better in Ethiopia this week," he wrote, "than when the Bolsheviks removed the last of the Tsars, or when the French Revolutionaries carried the last of the Bourbons to the guillotine." "In modern style," Legum continued, "the assassination took place on the television screens and the radio waves on the night before Selassie's dethronement . . . The whole nation had been invited to watch a TV spectacle in which the bones of feudal rule were exposed with ruthless professionalism."

This "TV spectacle" features in many of the histories of the Ethiopian revolution (for example, Keller 1991, 187; Ottaway and Ottaway 1978, 57; Kalb 2000, 144–145) but is usually afforded a sentence or two and portrayed as the curious final straw that broke the regime. Although some note, as did Bahru Zewde (2001), that the film that was shown was "a canny collage of royal feast and peasant famine [that] drove home the emperor's alleged callousness," it has not been extensively explored that what appeared on Ethiopian screens in September 1974 was radically different from what had been shown in the United Kingdom months earlier. Dimbleby's original film, made for Thames Television, was entitled *The Unknown Famine* and had not used any images of Haile Selassie. Dimbleby's voiceover had, in fact, informed its viewers that while the imperial government had "let things get out of control," they were now reaching out for help. When this film arrived in Addis, sent by Thames Television in accordance with the policy of sending copies of films back to the countries in which they were made, Dimbleby's more diplomatic tone was displaced and his footage reedited to include images of the emperor's indulgences, from lavish dinners to pampered pets. The new version, filled with jarring juxtaposition, was

retitled *The Hidden Hunger*. What began as an effort by a Western journalist to inform those outside Ethiopia of the country's desperate plight was transformed into a moving image indictment that asserted not just that the famine had been neglected but also that it had been willfully concealed.

In this chapter I put the critical role played by Dimbleby's doctored film into a broader history of cinema and television in the revolution's unfolding. I argue that the nature of its screening had significant implications for public participation in the change of regime. As Legum identified, its showcasing on the night of September 11, the night on which Ethiopians would normally have celebrated the New Year, was a clear act of political scenography, orchestrated for maximum impact. Images of the starving had been seeping into Addis Ababa for weeks and months prior to the final coup de grace, yet the glowing medium of the television screen and the collective act of viewing amplified the horror that was unfolding beyond the city limits, turning it into a spectacle that did not so much inform as dazzle the public. The following morning, when the officers arrived at the royal gates with their arrest warrant, the streets of Addis were momentarily subdued with shock (Girma 1996). The military officers who seized power recognized the importance of television to disseminate seemingly indisputable images that bolstered the case for both radical political change and their leadership of it. In the years that followed they utilized screens, large and small, to propagate a version of revolution that vindicated the military assumption of power, but also to threaten and cajole a population into submission. While it is a significant part of the story, the Derg's appropriation of the screen to their own ends does not account for the fuller history of film and television in the revolution, and in the process of healing and reconciliation that followed. Before Dimbleby's name was uttered on Churchill Boulevard there were those who wished to challenge the imperial regime, who believed that filmmakers and other artists had a responsibility to do more than encourage a viewing public to plug in, turn on, and cop out.

Feudalism on Film

The buildup to the downfall of Haile Selassie began long before his final arrest in September 1974. While the attempted coup d'état made by the brothers Germame and Brigadier-General Mengistu Neway in 1960 ultimately failed, it emboldened those who felt that the imperial regime was failing to modernize Ethiopia (Zewde

2001). The 1960s witnessed several major shifts, from rural rebellions to the rising of a rambunctious student movement that increasingly espoused the philosophies of Marx and Lenin. The latter, although centered on the campus of Haile Selassie I University in Addis, encompassed young Ethiopians studying throughout the country and, importantly, overseas. From the mid-1960s onward they took particular aim at hierarchies of landownership, claiming that Haile Selassie presided over a "feudal" system (Zewde 2014, 130; Hiwet 1975, 26). Students, both at home and abroad, began to rally behind a call for "Land to the Tiller." A slogan borrowed (and translated to "Meret Larashu") from other agrarian revolutions, they chanted it loudly during widespread demonstrations in 1965, after which it became a mainstay of the revolution's vocabulary. It was not only the students that were directing attention toward the harsh realities of Ethiopia's rural and urban poor; indeed artists, too, were bound up in the movement to make visible that which had been overlooked for so long. Writers such as Berhan Meskel Redda, playwrights such as Tsegaye Gebremedhin, and painters such as Gebre Kristos Desta used their work to highlight social deprivation and inequality. In 1963, foreshadowing the tragedy of a decade later, Gebre Kristos painted a poster (published in *Ethiopia Observer* in the same year) featuring a rendition of a skeletal body in his characteristically abstracted style to decry the prevalence of hunger. In the midst of this tumult, this rising clamor for change and for the exposure of social ills, a young student from Gondar, Haile Gerima, came to Addis to study drama. In 1967, he left Ethiopia to pursue further study in the United States, first in Chicago where he was awakened to the African American struggle for equality and justice, and then in Los Angeles, where he discovered the radical potential of cinema.

The year 1974 witnessed a protracted period of civil and military unrest, the start of what became known as the "creeping coup" (*Time* 1974). Teachers and taxi drivers took industrial action protesting proposed educational reforms and rising oil prices, respectively. Soldiers mutinied over pay and conditions, and in late February the government collapsed. The imperial regime limped on until the spectacular events of September, yet Haile Selassie's authority was eroded day after day. In the summer between the resignation of Aklilu Habta-Wolde's cabinet and the arrest of the emperor, Gerima returned to Ethiopia to hurriedly make a film that would expose and condemn the age-old feudal conditions of rural life. Although at the time he was working on his graduation film, *Bush Mama*, he delayed its completion in order, as a still-registered student, to be able to take UCLA equipment home with him to Gondar (Willeman 1978). In an interview with Paul Willeman in 1978, Gerima

described how critical the timing was. "A month earlier," he said, "the bureaucrats of Haile Selassie would have stopped the film . . . a month later, after the military had consolidated their power, things would have been crippled as well." In the same interview, he stated that because things were already erupting he opted not to make a film about the unfolding famine, news of which was seeping into Addis thanks to the efforts of the students and faculty at Haile Selassie I University. He chose, instead, to make a film that more broadly addressed the "political conditions" (Willeman 1978, 34) and that could resonate with struggles against oppression in the wider Third World (Davis 1975). This film was *Mirt Sost Shi Amet* or *Harvest: 3,000 Years*.

Harvest: 3,000 Years has been celebrated as a landmark contribution to both the development of African cinema and to the Third Cinema movement, a term coined by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino to bring together those who rejected the First (Hollywood) and Second (European) cinematic modes in favor of radical and confrontational work, particularly from the Third World (Gabriel 1982). UCLA became home to the Third Cinema Film Club to which Gerima belonged, alongside Teshome Gabriel, Charles Burnett, Ntongela Masilela, and others (Masilela 1993). It was in the company of these fellow filmmakers, each committed to a cinema that confronted stereotypes, revealed social injustice, and affronted oppressive, hegemonic culture, that Gerima was educated. This education, he later reflected, was a process of mental "decolonization" through which he rejected the Western "Cowboy and Indian" movies he had devoured in his local cinema as a child and started to "think about film as a way to engage our political world" (Willeman 1978, 32; Jackson 2010, 27).

In its depiction of the impoverished, cheated lot of a peasant family, the seeming insanity to which one community elder, Kebebe, had been driven, and the exploitative indulgences of a cruel landlord, Gerima's film was closely aligned with criticisms that Ethiopia's students had leveled against deleterious, hierarchical feudalism. In his 1982 study, Teshome Gabriel highlighted the film's use of oral narrative traditions, in which Gerima as the son of a playwright was versed, to facilitate a dismantling of the authority of the feudal lord. Kebebe's "madness," a familiar trope, enabled him to speak uninhibited and to call out injustices that the system that had once enslaved him had sought to silence (1982, 92). Mbye Cham went further, arguing that the structure of the film was dialectical, with opposing forces engaged in conflict, yet ultimately hopeful, concluding with the human capacity for self-liberation (1982, 147). This, Cham reported, was not remotely surprising given

Gerima's commitment to Marxism. Through provocative montage and washed-out dream sequences, Gerima presented the viewer with searing visual metaphors of feudalism: human beings, for example, yoked like cattle to the traditional plough. Quoting Gerima in a 1978 interview, Cham highlighted his juxtaposition of shots of a bereaved peasant woman having her head shaved, a traditional act to signify mourning, with a subsequent close up of a bald head, soon revealed as belonging to the landlord. This, Gerima explained, was an effort to both draw attention to a repressive tradition and to analogize the inevitable "desert and death" of the feudal class. The woman's hair would regrow; the landlord's baldness only went one way (1982, 149).

In both examples Gerima deployed editing that resonated with Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's dialectical theory of montage. The latter sequence, in particular, invoked Eisenstein's "intellectual montage" in which the juxtaposition and subsequent comparison of shots released an "idea" (1977, 62). Eisenstein, of course, had theorized cinema as a critical tool for political awakening in which montage could jolt the viewing audience out of passivity. The formal qualities of *Harvest: 3,000 Years* evidenced an understanding of canny editing in the formulation of visual provocation, yet Gerima's vision of film's activist potential, outlined in 1986, also relied upon relationships between the storyteller (the filmmaker), the audience, and the activist (the critic). This "triangular cinema," as he dubbed it, required reciprocity between these actors in order to disrupt and critique dominant modes. In his model, the storyteller explored and experimented, and the audience watched and engaged but may remain confused, leaving the activist with the responsibility to "bridge the gap" and set a process of transformation in motion (Gerima 1989, 69). Although it would take on a far wider significance in the Third Cinema movement, the narrative and form of *Harvest: 3,000 Years* suggested that Gerima sought to facilitate political awakening for Ethiopians in the mid-1970s, a contribution to the movement against feudalism that was gathering pace.

It is painful, therefore, to hear Gerima say in 1978 that people in Ethiopia had not yet seen his film (Willeman 1978). At that time he was still trying to have it blown up to 35mm, since that was the format of theaters in Ethiopia. He inferred, however, that there may be other problems in showing it beyond the practical. By 1978 many thousands of people had been murdered in the Red Terror campaign, unleashed by Mengistu to quash any opposition. The period of debate and of postrevolution fervor had been violently brought to an end, and faith in a transition to civilian rule and genuinely popular uprising was evaporating. The rigorous environment

of discussion and critique that Gerima's "triangular cinema" required had been firmly extinguished. More recently Gerima has stated that the Derg, in fact, sought to claim *Harvest: 3,000 Years* as the "property" of the Ethiopian people (Rohter 2010, C1), clearly recognizing its potential to contribute to a narrative of popular revolution. Gerima was not, of course, interested in propagandizing, especially for a version of revolution that obscured a military reality. He refused their attempt to assert jurisdiction over his work, reconciling to not making another film in Ethiopia until the regime had collapsed.

Spectacles of Starvation

It was not, of course, Gerima's film of revelatory dream sequence and provocative juxtaposition that dealt a death blow to the imperial regime, but the doctored spectacle of Jonathan Dimbleby's. The irony was that while *Harvest: 3,000 Years* had hoped to contribute to domestic political awakening, it ended up, in places such as the 1976 London Film Festival, being more generically celebrated for its realist reportage of poverty (Willeman 1978). Dimbleby's documentary, by contrast, an actual piece of reportage that introduced British audiences to the now familiar trope of the starving Ethiopian, ended up having a specific and dramatic impact on political change in Addis. Dimbleby had come to Ethiopia in 1973 following tips by students in Europe about a devastating famine that was unfolding north of Addis. Having negotiated with Haile Selassie's government to film only in particular areas where the government's (minimal) efforts at relief were in evidence, he and his crew were carefully escorted throughout their trip. Haile Selassie's government had, in fact, actively discouraged domestic or foreign media attention, believing that the famine could be quietly contained and avoid becoming a major political incident in a climate of increasing social unrest (Keller 1991). Television was introduced to Ethiopians in 1964 and was, from its inception, considered a tool to bolster the image of the imperial regime (Seyoum 1979, 44); its earliest broadcasts featured footage of the annual celebrations of the emperor's coronation (Head 1974, 40). As news of the famine broke outside of Ethiopia, the Imperial Board of Telecommunications, under whose jurisdiction television programming came, did not turn domestic cameras onto the disaster. Footage of the emperor's lavish eightieth birthday in 1972 was fresh in many minds; it was these images alongside those of starvation that would constitute a devastating visual indictment.

Ten years before another famine would inspire Bob Geldof's "Live Aid," Dimbleby's original film was the first to put graphic, full-color, moving images of starving Africans into living rooms in the United Kingdom and beyond. His intention, apropos Marshall McLuhan's interconnected "global village," was to appeal for humanitarian compassion, to insist upon the need for action and aid. In its opening sequences, *The Unknown Famine* used a dramatic, long point-of-view shot with the camera travelling between two lines of desperately hungry people, the immediacy of this enabling viewers thousands of miles away to literally walk amid the dying. The urgency and disorientated "liveness" of the film were further underlined by the slippages in focus and occasional shaking of the camera. The information's rawness was complemented by a vérité style of shooting, for which there had been a growing appetite in British television since the mid-1960s (Sexton 2003). Filming the "global village" in this manner ensured that the starving African could, in McLuhan's words, "no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs" (McLuhan 1995, 150). Unsurprisingly, after it aired in the United Kingdom on October 18, 1973, *The Unknown Famine* prompted an outpouring of outrage, but also of donation to charities such as Oxfam and the Red Cross (Jansson, Harris, and Penrose 1990).

On account of close-up shots of dead children, relentless exposure of physical distress and, crucially, a lack of white aid workers who might serve as familiar intermediaries, Peter Gill (2010) insists that the rawness of Dimbleby's film would make it unfit for broadcast today. Despite, as previously mentioned, attempts at diverting attention away from the implicit political controversies and toward the humanitarian implications, the images that Dimbleby narrated spoke for themselves. Among those who saw the original documentary were Ethiopian students in London who were disgusted and arranged a fundraising event at Africa Center where they could both solicit charitable donations and hand out pamphlets, titled "Repression in Ethiopia," denouncing the imperial regime (Zewde 2014, 184). Ethiopian students back in Addis had already tried to counter the domestic media blackout on images of the starving by organizing an exhibition on the campus of Haile Selassie I University under the guise of presenting some geographic information about drought. In April 1973 three faculty members, Abraham Demoz, Alula Abate, and Getachew Haile, produced a report of a visit to famine-stricken areas (Zewde 2014, 183). The photographs that they took provided material for the exhibition, which was soon suppressed by university guards and police. Despite attempts to contain them, however, images of the starving had already started

to leak out of the university campus and began to circulate on flyers, along with stories of desperate people who had trekked from the countryside and were now being physically blocked from entering Addis by cordons at the city limits. Indeed, just as news of the famine was being silenced in Ethiopia's capital, so too were the famine victims being kept from its streets. At the School of Fine Arts, painting student Eshetu Tiruneh produced a mural for his graduating project in spring of 1974, which he titled "Victims of the Famine." The final work, depicting the exodus of famished peasants from a barren landscape, was based upon many sketches of starving men, women, and children he encountered at his mother's house at the city limits. He channeled his outrage at their neglect into a large realist painting on the wall of the art school, an institution founded in the 1950s that Haile Selassie had celebrated as a bastion of creative vision and of modernity.[1]

Students, faculty, and artists affronted the imperial regime's attempt to shield the disaster from view and to blind the public to the desperate reality. It was the shocking visual revelation of the famine, of the physical dereliction of Ethiopia's rural subjects that would seal Haile Selassie's fate. The days between the popular uprising in February 1974 and the final overthrow in September were dubbed the "days of the leaflet" in which diatribes circulated, alongside photographs from the field (Tareke 2009, 39). As I explore in my broader research, all of these efforts can be understood as part of a wider movement to peel back, to reveal, to reject an imperialist tradition of veiling information from public view. By allowing Dimbleby's crew access in 1973, albeit in a highly controlled manner, the regime pierced a hole in barriers that it had erected for the purposes of both physical and political containment. Having created such a hole, the imperial regime soon attempted to seal it up; Tafari Wossen, then employed by the Ministry of Information, reported being sent to London to stop the finished film from being shown. He could not prevent Thames Television from airing it (nor did he particularly want to) and, like many fellow Ethiopians, was deeply shocked by what he saw. He brought the film back to Addis, where it was to receive a radical reedit.

Who exactly did the reediting of Dimbleby's film back in Addis remains to be revealed. In his recent autobiography Mengistu apparently claimed to have been personally involved in the process, although Tafari Wossen struggled to believe such a claim could be accurate. By September 1974, Ethiopian television and radio had become repositories for a bevy of anti-imperial messages. Blair Thomson, a journalist based in Ethiopia during the final days of the emperor's rule, recalled communiqués being broadcast that mocked Haile Selassie's title of "Negus" (King)

by placing it into parentheses (Thomson 1975, 114). Songs about the coming of revolution, promoting the Derg's foundational slogan "Etyopya Tikdem" ("Ethiopia First"), and satire about the emperor's "authority" filled the airwaves. Leaflets circulated that put photographs of the starving next to images of Haile Selassie indulging his pets, particularly his late, much-mocked dog Lulu. These juxtapositions provided the precedent for the explosive media spectacle of September 11. On that night, American paleontologist Jon Kalb recalled that Ethiopian television showed images of "people starving, interspersed with scenes of the emperor feeding his dogs from a silver tray" (Kalb 2000, 145). *The Unknown Famine* had become *The Hidden Hunger*. Any ambiguity about blame was removed; Haile Selassie's long-cultivated image as the nation's benevolent patriarch was destroyed.

At the heart of the reedit and the spectacular way in which it was deployed was the presentation of an explosive dialectic, but one much more limited in scope to that which Gerima pursued a year earlier. While *Harvest: 3,000 Years* had sought to foster a deep political awakening, a realization that feudalism could not survive if the people rose up and threw off their yokes, *The Hidden Hunger* sought merely to indict, to make the unequivocal case for immediate regime change. Given both the circulation of famine photography and the familiar footage of Haile Selassie's gilded life, none of the images in *The Hidden Hunger* were themselves unfamiliar, but their jarring juxtaposition on glowing screens foreclosed any further debate. This was not Eisensteinian dialectical montage. Rather than jolt people out of passivity, *The Hidden Hunger* dazzled its audience into shock.

In contrast to *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, *The Hidden Hunger* was a spectacle, not a clarion call. Much like the spectacle as described by Jonathan Crary, by way of Guy Debord and Michel Foucault, it sought not to facilitate sight, to clarify vision but rather to isolate, separate, and disempower, to produce "docile subjects" (2001, 74). The theatricality of its deliverance synthesized the cacophony of critiques of Haile Selassie into a singular, authoritative "final word." On September 11 it was, in fact, as much the medium of delivery (television) as the content itself that sealed Haile Selassie's fate. In "inviting," in Legum's words, the population to view this indictment on screens in homes, bars, and other public places, the military regime ensured that the civilian population were not, ultimately, participants in the final fall; they were, instead, spectators to the military's revolution. In this sense a visual spectacle that did not invite a response precipitated the violent spectacle of power by which Mengistu would govern. Just as Legum argued that the television had functioned as a more efficient, bloodless guillotine in Addis in 1974, so Blair Thompson underscored

its power to execute when he stated that "the main weapon in the final stages of Ethiopia's revolutionary process was not the gun, but the cathode tube" (Thomson 1975, 100). Conceiving of the television as a weapon, he foresaw its deployment in the service of dictatorship in the years to come.

3002 and Other Myths

The history of the struggle for power in the early years of the revolution is complex and still controversial. It involves rival student factions struggling against the military's increasingly consolidated power, with one (Meison, the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement) ultimately agreeing to cooperate with the Derg in the hope of a transition to civilian rule and the other (EPRP, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party) launching a campaign of violence to try to force the latter. The role of the student movements in the revolution remains a divisive topic. As Zewde (2014) states, the blame for the horror that the Derg ultimately unleashed in the name of Marxist-Leninism is too often laid at the feet of young activists who earnestly (if not in the best coordinated fashion) fought for social justice and saw their fight as part of a larger pan-African and global movement. The bloody Red Terror of 1977–78 extinguished the student movement (and any person suspected of being a counterrevolutionary), but it also put an end to the debates and seminar-like public space that characterized the immediate years after the emperor's fall. Even Gerima, as mentioned above, felt that there might still be room for a genuinely popular revolution in that period. Among filmmakers he was not alone. The Ethiopian-Greek Michel Papatakis was one of those who continued to work in Addis, believing that film had a critical role to play in educating the population and inciting real political awakening.

Papatakis was encouraged to professionally pursue film by the emperor (Fantahun, 2014). He was given the opportunity to study cinematography in Moscow prior to the revolution and, unsurprisingly, returned to Ethiopia convinced that cinema was a political tool. He followed in the footsteps of great Soviet-educated Francophone African filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène and Souleymane Cissé, both of whose work was concerned with enlightening audiences and revealing political injustices (Woll 2004). Papatakis's first film, *Gumma/Blood Money* (1974), made right at the end of the emperor's rule and showcased just in time for Haile Selassie to see it, was the first full-length color film made in the Amharic language.

Presenting a young man who suffered under the Oromo informal reconciliatory justice system, *Gumma* was soon read as a meditation on the unhappy plight of the Ethiopian peasant (Tigabu 2014). After the revolution Papatakis produced two further films that remain largely unknown outside of Ethiopia: *Yalefew Shekimena Yemimetaw Guzo* or *The Past Burden and the Journey Ahead* (1975) and *Tiggil Dil, Dil Tiggil* or *Struggle Victory, Victory Struggle* (1978). Tafari Wossen assisted with production of these films, and the former, he recalled, included footage of the destruction of *chika bet* (traditional "mud") housing by the imperial regime, as well as of gestures once read as imperial benevolence, such as the occasion on which the emperor threw bread to the starving from his car window during a drive to Debre Zeit (now also known as Bishoftu). In the post-revolution climate such imagery reinforced the narrative that the imperial regime was indulgent and neglectful. It also indicated an environment in which documentary images were being mined and repackaged to bolster key narratives. If before September 1974 the photographs of the starving were indisputable evidence of famine, after the revolution photographs and footage of royal paraphernalia indexed autocracy and neglect. In both cases the filmic and photographic were understood as making visible some objective truth that had long been concealed.

Like Gerima, Papatakis faced challenges with the Derg over control of his own work. *Tiggil Dil, Dil Tiggil*, a film that sought to chronicle the fight against the Somali thrust into the Ogaden region, was seized for its propagandist potential. Tafari Wossen reported that the Derg wished to retitle the film *Revolutionary Motherland or Death* after the threatening, nationalist slogan that circulated during the Ogaden war. The film's popularity with the military was matched by enthusiasm from the Soviets who, in 1978, signed an agreement for "Friendship and Cultural Relations" (as part of a broader diplomatic accord). In that agreement, excerpted in the anti-Derg student publication *Combat*, there were explicit references to the need for "film shows, lectures and exhibitions" and for the exchange of literature, photography, and cinema to bolster relations between the two countries (*Combat* 1979.) Given that it was the Ogaden conflict that affirmed Soviet support, it is unsurprising that *Tiggil Dil, Dil Tiggil* was lauded at the 11th International Film Festival in Moscow in 1979. Papatakis and Gerima were both noted in a 1984 Soviet publication that celebrated the revolution's tenth anniversary. In a review of the "Cultural Reforms" since the downfall of the emperor, Ethiopian cinematography was highlighted for its development, with both *Gumma* and *Harvest: 3,000 Years* cited as exemplary works of revolutionary cinema, each highlighting the impoverished life of the peasantry

(Nikolayeva 1986). Gerima had long distanced himself from Derg's fictionalization of popular revolution, yet his film and Papatakis's belonged to its history with or without their consent.

Nikolayeva's account in 1986 also revealed, however, a key slippage that was occurring between documentary and fiction. This line had already been blurred by both *Harvest: 3,000 Years* and *The Hidden Hunger*, the former employing rural peasants, filming as nonintrusively as possible, and encouraging them not to "perform" (Davis 1975, 18), and the latter actual documentary footage reconfigured to tell a particular story. Nikolayeva's account also referred to a "documentary" called *3002 Years* as one of the examples of the new cinema "devoted . . . to such topics as the overthrow of the imperial regime" (1986, 158). *3002: Wondimu's Memories* (its full title; Teferi Bizuayehu, 1976) was, in fact, not strictly a documentary but a drama mixed with some documentary footage to tell a tale in which the political awakening of Ethiopia's masses was attributed to the revelatory power of the television. The film, directed by Teferi Bizuayehu, one of the young filmmakers who benefitted from the Derg's encouragement of cinema, but who later fled Ethiopia in fear and disillusionment, was a key component of Ethiopia's entry for the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). Tafari Wossen served as its executive producer. *Sost Shi Hulet* or *3002* was set immediately after the revolution and told the tale of Wondimu, who is first seen celebrating the emperor's downfall in Revolution Square, "a placard in hand," the accompanying brochure explained, "[denouncing] life under the discredited oppressive feudal regime" (*FESTAC '77* 1977, 5). During the demonstration, Wondimu is shown having flashbacks to life in the Adolla Gold Mine, from which he is now liberated. In a clear reference to the spectacle of September 11, the film then shows Wondimu watching a television program "which flashes to the achievements of the revolution *vis à vis* the exotic pomp of the feudal regime." This "pretentious façade," the brochure continued, "was what the past regime attempted to hide behind in order to hide its inability to deal with long outstanding political, social and economic problems of the country." The revolution as revealed on the screen is thus shown to have "brought to light the miserable conditions that led to Wollo's 'Hidden Hunger'" (*FESTAC '77* 1977, 5) While there can be no doubt that Dimbleby's footage was a revelation to many and that there was clear truth in the accusation that Haile Selassie had neglected his poorest, rural subjects, *3002* revealed the seminal role that moving images had come to play to the narrative of the revolution. Wondimu was shown celebrating after the screening; the final blow against the regime was not carried out by him,

but on the small screen. *3002* was presented as factual; the manifold protests prior to September 11 were subsumed by a new narrative that insisted that the revolution had been televised.

Re-veiling and Reconciliation

The screening of *3002* at FESTAC made clear two things. First, the revolution had, indeed, increased interest in domestic filmmaking such that a key part of Ethiopia's entry in the pan-African showcase was a work of cinema. Indicative of this growth, the Ethiopian Film Center was established as the hub of the industry. Second, however, it showed that this interest in film stemmed from the now official narrative of the revolution, with the television spectacle as the cornerstone of mass liberation. At one stage, perhaps, Haile Gerima and Michel Papatakis might have celebrated domestic cinema's seeming political germination; however *3002* veiled another reality. In 1977 the image of television as liberator being propagated in Lagos jarred with lived experiences in Addis. In February 1977 Mengistu gave his infamous speech in Revolution Square announcing the EPRP's "White Terror" assassinations of Derg members, saying that a "Red Terror" must destroy those who were undermining the revolution. He concluded by dramatically smashing vials of pigs' blood, viscerally foreshadowing the actual blood soon to stain Addis's streets. The television provided a key medium to shame "traitors." Tortured, bloody corpses, some pinned with slogans denouncing their "counter-revolutionary" activities, were screened nightly as a warning to the viewing public (Tiruneh 1993, 213). The desire to make an example of those protesting the military takeover of power led to the notorious incident on May Day 1977 when, following an EPRP youth rally, hundreds of young Ethiopians were gunned down. Their families were subsequently told that in order to claim the bodies, they must pay for the bullets that killed their children (Zewde 2009). At the same time that Wondimu's televisual liberation was being touted in West Africa, small screens were threatening and cajoling the population at home.

Bahru Zewde (2009, 29) identifies three phases of the Red Terror's development: the first being the EPRP's campaign, the second being the highly visible unleashing of "revolutionary" violence by Mengistu, and the third (after May Day 1977) in which people simply disappeared. In this latter, most terrifying phase, the government no longer felt the need to justify its actions, and the media spectacle of the second

phase was replaced with a much more sinister mode of secret executions and closed-door disappearances. Television no longer announced deaths or warned of the consequences of counterrevolutionary behavior; bodies were simply dumped in the streets or never seen again. This displacement of the extreme visibility of revolutionary violence, from television screens to behind closed doors, mirrors Michel Foucault's (1995) account of the retreat of the violent spectacle of punishment in the nineteenth century from public gallows and guillotines to locked prisons. In the former case, the public execution served, as did the nightly television spectacles, to underscore the dictatorial jurisdiction of the Derg. In removing such images from view, the Derg removed any performance of enacting justice and replaced the spectacle of violence with the spectacle of total power. The Red Terror revealed, of course, the extent to which the military had betrayed the public in their takeover of the revolution, and the pretense that the television had been a liberating medium was firmly undone. Soon screens were more often filled with footage of pomp and parades, of cadres touring factories and visiting socialist dignitaries; violence lingered, but out of sight. The cathode tube, which had facilitated the apotheosis of a long campaign to reveal concealed truths, ended up re-veiling the machinations of power with the borrowed aesthetics of Marxist-Leninism.

In March 2012 I visited Ethiopian Television (ETV), hoping to track down the edited version of Dimbleby's film. I met with Bekele Sime who informed me that I could not see *The Hidden Hunger* because ETV did not have a working projector to show it. I was, instead, shown a video from 1991 entitled *Negat Kifle And* or *Dawn Part One* for which Sime had been a producer. Made in the year that the Derg fell, this film aped the structure of *The Hidden Hunger*, utilizing footage of Derg rallies and images of Mengistu and his men in blue Mao jackets, and juxtaposing them with the shocking images from the 1984 famine. In one memorable sequence, the bubbling fountains in front of the Tiglachin monument were shown with Mengistu touring visiting dignitaries followed by a scene featuring an overstuffed buffet; the latter was then abruptly interrupted by a shot of a peasant's skeletal back before jolting back to footage of a parade with a picture of Mengistu aloft. The film, of course, highlighted the jarring concurrence of the 1984 tenth anniversary celebrations with the infamous famine that shocked the West. The former were a triumph of gaudy neon and mass choreography, assisted by cultural consultants sent from North Korea. The famine that was unfolding in the countryside as hammers and sickles flashed in the Ethiopian capital vastly eclipsed the 1973–74 famine in its death toll, but also in the manner in which the government willfully ignored the needs

of the people in favor of a late Cold War jolly. The enormous Tiglachin monument to Ethiopian-Cuban friendship was unveiled during these celebrations, and with no sense of irony, the sculptural frieze along its base that depicted the ascendancy of Mengistu also included depictions of starving peasants being ignored by the imperial regime. In 1991 Sime and his colleagues remade *The Hidden Hunger* as an indictment of Mengistu and the Derg, and as a clear reminder that the images that had filled Ethiopian television screens through the 1980s had masked a reality worse than that which had been revealed in 1974. Unlike the emperor, Mengistu was not arrested, however; he escaped to exile in Zimbabwe.

The role of the camera in addressing the aftermath of the Derg period has been significant and is deserving of greater attention than this chapter affords. Films such as *Imperfect Journey* (Haile Gerima, 1994), *Ye Wonz Maibel*/*Deluge* (Salem Mekuria, 1997), and *Teza*/*Morning Dew* (Haile Gerima, 2008) have played a critical role in accessing repressed memories but also in calling attention to the intensely mediated experience of revolution. In *Deluge* Salem Mekuria begins with a photograph of her late brother, Solomon, over which she addresses him directly. She tells him that she is sorry for their disagreements and that through her film she wants to understand "what happened and why." The camera pans back to reveal that she is watching the photograph on a television. In the beginning sequences of her film she continues to talk to Solomon while the painfully familiar footage of Red Terror victims brandished with slogans appears on screen. *Deluge* explores the unresolved grief carried by those who lost children and family members in the years between 1974 and 1991, but it also stitches back together many foreign and domestic media images. It is an important meditation on the role of moving images in the radical change and violence that ensued. Mekuria re-creates sections of *The Hidden Hunger*, reusing both Selassie's birthday footage and Dimbleby's *Unknown Famine* to provide an initial explanation for why the imperial regime collapsed. Yet, underscoring the complexity of the situation, she adds the voice of her father who disagreed with the overthrow as a contrast to the youthful zeal of those chanting "Land to the Tiller." *Deluge* confronts the spectacle of September 11, 1974, revealing that beneath the seemingly indisputable case for regime change there was division and anxiety.

From the outset *Deluge* is a self-conscious work of cinema. By including footage of herself in the editing suite, Mekuria asserts the autobiographical motivations for her project but also the subjectivity of montage. These images cut through the perception of television and of documentary film as both revealing and authoritative, the seeming objectivity of the camera crumbling as the subjective craft of

filmmaking is laid bare. As her voiceover insists, *Deluge* is not about presenting a definitive account of the revolution, but about revealing the complicated task of piecing together a history in fragments. The images of the post-production process provide an important visual metaphor for this, of course, but they resonate even more profoundly if we accept that the manipulation of film and television played an active role in the dark direction of Ethiopia's revolutionary change. In a 2002 interview Mekuria was asked to what extent her film sought to confront negative Western stereotypes about Africa, embodied, in particular, in the image of the starving Ethiopian (Ukadike 2002). She replied that it was part of the project, since she had experienced much of the revolution from outside, watching her country through American news outlets. *Deluge* called attention to the labor of editing to destabilize the accepted authority of television and of documentary film, but it also challenged the simplified, dialectical use of montage whereby two juxtaposed images led to a singular, indisputable conclusion. By putting shots of famine alongside shots of tumbling waterfalls and abundant rivers Mekuria confounded, rather than resolved, assumptions about hunger and poverty. In insisting on the need to think and not to assume, she sought to enervate domestic and foreign audiences rendered dangerously passive by the acceptance of the televisual and the documentary as objective truth.

Like Mekuria, Gerima also largely watched the revolution from the outside. His first response to the Derg's downfall was to return to Addis with Ryszard Kapuściński to examine the impact of the revolutionary period and expose the pain of those grieving, but also to question the motivations of the new government, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In his documentary *Imperfect Journey* (1994) the opposition from an EPRDF representative with which Gerima's skepticism at the post-1991 revolution is met punctures any assumptions that the new government of Meles Zenawi would liberate Ethiopians. Showing footage of grieving parents, of new memorials being unveiled, but also of the confiscating of photographs and the hijacking of certain memories, Gerima presented his audience with a collage of difficult contradictions. Like Mekuria, he refused to neatly package a picture of resolution, provoking his viewers to think beyond what was being presented, to question the EPRDF's program.

Teza (2008), Gerima's epic feature film telling the story of young doctor, Anberber, traumatized by both the brutality of the Derg and by racist violence experienced overseas, offers an even more complex picture of the revolutionary years. Jumping between a foggy, late revolution present and a past riddled with idealism and lost

dreams, Gerima presents a story familiar to those who enjoyed Haile Selassie–era scholarships overseas, grew critical of the seemingly feudal system, but then became disillusioned by the military's anti-intellectual, bloody version of revolution. *Teza* introduces another television audience to the narrative when Ethiopian students are shown in a bar in Germany watching and then cheering as Haile Selassie announces his intention to step aside. The sequence serves to underscore both the hope instilled in the students, but also the naïveté that the military would soon give way to civilian-led change. The contrast between the jubilation with which the televisual announcement is greeted and the tense welcome Anberber later receives in Addis underscores the gulf between perception and reality. Gerima has said that *Teza* cannot be compared to *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (Thomas 2013, 88), because in contrast to the budget and equipment of the former, the latter was a rough-edged work of what cinematographer Elliot Davis called "guerilla-type production efficiency" (1975, 19). If *Harvest: 3,000 Years* had a breathless urgency to it, *Teza* offers a more melancholic reflection; where *Harvest*'s hope hinged upon liberating dream sequences, *Teza*'s trauma erupts in nightmarish flashbacks. What *Teza* and *Imperfect Journey* both share with *Harvest*, however, is the resilient faith of Gerima in cinema's ability to spark participation rather than cultivate spectatorship.

Conclusion

Though moving images, televisual and filmic, were central to the course of the Ethiopian revolution, their deployment by the Derg was anathema to Gerima's aspirations for a genuine cinema of liberation. The screening on September 11, and its subsequent mythologizing in *3002*, made clear that the justification for the military takeover hinged upon the mobilization of the television to spectacularly reveal that which students, faculty, and artists had been working to make visible for many months. The events of that night in which human suffering became dazzlingly visible set the tone for the coming years, whereby the Ethiopian public would be invited to watch, rather than genuinely participate in, radical change. The history of cinema and television through the revolutionary years is worthy of much closer attention, since, beyond the media spectacle of 1974, it was amid the revolutionary tumult that a domestic filmmaking scene was firmly established. Indeed, while screens large and small became the sites of both overwhelming and often oppressive images, it was the regime's very faith in the role of moving images to propagandize

and cajole that led to their encouragement of a burgeoning industry. As with so many of the eager cultural endeavors of the revolution, the most creative years were those between the fall of Haile Selassie and the violence of the Red Terror when some hope of civilian rule lingered. The arrival of the Soviets, in the wake of violence, brought investment and opportunities, but also censorship and ideological strictures. Nonetheless, from the fervent days of the creeping coup, through the spectacle of power and violence, to the painful process of reconciliation, the history of cinema and television in Ethiopia is an integral part not just of the context, but of the very process of revolution in the Horn of Africa.

NOTES

During the preparation of this chapter, on June 10, 2016, the veteran Ethiopian journalist and filmmaker Tafari Wossen passed away. Conversations with him over email, in Addis Ababa, and in Washington D.C. significantly informed the research presented here. I am indebted to the time that he afforded me and the information that he imparted.

1. This mural, a photograph of which Eshetu Tiruneh still has in his collection, was later reproduced in oil on canvas and is now on display at the National Museum in Addis Ababa. Eshetu's painting became iconic in the earliest years of the revolution and was reproduced in a range of printed matter for mass consumption.

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The Dead Speaking to the Living

Religio-Cultural Symbolisms in the Amharic Films of Haile Gerima

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This chapter is an exploration of the religio-cultural symbolisms of Haile Gerima's three Amharic films, *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (1976), *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999), and *Teza*/*Morning Dew* (2008).[1] In the past, most critics have failed to study these films adequately for various reasons, often being unaware of their pervasive religio-cultural and oral folkloric symbolisms. Complete commentary on the symbolisms in the films of Haile Gerima demands more space and time than provided here. Thus, a brief illustration of selected religio-cultural symbolisms will be made in conjunction with interpreting the deeper meaning of the films using selected filmic texts, relevant theories, and interviews with the filmmaker and related Amharic oral and written literature.[2] This chapter is divided according to diverse thematic structures of symbolisms. Before the discussion turns to the textual analysis of thematic structures of symbolisms, however, a brief intellectual and biographical introduction to the filmmaker and his work, inspirations, and methodological suggestions shall follow.

Haile Gerima

Haile Gerima (b. 1946, in Gondar, Ethiopia) is an independent filmmaker, writer, director, producer, editor, pan-Africanist, philosopher, professor, and storyteller. He has been teaching filmmaking since 1975 at Howard University, Washington, D.C., and is based in the city. Gerima and his wife, Shikiriana Aina, who is also a filmmaker and film professor, created the production company Negod-Gwad (which means "thunder" or "thunderstorm" in Amharic), Mypheduh Films ("sacred shield" in Ge'ez), as well as Sankofa Video and Books across from Howard University, specializing in African and African American films and books. In his over forty years of filmmaking, Gerima has so far produced eleven films: *Hour Glass* (1972), *Child of Resistance* (1972), *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (1976), *Bush Mama* (1976), *Wilmington 10—USA 10,000* (1978), *Ashes and Embers* (1982), *After Winter: Sterling Brown* (1985), *Sankofa* (1993), *Imperfect Journey* (1994), *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999), and *Teza* (2008) (for broader filmography and bibliography on and by Haile Gerima, see Belachew 2013). However, the primary focus of this essay will be on Gerima's three Amharic films, *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, *Adwa*, and *Teza*.

Gerima's Amharic cinematic corpus does not come to exist outlandishly. Often Gerima credits his sensibility of cultural symbolisms in storytelling to his mother Mulu Basilios, a school teacher, and to his grandmother Hargewoine Tafere, as well as his father Gerima Tafere, a priest, poet, playwright, dramatist, and historian (Berry, 2005) who, according to Gerima, is his strongest inspiration. The cultural symbolism the filmmaker inherited from his family and community mirrors both the oral and written literature of Ethiopia that has gone through transformation by way of Gerima's cinematic innovation.

A notable inspiration on Gerima is Ousmane Sembène, hailed by many filmmakers and critics as the "father" and pioneer of African cinema (see Dokotum 2008, 163–167; H. Gerima 2002, 259; Howard 1985, 28; Pfaff 1984; Sembène 1990). Sembène's prominent inspirational role in Gerima's filmmaking endeavor was voiced by Gerima as follows: "I'm a Sembène soldier. I believe in Sembène and his work showed me the way. I'm one of his cultural offspring using a weapon that we call the camera" (H. Gerima 2000, 127). Also, he adds:

> When I saw [Sembène's 1963 debut] *Borom Sarret* . . . I thought "Oh, I can make an Ethiopian film! It doesn't need to have an English script." English is a very imperial language . . . you feel like all your characters have to speak it to be in a movie. I saw

> Sembène's film, and that very same night I stopped writing my next movie *Harvest: 3,000 Years* in English and started writing it in Amharic. (Clark 2016, 61)

Therefore, Sembène's African-language films encouraged Gerima to make films in Amharic. The use of African languages is essential in conveying the cultural symbolisms in the corpus of films that have become known as "African cinema."

Cultural symbolisms are deeply rooted in the specific sociocultural context of Ethiopia, pan-Africa, and the African diaspora. Gerima's pan-Africanist intellectual and artistic inspirations include Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkurumah, Amilcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba, Ousmane Sembène, and Med Hondo. Also, his influences come in part from an interest in Third Cinema at UCLA and his membership of the so-called L.A. Rebellion movement. Teshome H. Gabriel, Ethiopian film scholar and theorist on Third Cinema, provided helpful ideas toward defining African cinema of Gerima's kind. First, African cinema endeavored to relate to and represent everyday life. The framework of African cinema holds and resembles "the variety and inter-relatedness of everyday human experience" (Gabriel 1989, 19). Second, the production and evaluation of African cinema defy a single formula. Thus, typically African cinema weaves together the complexities of life. Gabriel argues that African films' mythic and folkloric dimensions are a distinguishing marker from other film traditions. For African films

> represent a "look back into the future" rather than nostalgic yearnings for the past. Thus, the setting of particular films in the past is less an attempt to precisely depict the past for its own sake than presentation of shared memories intended as lessons for the present and as strategies for the future. African films are thus unfettered by the past, but informed by the experience of the past. (Gabriel 1989, 19)

In *Sankofa*, the griot calls out, "Sankofa, return back to your roots!" This expression is also echoed in *Teza*, *Adwa*, and *Harvest*, contributing to Gerima's self-reflexive style and marking explorations of memory as a major theme.

Symbolism in Africa and African Cinema

Jean-Mark Éla succinctly expressed the pervasiveness of symbolism in Africa as follows: "African civilization is a civilization of symbols . . . Africans live then in a

'forest of symbols,' a unique way of maintaining their relationship to the universe" (1988, 35). Prominent African filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambéty echo this aspect of African cultures in their work. An example of such an attitude is when Sembène stated, "Man is the symbol of art" (1979, 1).

Despite this, one critic in a review daringly wrote: "'*Harvest: 3000 Years*' is elementary film" (Van Gelder 1976, 27). In response to such a misconstruction, Gerima expressed:

> I have read accounts and interpretation of my film *Harvest 3000 Years* by Europeans and Americans. How confidently they claim to know the film, without a word of my language, the nuances, gestures, and psychological makeup that has grown over thousands of years of Kushite civilization. Give us the benefit of saying who we are, what we want to be, what we want or where we want to be, what we want or wherever we want to go. We are people of distinct history, a distinct experience. (H. Gerima 1991, 19)

This exemplifies how films like *Harvest* have been misinterpreted due to inattentiveness to the cinematic language embedded in the cultural symbolisms.[3]

Symbolism in Africa connects humans with one another, nature, and the spiritual. African religio-cultural signs and symbols have their abode traditionally in orality (Éla 1988). Likewise, African folkloric orality and cinema bring about new revelations (Gabriel 1989). For example, "*Harvest: 3000 Years*, like oral narrative art . . . rests on a temporal logic [as] the filmmaker . . . subverts linear time and space in order to call attention to ideas on an intellectual level" (Gabriel 1982, 91). Furthermore, symbolism in Africa is closely tied to religiosity and folkloric expressions.

It is crucial to mention views related to African orality, too, for Africa has been described as the oral continent par excellence. Orality is often depicted in opposition to and in absolute lack of textuality; this leads to the construct of radical otherness in the art, culture, civilization, epistemology, and even humanity of Africans (Finnegan 2007; Belachew 2012). African orality has been looked down on as inferior, mistakenly so by a Eurocentric outlook (Nkrumah 1964; Fanon 2008). Quite a number of Africans also internalize this Afro-pessimism or the negativity of stereotypical images. In response, African filmmakers including Gerima, in particular, have engaged with African folkloric orality in attempts to explore, use, and translate African folkloric oral tradition into cinema (Finnegan 2007; Azeze

1999; Thackway 2003). Hence, it is important to briefly inquire how folkloric orality is related to African cinema.

Folklore and Cinema

How does African oral literature translate into African cinema? The oral literature is composed of folkloric stories, songs, riddles, proverbs, prayers, and so on. It has been translated as such by images, sound, and through the repetition of scenes and rhythms that allow audiences to participate in dialogical reflections—"the oral tradition is a part of African film aesthetics in terms of space, pace, and rhythms" (Pfaff 1984, 32). Like oral folkloric storytelling, African cinematic storytelling embraces similar values, allowing the audience to participate in the storytelling process and inspiring critical thinking, unlike much conventional cinema that quite often manipulates the audience with its fast pace and familiar endings (Belachew 2013). Indeed, "the repetition of musical and/or visual leitmotifs, narrative incidents, and standardized call-and-response formulae [that] enable the audience to answer the griot's periodic interjections with set replies are all common structuring devices found in oral tales" (Thackway 2003, 80). Translation of folkloric aesthetics, particularly repetition, allows audience participation through the conjuring of reflective frames. This in turn leads to Gerima's own film theory: triangular cinema (H. Gerima 1989). The three points of triangular cinema are community (audience), storyteller (filmmaker/audience), and activist (film critic). This has also been referred to as "Fireplace-cinema (gathering, warming and sharing)" (H. Gerima 1984).

Analytical Method

Wax and gold as an analytical method can contribute to the unraveling of the multilayered poetic meanings of various religio-cultural symbolisms embedded in Amharic folkloric orality as well as to interpreting the Amharic films of Gerima. Wax and gold are prevalent in various art forms in Ethiopia particularly in Amharic oral poetic tradition. Teshome H. Gabriel was the first film theorist to apply the wax and gold theory to the analysis of African films. Gabriel, who argues for the development of wax and gold as a method of interpreting African films, explains the origin of the term as coming from the artistic work of Ethiopian goldsmiths.

> A goldsmith creates a wax form, casts a clay mold around it, then drains out the wax, and pours in molten gold to form the valued object. Applied to poetics, the concept acknowledges two levels of interpretation, distinct in theory and representation. Such a poetic form aims to attain a maximum of ideas with a minimum of words. (Gabriel 1982, 78–79)

In the Amharic folkloric tradition, the wax represents the surface meaning, while the gold depicts deeper meanings that are not immediately evident to those without the required knowledge of symbolism. Likewise, knowing the cultural symbolism of folkloric culture is vital for excavating the poetic riches of time and space in the Amharic films of Gerima.

The images and narrative of *Harvest*, through a wax and gold reading, signify transition of time and space—archaic and contemporary, feudal and revolutionary, local and global. African cinema, states Gabriel, "presents an opportunity to replay and rethink history and everyday life in ways which aspire to reveal new revelations and deeper levels of understanding . . . the characters depicted on the screen are often ancient and modern simultaneously" (1989, 20). This is largely true to Gerima's cinematic works and particularly true of *Harvest*. Some critics even view *Harvest* as an allegory of feudal Ethiopia and *Teza* of communist Ethiopia.

Alternatively, Greg Thomas (2010) in his critical essay on *Harvest* points out that commentators often neglect the crux of the matter, namely pan-Africanism. He also argues that the story of *Harvest* is not simply about feudal Ethiopia but also other parts of Africa and America. Furthermore, he successfully argues this by going back to an analysis of *Harvest*, often treated as a film purely about Ethiopia, and he compares the words of the lead revolutionary character Kebebe with those of Malcolm X (G. Thomas 2010). Similarly, *Teza* is more than an individual biography and tells stories beyond the Derg period in Ethiopia. In the words of the filmmaker, "through *Teza*, I have the opportunity to tell a story about Africans who find their lives, and subsequently their psyches, dislocated by a series of complicated and unforeseen historical circumstances" (H. Gerima 2013a, 47).

Synopses of Three Amharic Films

Harvest: 3,000 Years (1976), a black-and-white drama, was made while Gerima was a student at UCLA and shot in two weeks in Ethiopia in 1974 (Willemen 1978; Davis 1975). During this period the country was undergoing political turmoil, transitioning

from monarchy to communist junta. The plot of *Harvest* revolves around the peasant family yoked by the greed of the landlord and Kebebe, a patriot who has lost his land (H. Gerima 1995; M. Thomas 2014; Quam 1981; Hill 1978). The challenge for audiences and critics is how to unravel its poetic depth, which stretches between the plains of the past and the future, the real and the drama, the local and the global, the literal and the figurative and the symbolic. Indeed, *Harvest* is "a timeless masterpiece, a visual poem!"[4] Also, *Harvest* "best exemplified the aesthetics of liberation of Third Cinema in the way it blends imaginatively oral narrative art with revolutionary film form" (Gabriel 1982, 90–93).

Adwa: An African Victory (1999) chronicles the Ethiopian victory over the colonial ambitions of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia on March 2, 1896. *Adwa* uses oral histories and folklores, iconic paintings as well as textual sources to remember the war and the victory. The documentary poses a critique to modern official Ethiopian historians for depending on the traditional "hard" textual sources of history alone at the expense of oral and folkloric historical sources. Gerima states, "Often Ethiopian historians borrowed from Europeans, the very Italians we defeated, the very British and French who collaborated in the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935" (Belachew 2012, 144–145). *Adwa* ends with the preview of its forthcoming sequel, *Children of Adwa: Forty Years Later*.

Teza (2008) is Gerima's latest film to date.[5] It achieved more than twenty awards during its tour of international film festivals. Anberber, the main character, is an idealist doctor culturally and psychologically dislocated both at home and abroad in the diaspora. *Teza* is rich with religio-cultural symbolisms. The opening of the film has several layers of symbolism both iconic and oral, like the *hamina* or *lalibela*s (town criers) singing their morning song, children playing *enkokilish* (riddle around the fire), and the Lame Bora song, that all help to unlock the poetic mystery of the film. Quite a number of commentators make the assumption that *Teza* is simply about the Red Terror massacres and brutality of the Derg regime. However, I argue that it is actually Gerima's BBC commissioned documentary *Imperfect Journey* that chronicles what happened to the people after the monarchy and how they survived the brutality of the Derg regime and their thoughts about the present and the prospective future.

Religious Symbolisms

Religious symbolisms are important in Gerima's films, as they are the most prevalent and powerful. Ethiopian communities are largely religious and diverse. Arguably,

the religious symbolism of Gerima's films is used for his pan-Africanist, humanist ideological and political vision as well as in portraying the religious background of the narratives and communities he portrays. So his concern is not necessarily religious discourse by itself. Rather, he subverts religious symbolisms to portray sociopolitical issues. Of course, there are incidents, such as in *Adwa*, where the religious leaders of Christianity and Islam tell the story accordingly.

Tsebel (Holy Water)

Teza, meaning "morning dew," has several symbolisms related to water, the dripping of water, and Lake Tana (source of the Blue Nile River) from where Azanu emerges in solidarity with Anberber. *Tsebel* is also used in exorcism and healing, and through the holy water Anberber's memory is regained, sparking a flashback. Religiously, both Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia use *tsebel* (Gori 2011). In *Teza*, Anberber tells his childhood Orthodox Christian priest-teacher (*yeneta*): "My whole memory is blocked" and "I do not think holy water will work." In response, his *yeneta* challenges him as to why he is skeptical about holy water, adding: "What do you know about it. At least it will cleanse you. Try it for your mother's sake. . . . Even your modern medicine only works if you believe in it." While discussing holy water and later on interpreting Anberber's dreams, his *yeneta* challenges concepts of false modernization.

In *Teza*, *tsebel* functions to exorcise the demons of forgetfulness from Anberber. In *Harvest*, the plutocrat's wife is sick and fetches holy water (of St. Gyorgis) while a visitor suggests trying another holy water (of St. Mariam of Setela). Metaphorically, the holy water in Teza inspires therapeutic memories, healing, and exorcising. For the filmmaker, cultural aesthetics and history are like holy water and so he uses this symbol in order to explore these themes in greater depth within the Ethiopian context (H. Gerima 2009).

Making and Fulfilling the Vow

Another religious ritual is in the making and keeping of vows. Sacred vows are binding contracts among the major religious Ethiopian communities where God is witness. Anberber's mother is depicted crawling on her hands and knees on the rough road to the church despite both Anberber and Azanu urging her to stop hurting herself. She replies firmly, "St. Mary brought you safely. Now I must fulfill

the vow." Later, he is seen to be disapproving of the vow while he treats her sore and bleeding knees.

Also, in *Adwa*, Gerima documents that Menelik II vowed to St. George at the Battle of Adwa that if he granted him victory then he would build a church in the name of the saint—St. Gyorgis (St. George). Menelik II began fulfilling his vow, and after his death his wife, Empress Taytu, completed the construction and fulfilled the vow. This story is told by one of the two boys at the beginning and end of the documentary.

Symbolism in Rituals

Traditional church architecture in Ethiopia is circular with detailed symbolisms of the Trinity as creator God, angels, and saints. Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church lyrics that have different functions during the liturgical worship services are prominent in *Teza* but also present in *Harvest* and *Adwa*. The incense burners used by priests, called *ma'etent*, also have symbolic meaning as they represent the womb of Mary, with the fire representing the divinity of Christ and the burning incense, the worshipers (Qes. Solomon Mekonen, interview, Addis Ababa, July 10, 2016). Reverence is the hallmark of Orthodox Christian worship in Ethiopia where one has to take shoes off and women wear white head coverings and modest clothing. Even the antagonist landlord character in *Harvest* takes off his shoes with the help of Kentu, his servant. But in *Teza*, the clergy and the congregation (including a vision of Anberber as a child) rebuke Anberber for forgetting his tradition. Greetings also should be interpreted in the cultural context of the films and in relation to religious rituals. Embedded within Ethiopian greetings are religious sentiments of "praise to him," while bowing or kissing the knee can be attributed to respect and love as it renders mutuality; bowing below one's knee can also be a sign of seeking forgiveness.

Local and Global Symbolism between the Religious and Secular

Symbolism in numbers varies and yet remains important across the continent of Africa and in Ethiopia both in the reference to the Holy Trinity, a foundational belief of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but also in secular oral storytelling practices (Éla 1988, 39). In *Harvest*, Kebebe evokes the name of the Trinity repeatedly (*selassie* is mistranslated in the subtitles of the films as "the Holy Ghost"). Satirically in *Teza*,

Anberber says to his friend Tesfaye after spotting a triptych of communist icons from the car window, "How did the Trinity make it all the way here?" Similarly, from the terrace of the Ghion Hotel, where Anberber stays, the iconographic portrait of Marx, Engles, and Lenin at the Abyot or Revolutionary Square (now reverted back to its previous name, Mesqel or "cross") is a dominant image that overshadows the Addis Ababa scenery. This panoramic image is nothing but "a Trinity of alien icons" (Chinweizu 1988, 73).

Symbolism of Exploitation and Foreign Ideologies

Anberber paradoxically criticizes the foreign icons of communism in Teza, and yet we see that his library is composed of the same communist books. For him it seems no pan-African or Ethiopian writer, philosophy, or icon exists, reflecting the Eurocentric education of African intellectuals who either were ignorant about or ignored cultural and philosophical works from their own countries. Kebebe reflects this notion in *Harvest*: while telling stories to young Berihun, he remarks, "We belittle ours!" This cycle then comes to fruition later on in *Teza*, when Anberber regains his childhood memories and is seen holding a classic Amharic novel known as *Fiker Eske Mekabir* translated as *Love Unto Crypt* (Haddis 1966; translation into English by Ayenew 2005).

The oxbow—or yoke (*kember*)—is a symbol of the agrarian culture of much of the Ethiopian highlands and features prominently in *Harvest*. The peasant family uses the oxbow in day-to-day life to toil the soil. In the opening sequence the peasant family wake with the father and son preparing the oxen and carrying the oxbow to plow the vast land of the landlord. After a sequence depicting the father driving the oxen, harnessed to the yoke, with the mother arduously tilling the land behind them, the yoke is next depicted in the dream of their daughter, Beletech. In Beletech's dream, the yoke is an important symbol of oppression; hence, shouldering the yoke as depicted in her dream is an expression of dehumanization and slavery. Later on in the dream sequence the oppressive oxbow is broken by the thunderous, violent, yet exhausting resistance of Beletech, her brother, and her parents. The intense daily struggle and lifestyle of the peasant family is backbreaking and is also symbolized by the oxbow in this dream. The filmmaker argues symbols must be connected to reality saying, "The little girl's dream is very important, but not just as an intangible fantasy, but tangible, i.e., real in relation to the day-to-day farming, with ox-bows,

cattle and so on" (Willemen 1978, 35). Therefore, "In Gerima's lexicon, his films are '*symbolic reality*'" (Stafford and Triplett 1983, 60).

Other symbols that represent foreign ideology and culture in *Harvest* are the references to Pepsi and Coca-Cola as well as the repeating sounds and images of the thundering trucks on a main road. Berihun asks Kebebe what his life would be like if he were not robbed of his land, property, and family. In response Kebebe says sarcastically:

> *Actually, losing my land opened my eyes*. While in Addis about my land, they were preparing to greet the Queen of England. Since the Queen might get a headache if she saw poor people, thousands were herded into concentration camps like cattle in their own country. . . . Why should our poor be herded into a barn as if the Europeans had no poor? Imagine! Isn't it our oil and gas that they sell back to us at higher prices? Those swindling Europeans come here disguised, calling themselves Dr. Pepsi-Cola, Mr. Coca-Cola to exploit us. Have the poor created the poverty they're being jailed for? What amazes me is the new blind creature in Addis Ababa who couldn't comprehend this and imprisons his own people. (my emphasis)

Here Pepsi and Coca-Cola symbolically represent capitalism's economic exploitation of the Third World. Interestingly, Gerima openly identifies himself as a "Third World filmmaker" (Haile Gerima in an interview with Howard 1985). Specifically within *Harvest* it also seems that the filmmaker identified himself with Berihun who grabs a ride on the back of a passing truck, searching for a better life at the end of the film. Gerima found himself in the distant lands of America and likewise grabbed the camera to find and express himself through film.

Symbolism of Names

Names are powerful symbols in Ethiopian societies, as they appear to be in many African societies. The following parable in Ge'ez illustrates the case:

> "Semu yemarreha haba gebru": "One's name leads one to one's action." This proverb links a word to a deed. The notion shows the spiritual, physical, or psychological influence of a name over the destiny of its bearer. The name represents parental aspirations and determines the future roles of its bearer. (Yemane 2004, 88)

In the films of Gerima, names, and particularly character names, play symbolic roles and act as signposts in the films' narratives. Gerima employed his own nickname as a powerful symbol in both his production company and his cinematic storytelling. The name of his film and distribution company is Mypheduh ("Sacred Shield" in Ge'ez). It was a nickname given to him by his father and subsequently adopted by the filmmaker to imply his work as a sacred shield of culture.

In *Harvest*, the characters' names have meaning, as has been previously noted by Michael W. Thomas (2014), but this reoccurs in all of Gerima's Amharic films and is key to uncovering some of the implied messages of the film. In *Harvest,* for example, the meaning of Belay the peasant father is "ruler/supreme" and can be a typical name found in rural areas; it also draws one's attention to the peasant hero of Gojam, Dejach Belay Zeleke, who was hanged after liberation. The revolutionary Kebebe can imply "vanquisher or victor," the peasant daughter Beletech can mean "pre-eminent/rising above/excelling or outshining," and Berihun, the name of the peasant son, can mean "vanguard, trailblazer, or avant-gardist." On the other side of story in the landlord's sphere of influence we have the servant Kentu, which means "vanity/miserable," and is probably a nickname by the society or a slave name given by the owner with which he seems comfortable given his attitude in servitude; and the son of the landlord is Tenku, which implies being the cause or source of problems. The example of namelessness is that of the landlord (H. Gerima 1985); he is addressed only by a pronoun as the master. But Kebebe calls him many insulting names, such as "you pig" or *asamaw letyibelu* (the lazy pig who sits and eats), *isist banda* (chameleon, translated in the film as "swindler"), and *wedel wisha* (fat dog), implying he learned the exploitative techniques from his true masters—the Italian Fascists. If the reason behind not naming the landlord is explored in more depth, other nameless characters come to mind such as in the biblical story of the unnamed rich man and Lazarus the poor (Luke 16:22–31), which resembles the dichotomy between the landlord and Kebebe. St. Chrysostom also importantly said, "and where is the name of the rich man? Nowhere; he is nameless" (Chrysostom 1981, 105).

In *Teza*, the names of the protagonist, Anberber, and his friend have specific meanings and are interpreted in the song of the two *azmari* (artistic storytellers; the female composes the lyrics while the male repeats key phrases and plays the *masinko*):

> These two brothers
> How fortunately named they are

One's Tesfaye, the other's Anberber
One is named "Hope," and the other "Warrior."

These names also denote defining traits of the characters and the reality of life in general. Probably it denotes the condition of the oppressed who are constantly fighting with the hope of freedom and liberation. In the closing sequence of the film, Anberber names his newborn son after his friend, Tesfaye, not simply in memory of his friend but more importantly forecasting a vision of the future filled with the hope of peaceful coexistence.

Folkloric Memory and Musical Symbolism

Arguably, a griot is not a monolithic person in West Africa, and the equivalent can be found in other parts of the continent including in Ethiopia. "The word griot (probably of Franco-Portuguese derivation) has come to be used to denote a specialist musician-cum-narrator of the type found in the Malinke culture zone of West Africa" (Chinweizu 1988, xxxiv). The mantle "screen griot" is also given to some African filmmakers mainly for their role as storytellers and their use of folkloric orality in films (Thackway 2003, 49–92).

As Chinweizu puts it: "the griot hands down the communal memory from generation to generation" (1988, xxxiv). Gerima's films signify the power of historical memory excavated through orality. The documentary *Adwa* begins with the voice-over of an elderly storyteller, representing the fading memory of a griot, confronting the documentarian saying: "why didn't you come earlier if you wanted to know history?" (Sáma and Thomas 2013, 107; see also G. Thomas 2013, 98). Then, the folkloric story of the *zendo* (the dragon slaughtered by a gallant hero) is told with the fading memory reinvigorated by images on screen. In *Harvest*, Kebebe, the principal character, is a patriot and poet who plays the *begena* (Ethiopian harp) and sings a poetic song regarding the causes of injustices in Ethiopian society. In the opening scene of *Teza*, Anberber's childhood friends play *enkokilish*, a game of riddles around the fire. The riddles unravel the mystery of childhood and memory that help restore the cultural and emotional displacement of an African intellectual whose memories and stories are untold (H. Gerima 2013b, 47–48).

In Gerima's Amharic films the griots of West Africa are personified particularly through their Ethiopian equivalents, namely in the representation of *hamina*

(singing beggar/minstrel), *lalibelas* (mendicant praise singers who usually travel in husband and wife pairs), or *azmari* (itinerant musicians who perform at social gatherings) and in the church by the *yeneta* or *menekusit*—elderly teachers or spiritual elders/monks. Again, in Ethiopia there is no one identifiable griot, but many persons in society who fulfill a similar role to that of the griot of West Africa. Thus, studying African and Ethiopian (particularly Amharic) cultural storytelling mechanisms and storytelling persons helps to understand the filmic narratives in which such characters and artistic products are represented. Gerima, for example, translates folkloric orality in his cinematic storytelling. His visual poetics, slow pace, and rhythm of editing and repetitions all render the aesthetics of African, and in particular Ethiopian Amharic, folkloric orality and symbolic storytelling traditions (Thackway 2003; Belachew 2012). Also, Gerima proposes a "Cinema of Silence" to combat against the issue of excessive noise that inhibits audiences from engaging with cinema and that also hinders critical reflection (H. Gerima 2013b). As mentioned above, instead of the all-encompassing sound designs of many films that attack emotions and influence the subconscious, the traditional aspects of oral storytelling, song, and music are instead triumphed in the Amharic films of Gerima for their ability to inspire critical thought and audience engagement.

Symbolism in Songs

The song "Our Bride" is the chorus of *Harvest*, a soundtrack performed repeatedly throughout the film. In the context of the oral storytelling tradition, repetition has a tremendous significance including signifying meaning affirmatively, bringing attention to the central point of the story, and allowing audience participation and reflection. The essence of the song is also captured in the very title of the movie, *Harvest: 3,000 Years*. This melancholic song was written and sung by Gerima's father and serves as a poetic key toward unlocking the wax and gold of the film. Abba Gerima composed the song "Our Bride" after the liberation from Italian Fascist occupation. Gerima credited his father for writing the song and includes the recorded version sung by his father and accompanied by the *washint* (traditional end-blown wooden flute). The lyrics of the song are:

> Our bride our new bride,
> Your dress three thousand years old,
> How could it not be torn?

Our Lady, our mistress,
Your dress three thousand years old,
Why it is not yet changed?

Functionally, history of the past can help to critically examine the present and to impact the future. The mention of "three thousand years" signposts the legend of the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia, descended from the Ethiopian queen Sheba and King Solomon of Israel and their son Menelik I. Both the song and the film do not deny the importance of rich heritage and the value of myths. However, it criticizes and contrasts the irony of history and freedom with the oppressive use of historical memory (Hill 1978). History, even positive history, can be used by the despot in power as a tool of oppression against the poor. Often the political and intellectual elites use history, vaingloriously and even oppressively, against people's liberation and freedom. The song "Our Bride," therefore, is an elegy to the life of the oppressed. It also initiates revolution, liberation, transformation, and humanization simultaneously.

The song is a memory song. It sounds nostalgic, but actually interrogates what is wrong with Ethiopians (and other Africans) who stand at the crossroads between legendary history (and civilization) and oppressive use of myth where poverty seems ironic (particularly after independence) when it pervades visions of liberation. In *Teza*, news of Haile Selassie's fall from grace is reported in a similar way: "Comrades! The decadent 3,000 years old regime has been toppled! Ethiopia is free! Let's drink to that." Of course, Anberber the principal character is reluctant to join the euphoria, questioning the credentials of the new regime rather than simply rejoicing in the overthrow of the monarchy. In 1974, Ethiopia was in transition from monarchy to the communist military junta that developed into the bloody revolution and full-blown civil war sparked by the Derg's Red Terror that "eats its own children" (Davis 1975, 18–19).

Telling Stories through Song and Music

In *Harvest*, Kebebe represents the reoccurring "madman" character, evident in folkloric stories throughout Africa, and as is common in his African counterparts, he uses music to tell stories (M. Thomas 2014, 188). He carries and plays the ten-stringed *begena*, an Ethiopian harp. The box lyre structure of the harp is distinct but is said to belong to the family of lyres (mostly bowl shaped) in Eastern Africa

(Kebede 1995, 82). Griots, as storytellers, often play musical instruments such as with Kebebe and the *begena*, while others tell stories or interpret dreams around the fire. Children are also present and most vocal in the many fireside stories, games, and songs in Gerima's films. In *Teza*, for example, the opening sequence depicts children around the fire playing *enkokilish*, a game of guessing the word a riddle represents. Through this Gerima sets the tone of the film as one that plays with riddles and hidden meanings as experienced through the dislocation of space and time in the decentered narrative, playing constantly with cuts between flashbacks and flash-forwards. Part of this opening riddle is as follows:

"My turn!"
"Go for it."
I saw it when I left. When I returned, it was gone.
"Rain?"
"How about love?"
Might as well give me a state.
"Life!"
Do you think so?
"Childhood?"
"Teza! Teza! Teza! (Dew! Dew! Dew!)"

In the Amharic films of Gerima, the Ethiopian equivalents of the West African griots that have prominent roles in films include the *menkuse* (monk), *merigeta* (ecclesiastical clergy), *yeneta* (priest-teacher), *azmari* (artistic storytellers), and *shimagele* (elderly and spiritual leader). An elder often tells a story or interprets for the young around a fire, as one can observe in both *Harvest* and *Teza*. An example of this in *Teza* is when Anberber's nightmarish dream is shown to be confusing to him and to the lay spectator, but gets interpreted by the elderly priest-teacher, Anberber's *yeneta*, around the fire. The *yeneta*'s interpretation brings clarity to the confusing and surreal images in the dream sequence and is as follows:

I think the grain stands for our people
And the granary stands for our country.
The holes in the different parts of the granary represent our country's chronic problems.

Your attempt to block a hole and stop the leak, and your rushing to stop even more holes and leaks, all this represents your frustration with the existing situation.
The grain pouring from the granary is the people.
The book you tear up and use to plug all those holes is a symbol of the knowledge you absorbed.
As it appears to me, the nightmare that haunts you day and night
Shows you've found your education useless for confronting the realities you're faced with.

As can be seen here, the interpretation of the dream is clear in explaining that Anberber's problem stems from the troubles of humanity itself, which are far more complex than any single person can fix by himself, whether they are educated abroad or not. Gerima seems to be suggesting that the need to recapture what has been lost in academia can be offered in the wisdom hidden in informal and traditional indigenous education forms.

In *Harvest*, the peasant daughter's grandmother (Haregewoin Tafere who is the real grandmother of the filmmaker) is a *menekusit* (monk),[6] as can be deduced from the cap that she wears, and she both listens to and interprets the dream of the young girl. Of course, she conceals the negative aspect of the dream. The close-up of the wrinkled face of the grandmother represents the wisdom of three thousand years, of history and time immemorial.

Kebebe, meanwhile, sharply criticizes the ongoing exploitations of the poor by the landowning elites in the lyrics of his songs and his firebrand rhetoric. He represents the population of patriots who fought for Ethiopia's freedom from colonialism and Fascism and yet suffered as their entitlement to land and its fruit (the harvest) was looted by corrupt officials. Kebebe speaks out: "I fought for those who bragged liberation. They robbed my land I bled for and dumped me here [in the modern house]." The modern house dungeon is sarcastically described here as it is actually an empty space under the arch of a bridge. In essence then, Kebebe can be seen to represent the homeless existence of *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1965). Kebebe's *tej-bet* (traditional drinking house) song, accompanied by his solemn *begena* strumming, speaks of the extreme economic disparity between the rich and the poor, the exploiter and exploited (M. Thomas 2014; G. Thomas 2010). Kebebe plays the *begena* and performs a lyrical critique in the company of his friends in the *tej-bet*; however, shortly after in a following scene, the police imprison Kebebe along with his *begena*. While they handcuff and drag Kebebe, he warns them, "Don't hurt

my Begena!" During the communist regime (1974–91) *begena* music was banned, and the Yared Music School in Addis Ababa was prohibited from teaching *begena* as a subject due to the regime's aggressively secular stance in an attempt to curtail the influences of the Orthodox Church.

Symbolism in the Dragon Legends

A chapter in *Adwa* titled "The Dragon Story: Invoking Memory" is another symbol that needs further investigation. Symbolically, *zendo* (dragon) has two diverse meanings in *Adwa* and *Teza*. The folkloric story of the *zendo* in *Adwa* represents the colonial intruder who was attacked and killed by the gallant warrior. This story of the *zendo* reaches its conclusion when the gallant warrior rescues the villagers by the heroic act of killing the dragon. The painting in *Adwa* depicts the dragon opening his mouth to swallow the warrior and the gallant warrior aiming his spear at the dragon's mouth. The documentary then cuts to another iconic image, that of St. Gyorgis (George) piercing the mouth of the dragon, and subsequently, another church painting that vividly depicts the story of the Battle of Adwa. Two boys are shown gazing at the Adwa painting; it is soon apparent that one boy is blind as the other guides him through the stories of Adwa. The director (who is also the editor) synergizes this sequence of the boy telling the story of the Battle of Adwa with the folklore of the dragon, the painting of the Battle of Adwa, and the icon of St. Gyorgis. The conversation of the two boys studying the commemorative painting of the victory of Adwa reminds the documentarian: "Different historical deeds of a nation . . . passed from generation to generation through various cultural mediums of custodianship, the transmission of stories, and especially through the art of folklore, popular songs, and war chants. Throughout, they have nurtured me from adolescence to adulthood." Thus, Gerima demonstrates and embodies Amharic folkloric orality through his films. His appreciation of folkloric tradition is expressed through archiving oral stories on film, harnessing folkloric aesthetics as well as translating oral folkloric storytelling traditions onto the narrative structure of the films.

The final scenes of *Teza* show the birth of Anberber and Azanu's son in the cave with the legend of the *zendo* (dragon). While the dragon in *Adwa* negatively represents the enemy, the dragon in *Teza* has positive connotations of life—a new beginning. In Ethiopian tradition there are legends and myths related to the *zendo* that require further study here (Hable Sellassie 1972; Gerima T. 1969).

In the closing scene of *Teza*, we hear the *elelta* (joyful ululating) of the young people from the cave, signaling the birth of a child, which symbolically lights up the face of Anberber with a warm glow. Then the children around the cave sing *Eyoha Abebaye*—a song sung at New Year, a season of flowers in Ethiopia. Finally, the dragon legend is heard, narrated by Anberber:

> Childhood legend says we are descended from dragons
> The youngsters hiding from the war in the cave also say the dragon watches over them.
> The dragon will give birth to them as her own children.
> They will have their own language.
> They will create the world . . . for them.
> And in that new world
> They will not have a word for murdering or killing.
> They won't inherit our feuds.
> The vultures will not devour them.
> When they emerge we will recognize them as the dragon's children,
> As they will bear her genes.
> Azanu and I named our child Tesfaye.
> And our hope will be brought up by the dragon, with the rest of its children in the cave, as it prepares them all to emerge and create their new society.

Anberber declares here that they name their newborn son Tesfaye (Hope). Metaphorically and biblically, the birth of a child is a sign of hope and a new beginning, which is in contrast to the old hope of the past as represented in Anberber's friend (also named Tesfaye). In African traditional religions and in Christianity, new birth as a rite of passage or being born again is an essential theological metaphor (see John 3:3; Revelation 21:1).

Symbolism of Life and Death

Adwa includes a profound song whereby the dead speak to the living. The filmmaker tells that once he was skeptical whether Ethiopians really won the war. In response his historian father told him a folkloric story that shaped his thoughts even long after his father passed away. He demonstrates that the stories his father

told him became the pillars of his life. The song in *Adwa* is also accompanied by the *begena*:

> Past spirits summoned each other
> From here and everywhere
> The congregated spirits of the dead gathered
> To council the worldly soul of the living.

The famous *azmari* Lemma Gebrehiwot then provides his own commentary on the lyrics of this song in response to the question: "How do the dead speak to the living?" Pointing to different parts of his *masinko* (Ethiopian single-stringed fiddle), he interprets the poetic stanzas, saying:

> This wood was a living plant, now it is bending like a bow. This is a skin of cattle or a goat or other animal. It was the skin of a living being. But now it is stretched like this. The string is a horsetail. After it was taken from its master (the horse) it is dead. There is a song for the horse and its tail "restlessly swings his tail. Looking yonder at the oncoming battle." Again, the wooden part, after the plant is cut down it is dead. This skin was that of a living thing, now it is dead. For the *kirar* (a five-string lyre) the *jimatoch* or strings are taken after the animal died, from the gut. The washint or the flute is capable of producing musical sound and melody after it is cut down. (Lemma Gebrehiwot)[7]

The symbolisms interpreted by Lemma in Ethiopian musical instruments signify that "death does not have the last word; [as] African symbolism dramatizes the victory of life over death" (Éla 1988, 40). The song "the dead speaking to the living" can be understood as a song about Ethiopian traditional musical instruments, but it can also be understood as a cross-generational storytelling technique. Thus, the folkloric song signifies symbolically both musicality and storytelling tradition (Kebede 1995). Gerima's theoretical model "triangular cinema" (H. Gerima 1989) comprises audience/community, the filmmaker/storyteller, and the activist/critic joined around the cinematic fires listening to the cinematic reenactment of the dead speaking to the living. On and off the screen, through African folkloric and symbolic storytelling, humanity participates in the drama of life (Éla 1988).

A world authority on Ethiopian and African music, Ashenafi Kebede, remarks, "It is edifying to study how musical instruments serve religious and symbolic roles in

society" (1995, 97). He also adds: "The *krar* traditionally possessed the theriomorphic symbolism of a farm ox, the *masinko* that of a horse. These and many other similar symbolic attributes of music and musical instruments are ignored and forgotten by today's young performers of urban music" (Kebede 1982, 114). The origins of music among many African societies can be attributed to different sources: animals, supernatural powers, and individual composers (Kebede 1982, 93). In a popular Ethiopian icon, the three birds present and represent the heavenly melody of St. Yared (sixth century) the melodious (Lesana 1997). The ecclesiastical musical chanting we hear from Gerima's Amharic films belongs to Yaredic tradition. Yared's later generation of disciples developed the musical notations, and each represents theological and spiritual symbolisms.

Conclusion

This chapter is a call for critics to delve deeper into the local and cultural symbolisms and specifics of Haile Gerima's Amharic films, and more broadly films from other emerging filmic cultures in diverse languages across the continent and elsewhere. By doing this, the critic's role as cultural interpreter, activist, and guide can be better utilized in order to reconnect rarefied cultural wisdoms and meanings to their sources of inspiration and disseminate their global messages to the wider world.

NOTES

1. Gerima's documentary *Imperfect Journey* has partial conversations in Amharic and Tigrinya but is mainly in English. There are more Amharic films by Haile Gerima that are under production including *YeAdwa Lijoch: Kearba Amet Behuala*/*Children of Adwa: Forty Years Later* (documentary also called *Adwa II*) and *Yetut Lij* (drama).
2. Evidently cultural symbols of Gerima's films are not only Ethiopian but also pan-African, such as the symbol of the *sankofa* bird (Akan symbolic concept of Ghana) in *Sankofa*. See Grayson (2000), in which chapter 3, titled "Asante Icons in Sankofa," in particular deals with the symbolisms of the buzzard bird and Nunu in the context of the Asona ancestors.
3. Éla reminded us, "A symbol, however, is accessible only to the 'insiders'" (1988, 35).
4. Guiseppe Gariazzo, from the flyer made for the DVD edition of *Harvest: 3,000 Years*.
5. See G. Thomas 2013.

6. The *menekusit* is a female nun, a storyteller and dream interpreter who does not necessarily live in a monastery according to the diverse monastic traditions in Ethiopia.
7. From an interview originally broadcast on Ethiopian Television.

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Whether to Laugh or to Cry?

Explorations of Genre in Amharic Fiction Feature Films

Michael W. Thomas

Focusing on the distinctive nature of popular film culture in Ethiopia compared to other contexts, this chapter explores the complex expressions of film genre in Ethiopia. This investigation is conducted through the prism of genre as it manifests itself in varying forms and meanings throughout the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of films in the Amharic Ethiopian filmic landscape. The rise of cinemas and cinephiles dedicated to Amharic fiction film is a phenomenon that has paved the way for the creation of a commercially viable film industry in Ethiopia with local yet hybridized genres. These genres do not only act as mediators between producers and consumers. Importantly, their definitions are constantly in flux as they act as markers by which films are understood in many parts of production, marketing, exhibition, and consumption, both reflecting and inflecting history and society. Recent scholarship on cinematic genres (Altman 1999; Grant 2007; Langford 2005; Moine 2008; Neale 2000) call for studies that move away from dogmatic formalist and structuralist categorization and theorization of genre toward a "concept of genre [that] derives its meaning and operative value from the complex play of interactions between films and their contexts of production and reception" (Moine 2008, xvii). In this way, this chapter aims to contribute to global genre theory in film studies as well as contributing to

the small but growing strand in African film studies that take genre as a focal point, particularly influenced by Jonathan Haynes's seminal *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (2016).

Richard Jameson describes the idea of genre as "second nature to the movies and our awareness of them. Movies belong to genres much the way people belong to families or ethnic groups" (1994, ix). This notion is similarly echoed in screening schedules throughout cinemas in Ethiopia; often second only to the name of the movie is the film's genre or type (in Amharic: *yefilmu aynet*, "the film type"). The genre type of a movie also appears in movie trailers, on posters, and even on video CD (VCD) jackets. The prominence of genre appellations indicates the role they play in the Ethiopian context and raises questions surrounding the specific impacts of genre on the production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption of Amharic films. My emphasis on the role of genre in Ethiopian productions is based on the sense that Ethiopian films, like their counterparts in Nigeria, are "essentially generic" due to market considerations (Haynes 2011, 67). Since genre films are often associated with low art, because of their formulaic structure and repetitive elements, as opposed to the novelty of art house/festival films, the critical lens that genre theory provides enables a productive and generative way of considering all types of films. This will importantly contribute to the significant current focus on how film scholars can analyze both global art house (festival) films and popular films from localized commercial film industries around the globe, and how we can find ways of approaching the differences and similarities between what is assumed to be high and low art.

This chapter explores, in particular, the two most prolific genres in Amharic films, *yefiker film* (love film) and *assikiñ yefiker film* (humorous love film), which have come to dominate cinemas across Ethiopia since the flourishing of the film industry in the early 2000s. The analysis of the *yefiker film* and *assikiñ yefiker film* genres will show how genres in Ethiopia are inflected by both foreign (Bollywood melodrama and Hollywood romantic comedies) and local influences. Furthermore, the prolific use of the term *fiker* (love) in the names of genres will receive particular attention in conjunction with the analysis of films, interpreting the concept of *fiker* as a culturally and historically specific rendering of an Ethiopian "melodramatic imagination" (Brooks 1976). Melodrama is a key concept with Grant and Kuhn stating, "it is melodrama, or rather the melodramatic imagination, that emerges as the most pervasive, and the most thoroughly scrutinized, of generic modalities across world cinemas" (2006, 6). The term "melodramatic imagination" will be

discussed in more depth later in the chapter, offering more abstract thoughts after the discussion of films, their genres, and their fluctuating popularity in Ethiopia.

The approach of this chapter aims to galvanize scholarship in melodrama and genre studies by arguing for cinema genres to be studied in context and in a diachronic way, seeing how genres change over time in any context. Before discussing these Amharic film genres, however, I first want to engage with how African film scholars have recently used the concept of genre in their analyses in order to ground the Ethiopian experience within these wider debates.

Understanding Concepts of Film Genre from an African Context

Onookome Okome (2010) argues that skeptics of commercial films from Africa are opposed to them precisely because they see Nollywood (like Hollywood) as degenerately representing a stereotypical Nigeria of "juju" and "spirit possessions" to audiences the world over. Incidentally, similar criticisms are voiced locally by commentators in Ethiopia about Amharic films as they lament the dominance of love-based melodramas and comedies that are deemed to represent a naive image of the country to outsiders (Meaza 2005). Indeed skepticism about commercial cinema in Africa is well rehearsed, with Haile Gerima, the most internationally recognizable filmmaker to emerge from Ethiopia, saying he finds "it difficult to call the current video productions real cinema" (cited in Arefe 2006). Even prominent African film scholar Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike at one point dismissed video films for being "devoid of authenticity" (2003, 126). However, in 2010 the publication of the edited volume *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (Şaul and Austen 2010) attempted to bridge the critical divide between African popular video and festival film scholars by combining the two strands of film scholarship. This publication contained the following pertinent call by Haynes: "It is time to roll out the disciplinary apparatus of film studies and apply it to the video films" (2010, 13). This chapter does just this, drawing on genre theory and applying it to Amharic films.

Genre theories, however, remain problematic in African film studies due to the resistance to creating categories, which risks pigeonholing and essentializing films into definitive static taxonomies. Haynes makes the important point, however, that "it is hard to function without a working taxonomy" (2010, 18). In industries where no in-depth corpus of canonical films exists, due to a lack of committed textual analysis and research, such as with Ethiopia and Nollywood (among other local

popular film industries), the scholarship suffers from an incoherent and often indiscriminate and wide-ranging, almost random, selection of texts. Indeed Cohen points out that genres change over time and that "the process by which genres are established always involves the human need for distinction and interrelation" (1986, 204). Certainly, with the film industry in Ethiopia and sheer volume of films being produced, there is a present need for the formulation of generic corpuses in order to open up the Ethiopian experience of cinema to analysis. I adopt genre names in Amharic, following common usages by cinemagoers, exhibitors, distributors, and producers and that express the intentions of Ethiopian society. Identifying films in relation to genre is not only an invaluable tool for dealing with the increasing volume of film productions in Ethiopia, but it is also necessary for documenting the influences and histories of local and foreign cultural products, early celluloid films, and noncinematic genres (oral and written literature) in relation to the contemporary moment. The pioneering scholars of African cinema have come to readily acknowledge the importance of commercial film industries and their hybridity across Africa with Diawara referring to the significance of genre and "the cultural workers in Nollywood . . . to have realized that stars and distributors are as important as 'auteurs,' if not more so" (2010, 190).

Taking a more flexible approach to genre criticism, Haynes notes that "generative models of genre are doubtless better than the attempt to erect a stable taxonomy," recognizing a tendency in film studies to see films as belonging exclusively to one genre (2010, 18). Instead single genres can be seen to contain dominant properties (which play an overall organizing role) within the genre, properties that are common to all narrative cinema (such as spectacle, passion and emotion, digression, suspense, and humor). It is these multifaceted and interrelated aspects of genre, constructed by consumers and producers alike, that create its fluidity. In order to carry out a comprehensive study of genre in Amharic cinema, then, it is also important to focus on how multiple genres relate to one another and how the very structures of the movie industry in Ethiopia, like with Nollywood, can be seen as essentially generic due to the profit-driven pressures of the local film market (Haynes 2011, 2016).

In order to bring recent advancements in genre theory in film studies to bear on African film industries, the contextualization of each study is paramount. In opposition to a "foreign normality" to the study of African films, Haynes raises the issue of context, calling for studies analyzing movies as "prolongations, or possibly betrayals, of specific cultural traditions, as interventions in specific local debates or histories" (2010, 12–13). To a certain extent, however, this has been lacking in much African

film scholarship as academics have intervened by naming genres a priori and thus implementing a top-down critical approach. By imposing academic appellations unused by local industry professionals and spectators alike, this method of genre criticism remains divisive among film scholars the world over. A few examples of genre terms used in regard to the commercial film industries in different African contexts are "romantic melodrama" (Krings 2015, 126), "occult melodrama" (Green-Simms 2012), "horror movies" (Wendl 2004), and "the women's film" (Owusu and Kwansah-Aidoo 2015). Most of these studies offer "cultural humility and inductive procedures," as called on by Haynes (2010, 20); however, scholarship focused on contextualizing daily genre usage by local producers, exhibitors, and spectators remains largely absent.

Again, my cue is taken from Haynes, and the important groundwork he has covered in terms of the need to contextualize genre scholarship regarding commercial African film industries; he says: "We need to establish what they mean and what to call them; we cannot assume we already know" (2010, 20). Embarking on a genre study of film in Ethiopia has never before been attempted; I thus employ the genre labels commonly used by local audiences, cinemas, and directors. Here, it is necessary to interrogate the prevalent use of generic labels borrowed from Hollywood blockbuster-type categories, such as romantic comedy, and how they are understood within the Ethiopian context. Romantic comedies made in Amharic, for example, have an alternative generic formula, both influenced by and at the same time drastically different from Hollywood-type romantic comedies. Other genre appellations, such as the already well-researched Nollywood "occult melodrama," remain bound to academic criticism and thus, although advancing our understanding of certain themes and trends, lack recognition among their local audiences (Meyer 2010; Green-Simms 2012). More nuanced and local understandings of how genres emerge in African contexts are needed (for example, what does "romantic comedy" actually mean in Ethiopia?), just as academic genre naming demands rigorous localized vetting (what does "occult melodrama" actually mean in Nigeria or Ghana?).

The *Yefiker Film* Genre

In order to investigate distinctions between film genres in Ethiopia, this chapter will now explore the *yefiker film* (love film) and the *assikiñ yefiker film* (humorous love

film) genres, the two most widely and commonly used generic appellations among film practitioners and spectators in Ethiopia, and the names that characterize the main content categories used to distinguish film releases. These genres are dominant through a combination of critical acclaim, commercial success, sheer volume of films produced, and their ability to influence other genres. Such examples of this are the *yefiker film* heavily influencing the moralizing and diachronic narratives of the *lib anteltay* (*yefiker*) *film* ([romantic] suspense film) and the *beteseb film* (family film) as well as it fusing with humor in the creation of the *assikiñ yefiker film*.

The deeply emotional element that engenders the term *fiker* in relation to commercial film genres in Ethiopia can take romantic, devotional, nationalistic, and spiritual forms, resulting in a term that can be seen to embody a deep attachment to idealistic notions of Ethiopian culture. Interestingly, however, as an Amharic term for melodrama does not exist in relation to cinema in Ethiopia, the word *fiker* can appear somewhat amorphous in its use to describe both melodrama and comedy, the two strains that Altman (1996) describes as foundational to American narrative cinema but as markedly distinct genres, with Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik going a step further than Altman by identifying a "kinship between comedy and melodrama" (1990, 13) in the Euro-American contexts. A similarly close bond is conjured by *fiker* in the naming of the Amharic genres *yefiker film* and *assikiñ yefiker film* (and will be discussed in more depth later on). In his definition of melodrama's loose attributes in American cinema, Barry Langford identifies "stark and simplified oppositions between moral absolutes personified in broadly drawn characters, eventful narratives packed with sensational incident, a strong scenic element and a powerful emotional address" (2005, 32–33). This definition of melodrama, imbued with different formal and stylistic characteristics, could stand in either the Ethiopian or any other cinematic (as well as literary, theatrical, or televisual) context.

The excessive melodrama of many *yefiker films*—including suicide attempts, revenge, death, and other traumatic and fatalistic occurrences—interrupt romantic through-lines, which fundamentally posit ideas of marrying for love against more traditional marriage values and patriarchal dominance in Ethiopian society. Central to *yefiker films* of the early 2000s were explorations into the tensions between youth and the traditional family nucleus as university and other more risqué settings encouraged a disobedience within the realms acceptable to Ethiopian society. Instead of a total disassociation from and rebellion against the family, films often resolved with compromise and understanding being reached between the younger

and older generations. More often than not, true, unconditional, and spiritual love (often inspired by Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity) paves the way for the healing of all wounds and enlightenment of entrenched views as the complications between young lovers and their extended families are resolved in moral terms. In this sense the spiritual love achieved in the dénouements of the *yefiker film* can be seen as opposed to the more jovial, bodily, and physical union achieved in the *assikiñ yefiker film*, pointing to the idea that while *yefiker films* provide nourishment for the soul, *assikiñ yefiker films* provide more comedic relief for the corporeal dilemmas of daily life (Behailu Wassie, interview, Addis Ababa, March 8, 2016).

The commercial viability of filmmaking in Ethiopia was facilitated after cinemas were allowed to screen Amharic video/digital films. Prior to this, the City Cinema Administration's first criterion for licensing a film was that it had to be 35mm, as cinemas only had the technical capability to project celluloid films. One of the earliest video productions to change this dynamic was Tesfaye Mamo's *Fiker Mecheresha*/*The Edge of Love* (1994), which became critically acclaimed after it was allowed to be screened at the Hager Fiker Theater for its premiere (Tesfaye Mamo, interview, Addis Ababa, March 9, 2016). Adapted from a folktale and shot on location in Bahir Dar (the capital of the Amhara region), the film follows the story of a young couple, Abaynesh and Habtamu, who defy their families' wishes for them to separate by escaping to an island in Lake Tana. After their small papyrus *tankwa* (canoe) drifts away, they are marooned, and with Habtamu soon succumbing to illness, Abaynesh is left alone mournfully despairing Habtamu's death with the film's tragic ending revealing a man discovering the remains of the couple. The film's social romantic melodramatic mode is highlighted in flashbacks depicting how the love of the young couple is complicated by the love, loyalty, and commitment they show to their extended family. As such, the couple are shown to be not victims of evil deeds but victims of circumstance and of society, which places the generational struggle and desire to change the conception of romantic love and marriage in Ethiopia center screen. Despite the short but successful screening of *Fiker Mecheresha*, due to a lack of projectors it was unable to be screened in Bahir Dar or other cities (Tesfaye Mamo, interview, Addis Ababa, March 9, 2016).

It was only in 2002, after the screening of five different films in four different cinemas/theaters, that theatrical releases of Ethiopian films became the norm in Ethiopia. Of these five films, by far the most successful were the three *yefiker film* features: Zekarias Haile-Mariam's *Tsamako* (2001), Tewodros Teshome's *Kazkaza Welafen*/*Cold Flame* (2002), and roughly three months later, Tatek Tadesse's

Gudifecha/*Adoption* (2002). The other films screened were Helen Tadessa's *Yeberedow Zemen*/*The Ice Age* (2002), a situational comedy originally made for television but later screened in Alem Cinema due to disagreements with Ethiopian Television (now the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation), and Abreham Tsegaye's rural epic, *Yenetsa Tiwild*/*The Free Generation* (2002). As Alem Cinema was seen as more exclusive by audiences at the time, it did not draw the huge crowds the government-affiliated cinemas and theaters were able to, leading these films to be relatively unsuccessful at a time when many cultural commentators cited the fact that films were popular by default, simply because they were in Amharic (Meaza 2005). As the *yefiker films* were more easily accessible to the wider public, being screened in larger and cheaper government cinemas, the perceived exclusiveness of Alem Cinema proved influential in the lack of commercial success the epic-rural and comedy genres subsequently suffered early on in Ethiopia. Indeed it was these early *yefiker films* that combined to help establish a generic blueprint for commercial filmmaking in the form of the *yefiker film* genre, inspiring a trend in romantic social melodramas that dominated Ethiopian cinemas until the emergence of romantic comedies in 2007.

Tsamako was by far the most costly film of this era, costing 250,000 Ethiopian birr (roughly $33,300) and taking six months to produce. Although *Tsamako* was first premiered at Imperial Hotel in 2001, due to the director's and producer's affiliations with the government it was permitted to be screened at Mega Amphitheater in early 2002, and it proved a commercial success and influential in paving the way for digital/video films to be screened in cinemas and theaters across the country. The film's narrative, set in the communist Derg era of the previous government, follows the female protagonist, Tigist, as she searches for her lost love, Tewodros, after he escapes from a military prison. Finding refuge with the Tsamako people of southwest Ethiopia who nurture Tewodros as one of their own, Tewodros proves himself to such an extent that the elder of the community promises his daughter's hand in marriage to the outsider. In true melodramatic form, Tigist manages to track down Tewodros through the help of a journalist and arrives at the village on the eve of the planned wedding. The love triangle of this film represents the tensions between tradition, modernity, love, and community within a setting and small ethnic group outside mainstream Ethiopian culture in which a hopeful and inclusive image of Ethiopia is projected and through which, in Zekarias's own words, one is encouraged to "measure the depth and might of love" (cited in Yared M. 2001).

The Ethiopian melodramatic imagination imbued within the romantic social narratives of the *yefiker film* comes to the fore in both *Kazkaza Welafen* and *Gudifecha*. Largely set in the Sidist Kilo campus of Addis Ababa University, *Kazkaza Welafen* directly addresses the social tensions of everyday life for Ethiopian university students with the dangers of HIV/AIDS as its central theme. It follows the story of the female protagonist Selam, a promising university student and advocate for the prevention of HIV/AIDS who secretly believes she too is living with the disease. (We see in a flashback that her late boyfriend forced her to have sex while he was drunk and knowingly HIV positive.) The film opens with a dramatic car accident in which Selam survives but fatally injures her boyfriend; after recovering at home she has to deal with the ill health of her mother, the manipulation of a rich suitor offering financial stability in return for her hand in marriage, and a close friend falling ill due to AIDS. *Kazkaza Welafen* reaches its climax with Selam attempting to commit suicide and being rushed to the hospital. The film's ending, however, is resolved happily with Selam's recovery in the hospital, negative HIV test result, and marriage to Brook, a generous and kind suitor with whom Selam has fallen in love because of his patient devotion to her (as shown intermittently throughout the film).

The real evil in this film is the AIDS disease and its effects on Ethiopian society; beyond this, the filmmakers show that the social insecurities of everyday life create a world in which Selam cannot survive. Using the visual trope of blind characters to symbolize the blindness of youth and Ethiopian society to HIV, and after Selam demonstrates a moral strength in her abstinence and other virtuous acts throughout the film, she is rewarded somewhat fatalistically through a negative HIV test result. This result opens the way for a happy resolution, allowing true love to be realized and reflecting the prevalent sentiment *fiker yashenifal* (love conquers all). The *yefiker film* can thus be seen to be imbued with resolutions that affirm local Ethiopian moral codes, teaching people how to face life's obstacles without compromising their values, while simultaneously promising a romantic love that does not have to be sacrificed because of familial or societal pressures.

In *Gudifecha*, as in other *yefiker films*, couples do not always live happily ever after. Like *Kazkaza Welafen*, *Gudifecha* similarly adopts a romantic social melodrama mode with its narrative focusing, however, on a wealthy family and the various issues of love that ensue after Meron and her adopted brother Josie have a romantic affair. Meron's circumstances become complicated after she becomes pregnant with Josie's child, forcing them to go into hiding and Meron to drop out of university. The wealthy father, Meshesha, manipulates the couple, forcing them to abort the baby

despite Meron knowing that, because of her hemophilia, it will most likely cause her own death. Left with little choice, Meron decides to take traditional medicine in an attempt to abort her child. In a highly stylized scene, accented by low-key lighting and strong shadows, Meron and Josie arrive at the house of the medicine woman. After Meron commences her procedure, Josie explains that Meshesha had told them to abort after revealing that he is actually Meshesha's real son, given birth to by Meron's aunt, thus making Meron and Josie agnate siblings. The film then cuts to a lakeside resort two years later in which Josie explains his life to his new love (intercut with flashbacks), describing that after Meron's death he was deemed mentally unstable and forced to undergo both Orthodox and Pentecostal Christian healing, which he found to be of little use compared to the help he received from a psychologist, augmenting the film's advocacy of modern medical techniques over traditional and spiritual practices.

Much like in *Kazkaza Welafen* and central to both plots are their youthful perspectives and outlooks (reflecting the ages of the filmmakers and the majority of their audiences). It is the youth who are burdened with the problems of older generations, who explore the impacts of both modern and traditional medicine, and who express their desire to marry for love and not for family. While in *Kazkaza Welafen* all of these competing claims are happily resolved through fatalistic good fortune, in *Gudifecha*, the death of Meron is also deeply symbolic and fatalistic as she is the victim of her father's patriarchal sins (adultery with his wife's sister) and lies (withholding that he was in fact Josie's legitimate father), with Meshesha ultimately becoming paralyzed due to the stress of the situation and paying the price for his daughter's death.

In *Gudifecha*, the opening sequence uses sweeping crane shots and tracking shots to frame the familiar location of the Sidist Kilo campus of Addis Ababa University, symbolizing, as in *Kazkaza Welafen*, a prototype of modern Ethiopia where the lived tensions between Ethiopia's modern society and past traditions come to the fore in what was once the palace grounds of the last emperor of Ethiopia. This university setting is central in many Amharic films, engaging the aspiring younger generations as well as older generations familiar with the history of the location. In such a way, the *yefiker film* proves successful as it attempts to rationalize and comprehend the social and cultural insecurities of everyday life through a moral structure, reflecting and expressing the hopes, dreams, pressures, anxieties, and vulnerabilities of contemporary Ethiopia. The genre's early prevalence and patriotic sensibilities were also forged in an era of hostile tensions following the aftermath of

the Eritrean-Ethiopian War that destabilized the very fabric of Ethiopian national identity and created social and economic uncertainty. The Ethiopian melodramatic imagination being self-perpetuated by the *yefiker film* was crucial in affecting and reflecting these popular sentiments of the time.

Interestingly, the success of these films can also be linked to their sites of exhibition. While *Kazkaza Welafen* enjoyed an extended screening run in the pioneering Hager Fiker (love for country) Theater (Tewodros Teshome, interview, Addis Ababa, February 18, 2016), *Gudifecha* also enjoyed screenings in multiple cinemas, being continuously shown in Ambassador Theater for a year and six months (Tatek Tadesse, interview, Addis Ababa, March 12, 2016). Hager Fiker Theater, Ambassador Theater, and Mega Amphitheater (the exhibition site of *Tsamako*) were all well established and accessible government-run sites of cultural activity in and around Arada, the district of Addis Ababa long associated as the center of the old and new artistic, social, and urban movements. In contrast was the privately owned Alem Cinema, which was branded exclusive and upmarket at the time it first opened in 2002 due to, in part, its higher ticket price and location in downtown Bole, the district of new money and wealth in Addis. Crucially, Hager Fiker Theater was founded in order to inspire Ethiopian patriotism against invading Italian forces in the 1930s and later became a dedicated center for Ethiopian arts, specifically music, dance, poetry, and theater (Ashagrie 1996). Similarly, the government-run Ambassador Theater was built in 1966 and as the largest cinema, with 1,447 seats, housed the Derg-era Ethiopian Film Center. The nationalistic symbolism embodied by Hager Fiker Theater and Ambassador Theater and their roles in providing a launchpad for the success of the *yefiker film* epitomized the nature of a thriving local and popular cinema impregnated with a concept of love (or *fiker*) committed to projecting and responding to an imagined sense of Ethiopian culture and nation through a fundamentally melodramatic mode.

Emergent Genres and the Turn of the *Assikiñ Yefiker Film*

In the years that followed the commercial success of the *yefiker film*, more privately owned cinemas were built. Agona and Sebastopol opened a couple of years after Alem Cinema with these three privately run cinemas now solely dedicated to screening Amharic features. Dominated at the time by the *yefiker film*, this trend also opened up privately run cinemas to a wider audience demographic, dispelling

the perceived exclusivity of such cinemas when Alem Cinema first opened. As the Ethiopian melodramatic imagination of the *yefiker film* established a formula for commercial filmmaking in Amharic that emerged into a body of films identifiable as the *yefiker film* genre, so too other branches grew from the *yefiker film*. Films such as *Yenetsa Tiwild*, the first rural epic to be screened in the contemporary era, although not a commercial success, can be seen to belong to the aesthetically influential rural epic genre. This genre includes Michel Papatakis's *Gumma*/*Blood Money* (1974), a popular success in its time, entirely shot in the rural villages of the northeastern Wollo province. This genre has emerged as a marker defining films set in rural Ethiopia with stories concerning rural issues that resonate with wider Ethiopian social themes and that project an Ethiopian melodramatic imagination in the same vein as the *yefiker film* and its theatrical heritage. Many VHS rural set features were made by previous theater practitioners Beminabu Kebede and Abreham Tsegaye (who both often featured in their films) in the 1990s and released straight to video, with the most recent examples of this genre being the critically acclaimed cinema releases *Ashenge* (Paulos Regessa, 2007), *Geday Siyarefafid*/*When the Killer Was Late* (Naod Lemma, 2013), and *Hagerish Hageré*/*Your Country Is My Country* (Mulualem Getachew, 2016).

Also developing early on was the *lib anteltay film* (suspense film) that, like the rural set films, includes the key melodramatic imagination intrinsic in the *yefiker film* but with thriller-type narrative structures and stylistic techniques to create suspense, often focusing less on romantic elements and more on sociopolitical issues with sinister characters and immoral deeds clearly marked (M. Thomas 2015). Alessandro Jedlowski rightly points out that in Ethiopia "the period around 2007/2008 can be considered something of a golden age . . . with different film genres being equally successful with local audiences" (2015, 181). The most commonly mentioned films in this period, described as some of the most successful films in the history of cinema in Ethiopia, are the *lib anteltay film Siryet*/*Absolution* (Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn, 2007); the tragic *beteseb film Wisané*/*Decision* (Tom Thomas, 2008), and the *assikiñ yefiker film Yewendoch Gudday*/*Men's Affair* (Henok Ayele, 2007). As also noted by Jedlowski and confirmed by industry insiders, after the success of *Yewendoch Gudday*, the *assikiñ yefiker film* became more common due to their relatively small budgets and short production times. This had the effect of saturating the market, pushing "producers . . . to invest mainly (if not only) in projects that guarantee good (and safe) economic returns, provoking . . . repetition of plots and genres" (Jedlowski 2015, 182).

This is not to say, however, that all *assikiñ yefiker films* are stagnant, unoriginal copies of each other or of Hollywood romantic comedies or devoid of generic innovation. Instead, the *assikiñ yefiker film* can be seen to be closely related to the *yefiker film* in that they often confront social tensions and inequalities by using romance and love to bridge class, ethnic, and familial divisions. The *assikiñ yefiker film*, however, always results in laughter, the overcoming of obstacles, and ending happily with the union of the couple. If, as Barry Langford suggests, "melodrama has a syntax [structure] but lacks a clear semantic [constituent] dimension" (2005, 32), then romantic comedies in Ethiopia can be seen as embodying a similar syntax to the *yefiker film* in terms of narrative and formal structures, tackling similar social themes and placing similar obstacles in the way of love's attainment. The distinct constituents of the *assikiñ yefiker film*, however, include secondary characters who serve a purely comedic function (usually a group of two or more friends), humorous (almost slapstick) encounters, and comically flawed good intentions that always conclude happily (unlike the more tragic possibilities that may unlock moral enlightenment in the dénouements of *yefiker films*).

Interestingly, many filmmakers, including the director of *Yewendoch Gudday*, Henok Ayele, put the success and influential impact of the film down to the fact that as well as being popular in the cinema, it enjoyed wide circulation on VCD. Through the film being viewed at home and in other domestic spheres it became common to quote jokes from favorite characters and cite humorous plotlines that brought the film widespread reputation through word of mouth as well as in the public cinemas of Addis Ababa (Henok Ayele, interview, Addis Ababa, February 11, 2016). The consequential opening-up of more film markets and ability to permeate many perceived boundaries in Ethiopian society quickly inspired the making of more *assikiñ yefiker films*, cementing it as the go-to genre for producers, cinema selection committees, and consumers.

Most importantly, *Yewendoch Gudday*'s success lay in its searing narrative that plays upon the common male anxiety of women who leave their boyfriends in Ethiopia for members of the Ethiopian diaspora abroad. When such a scenario presents itself in the film's opening, the protagonist Aimro is heartbroken to such an extent that he becomes housebound. Aimro's close friends (all colleagues at a carpenter's workshop) are so disgusted by the situation that they vow revenge by establishing the "*yewendoch gudday*" group with the sole aim of avenging shunned men, victims of women who willingly trade love for riches and the prospect of life abroad. A farcical scene plays out midway through the film in which Aimro

begrudgingly goes to the wedding of his ex-girlfriend while his friends hatch a humorous plan that involves them gate-crashing the wedding. It is at the wedding that Aimro catches the eye of Helina who believes Aimro also to be a wealthy member of the Ethiopian diaspora. The lies and deceit that build up between the two as they start dating are finally dispelled in the film's climax, which concludes with the love between the couple being laid bare after they come clean, admitting in earnest their wrongdoings and, in turn, true feelings for each other.

The humor of other *assikiñ yefiker films* is often born out of extremes, and these extremes can be characterized in male and female protagonists in the sense that "opposites attract" as in the film *Silä Anchi*/*For You* (Belay Getaneh, 2008), in which a beautiful extrovert waitress falls in love with an awkward-looking, stiff, and introverted high school student. These comedic extremes may also be represented through a "clash of cultures," which plays on the challenges of speaking foreign languages (often English), such as in *Yefiker ABCD*/*Love's ABCD* (Dawit Negash, 2012); or also on other such binaries as poverty/wealth, in *Yewendoch Gudday* and *Yanchiw Léba*/*Yours Thievingly* (Belay Getaneh, 2011); rural/urban, such as in *Lawnderi Boy*/*Laundry Boy* (Tsegaye Yohannes and Leul Solomon, 2011) and *Ayrak*/*Don't Be Distant* (Fikreyesus Dinberu, 2014); and even films that combine many such dichotomies as in *Tilefe*ñ/*Abduct Me* (Mulualem Getachew, 2015).

Speaking with audience members in the long queues that wind around the cinemas of Ethiopia, it becomes apparent that the two major reasons for going to the cinema are, first, to be educated on issues of *fiker*, including how to love within the context of Ethiopian society and the multigenerational patriarchal families to which most people belong, and, second, to be entertained. This point draws comparisons with the idea of "edutainment" in the Nigerian context (Green-Simms 2010), with both the *yefiker film* and *assikiñ yefiker film* genres proving educational in the eyes of audiences. Indeed, romantic comedies and comedies continue to draw on the melodramatic imagination intrinsic to the *yefiker film* in their didactic dénouements. This is evidenced in the neat and often idealized unifying resolutions of films that, although intended to create laughter, also prove instructive. Through the sentimentality evoked by both genres (laughter and extreme emotion) they manage to entertain while drawing didactic conclusions that teach audiences how to negotiate between romantic love and the love of family and nation, confronting social and moral obligations. The development of these two dominant generic strands in Ethiopia and the dual demands on popular films to educate and entertain have meant that there is a generic kinship between the *assikiñ yefiker film* and *yefiker*

film in Ethiopia much like that which has been suggested by Neale and Krutnik where "comedy can come surprisingly close, in its concerns as well as in many of its structural features, to the genre we tend now to think of as melodrama" (1990, 13). Thus there is heavy cross-pollination in terms of themes and style, as well as in terms of industry personnel, which has resulted in the fluid and sometimes ambivalent nature of film genres in Ethiopia with the melodrama of the *yefiker film* genre remaining ever-present.

In fact, it is evident that from 2013/2014 onward there has been a move back toward the *yefiker film* genre, with films combining a more developed aesthetic integrity (infused with original soundtracks, symbolic locations, more stylized and detailed mise-en-scène, and more sophisticated cinematography and editing techniques) with similarly melodramatic narratives of fatalistic incidents and significant moral address dispersed by occasional moments of comic relief. Of particular note, due to its commercial success and wide distribution in cinemas and on VCD and extensive critical acclaim, is Kidist Yilma's tragic *yefiker film*, *Rebunni*/*Teacher* [*of moral everyday instruction and traditions*] (2014). The film centers on the relationship between a rich Addis Ababa–based businessman, Leul, and the unassuming, traditionally moral girl-like landowner, Gela. Highlighting the disillusionment of big corporations and the lessons business-minded folk can learn from traditional values of love and family, *Rebunni* explicitly addresses the growing tensions and inequalities experienced in twenty-first-century Ethiopia between society and irresponsible capitalism. Other recent *yefiker films* that focus on an introspection of contemporary Ethiopian society are *Traffikwa*/*The Traffic Policewoman* (Eyerusaleam Kassahun, 2013), which focuses on police corruption and the damaging effects of gossip; *Sené 30* (tenth month in the Ethiopian Calendar which generally falls between June and July) (Fikreyesus Dinberu, 2015), which focuses on drawing parallels between older and more recent notions of romance/love in a story of intergenerational moral exchanges; and *Alsetim*/*I Will Not Give* (Bisrat Mohammed, 2016), focusing on the dichotomy between rural and city life.

The issue of evolutionary genres is also exemplified when taking into account Amharic festival films and their theatrical releases in Ethiopia. Compared to the commercial Amharic cinema, these films are consistently greeted with a cold reception by the majority of Ethiopian cinemagoers. Following the theatrical release of the critically acclaimed *Lamb* (Yared Zeleke, 2015), which was the first Amharic feature to be officially selected in competition at Cannes, Ethiopian audiences responded ambivalently at best (Naod Lemma, interview, Addis Ababa,

March 5, 2016). This ambivalence is shown in the weak box office receipts the film garnered (reflecting the previous year's performance of *Difret* [Zeresenay Berhane Mehari, 2014]) but is also evident in audiences referring to this fictional film as a "documentary" (Naod Lemma, interview, Addis Ababa, March 5, 2016). In fact, after further discussion on the subject of what "documentary" means in Amharic usage (and in the context of contemporary cinema in Ethiopia), it emerges that the term is used by cinemagoers and some producers to describe a film that is aesthetically accomplished but lacks the narrative energy, and crucially the melodrama, of the commercial Amharic films familiar to Ethiopian audiences (Biniyam Tefera, interview, Addis Ababa, March 11, 2016). In effect, then, it seems "documentary" in the Amharic lexicon has come to define certain festival films that screen in Ethiopia as they lack the specific Ethiopian melodramatic imagination and energy of the commercially dominant genres. It is the centrality of the local generic regime in the Ethiopian context, dominated by the *yefiker film* and *assikiñ yefiker film*, that transforms the understanding and definition of a fictional festival film into a documentary.

A generic regime, as understood here, is evolutionary as it is made up of a group of generic categories and determined by the relations they maintain with one another and with foreign genres (and their generic regimes) that inevitably inflect one another. Paradoxically then, "documentary" could be seen as a peculiar genre appellation within the larger generic regime of Amharic fiction films delineated by their presence within Ethiopian cinemas. Through this understanding of generic regimes it is clear that both foreign and local influences affect the commercial Amharic film industry in Ethiopia, as will be discussed in the following section with regard to Bollywood, Hollywood, and also local Ethiopian sources. Hierarchical parameters that determine the prevalence of genres in any one generic regime are formed by a combination of critical acclaim, commercial success, sheer volume of films produced, and their ability to influence other genres. This is evidenced in the success of the previously mentioned *lib anteltay film* and *beteseb film* genres, the latter exemplified by Hermon Hailay's *Yaltasebew*/*Unrevealed* (2013), featuring child actors in prominent roles or whose narrative revolves around the nuclear family. Although touched on lightly here, the exhibition context can also be seen to be influential on the early success of the *yefiker film* genre, resulting in its far-reaching and long-lived effects on the commercial cinema of Ethiopia.

The Concept of *Fiker* (Love) in Amharic Cinema Genres

The ubiquitous use of the term *fiker* in the definition and naming of nearly every type of genre in Amharic filmmaking—at times seemingly interchangeable with English words transliterated into Amharic such as *romans* (romance) or *romantik* (romantic)—conjures the fundamental romantic elements that are a central part of the narrative of most Ethiopian films. The concept of *fiker*, as touched on previously, indicates issues of the heart and signifies deep emotional feelings. Like many concepts in Amharic, multiple interpretations are possible, indicating both romantic carnal desire as well as spiritual and familial nonromantic love. Most commonly modern and traditional secular Amharic music abounds with concepts of love, romance, and heartbreak with the songs of *azmari* (itinerant musicians) particularly known for employing tactfully nuanced double entendres. The ancient and contemporary religious music or *mezmur*, on the other hand, are equally as prevalent but employ love in an entirely devotional and spiritual sense. Love and romance in Amharic cinema is also morally defined, clear-cut, and heavily influenced by the previously mentioned saying, *fiker yashenifal* (love conquers all). *Yefiker films* (both tragic and happy), *assikiñ yefiker films* (and other comedies), and even *lib anteltay film*s almost always resolve through pedagogical denouements underlining family, society, and nation over immoral deeds, corruption, and greed. This coheres with the fact that the didactic role of theater, poetry, literature, and music, with Amharic's status as the national language, has long been emphasized in Ethiopia, enabling the appreciation of these arts as a means of expression but also instruction.

Indeed, the seemingly omnipresent nature of *fiker* in relation to naming Amharic films and their genres is not purely concerned with romance but signifies the excessive emotional tones of the Ethiopian melodramatic imagination. *Fiker* can be translated as "love," "devotion," or "affection" and has roots in the ancient Ge'ez word *afikero* (love). In daily usage, *fiker* has religious and spiritual connotations (as well as embodying romantic notions in the secular sense), and even nationalistic sentiments, as observed in the old term *mefikeré hager* (patriot). Many contextually specific sociopolitical sources have also inflected the meaning of *fiker* with patriotic and nationalistic implications, such as Ethiopia's long history of independence with emperors claiming lineage from the Solomonic dynasty; an entrenched belief that Ethiopian people are chosen by God as cited in biblical passages; pride in defeating the Italian colonial army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896; and the long-standing

popularity of Ethiopian cultural forms (music, prose, poetry, theater, and dance) over foreign cultural imports. From this description, therefore, and the point of view of genre studies, the concept of *fiker* can be seen as a culturally and historically specific rendering of an Ethiopian melodramatic imagination.

The melodramatic imagination in Amharic films is influenced by local popular cultural forms, in particular contemporary and traditional Amharic music, literature, and theater, but also crucially by foreign cultural imports. In fact it was foreign cinema, mainly in the form of Hollywood and Bollywood productions, that became a prominent and influential foreign cultural import when cinema was popularized in the 1930s, a popularity only superseded by the boom in Amharic film production in the early 2000s. It was these foreign films, along with locally inspired societal transformations, that have influenced the nature of popular Amharic films and combined to characterize a contextually specific Ethiopian melodramatic mode inflected by *fiker*.

It is important to note here that an Ethiopian rendering of a melodramatic imagination is distinct from Brooks's (1976) theorization as emerging from the processes of modernization and secularization in Europe in the nineteenth century. Unlike Western Europe, Ethiopia has remained a staunchly sacred society where modernity was introduced in a top-down manner through government reform. The very introduction of cinema in the country (through Emperor Menelik II's personal intervention) embodied the contestation between the sacred and the modern in Ethiopian society with cinema used to legitimize society's sacred beliefs while at the same time seen by others as satanic. But in order to now better understand the influences of Hollywood and Bollywood films and genres on contemporary Amharic cinema and its melodramatic imagination, it is important to explore how foreign cinema was received in Ethiopia. To do this, I will harness accounts from popular Amharic novels of the time, journalistic writings, and accounts by audiences and distributors.

From the 1950s onward, Hollywood romantic dramas, comedies, and adventure films were said to be in high demand by Armenian, Greek, and Italian film distributors in Ethiopia (Warren and Warren 1978, 57). Many references to Hollywood films and actors are made within a multitude of Amharic novels throughout the twentieth century. The most prevalent response to Hollywood films in these novels is a moralistic and didactic one, viewing romantic and social elements in American films as being in conflict with traditions in Ethiopian society, and displaying a particular anxiety around the influences of Hollywood in downtown Addis Ababa and on the

Ethiopian youth. In the novel *Meselal*/*Ladder* by Mengistu Gedamu (1966/1967), the young protagonist El-Tex (whose name alludes to Texas, a setting synonymous with cowboys and westerns) imitates the Hollywood stars in both his mannerisms and dress after frequenting the cinema situated in the *bereha* (the nickname of the area where the red-light district in Addis used to be). El-Tex is depicted as an honest but unpatriotic man who becomes corrupted by his American experiences. Filled with self-importance after returning from studying in America and after marrying an English woman, El-Tex turns his wife into a "ladder" in order to use her wealth and connections to get ahead, with the novel critiquing the way Ethiopians take advantage of foreigners and foreign ideas for their own ends.

A similar image is conjured by the novel *Seteñña Adari*/*Prostitute* (1962), with prostitutes such as "Lete'igzre changing her name to Liz . . . saying it's from the great American cinema actress, Elizabeth Taylor" and "mimicking the lives and looks of actresses" (Inanu 1962, 31). The female narrator whose circumstances have forced her into prostitution also describes the more experienced women having learned English from the cinema. When these women accompany their female friends to the cinema, it is their ability to interpret the films that proves to be "the light in the dark" (Inanu 1962, 32), with experienced moviegoers enlightening their less experienced companions. These novels give a strong sense of the effect that Hollywood films had on people at the time, encouraging "middle-class aspirations" and inspiring cinemagoers "to imagine themselves as international, bourgeois subjects—stylishly dressed, well-spoken, and, most importantly, modern," not unlike the effect that they had on South African audiences of the same era (Dovey and Impey 2010, 60). The cinema is often noted to be particularly popular among groups of young women, both today and in the past, with lessons of love, emancipation of youth, and the modern, cutting-edge fashion styles of Hollywood attracting them (Fantu 2016; Menilik Mered, interview, Addis Ababa, February 11, 2016). However, it was these same ideological themes of Western individualism, consumer capitalism, and raw carnal desire, innate in the ideology of Hollywood's melodramatic imagination, that proved controversial when films were exported to places such as Ethiopia and perceived as propagating forms of moral impoverishment and spiritual desolation.

Where Hollywood films often polarized opinions in Ethiopia, Bollywood films proved successful in drawing together larger and more diverse audiences across generational, ethnic, religious, and class divides (Shah 2007). The Ethiopian filmmaker, writer, and actor Mikael Million states how Bollywood films inspired him

to become involved in making films, particularly referring to the "human and moral messages" the films convey (Mikael Million, interview, Addis Ababa, February 15, 2016). The idea that these foreign Bollywood films invoked the genre term *yefiker film* indicates the close relationship contemporary Amharic films and the contemporary *yefiker film* genre have with Bollywood rather than Hollywood dramas or romantic comedies that are more commonly referred to by their English names.

The theme of love in society, represented by Bollywood films from the 1950s onwards, was dealt with differently from Hollywood films of the same era, positioning the extended family as key to any narrative resolution with youths ultimately convincing older generations of the virtues of marrying for love (Fair 2009). Instead of a flagrant disregard for (or even absence of) parents and the family, as often seen in Hollywood films of the era (of which those starring Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor, Charlton Heston, and Humphrey Bogart are commonly recalled by Ethiopians), Bollywood films shown in Ethiopia resonated with the moral, cultural, and perhaps most importantly, spiritual sensitivities of both Orthodox Christian and Muslim Ethiopia. Despite many Ethiopians not being familiar with Hinduism, the religion was often read as a traditional element in movies as opposed to the "Westernization" and acculturation represented by Hollywood. Major Bollywood themes, such as generational struggles, class divisions, and a changing conception of love (Nandy 1998; Dwyer 2000; Vasudevan 2000), crucially reflected issues experienced in Ethiopian society. As Laura Fair notes when explaining the popularity of Bollywood in Zanzibar: "Indian films addressed global generational tensions, yet resolved them in ways that affirmed local moral codes" (2009, 66). These observations are similar to what Brian Larkin notes in Hausa society where Bollywood is favored over Hollywood as the "images of modernity they [Indian films] offer are mediated through a concern for maintaining traditional social relations and so they run parallel to, similar yet different from, the modernity offered by westernization" (1997, 433).

Typically the core melodramatic mode of Indian films critiqued society through representing reified cultural and religious elements in opposition to the tensions and global desires of India's transition toward modernity (Nandy 1998; Vasudevan 2000; Larkin 2008). Likewise, popular Amharic films display a "melodramatic imagination" similar to that deployed by Bollywood, while their comedic elements feed more off Hollywood-style romantic comedies in order to probe questions in contemporary Ethiopian society. Although the ideology of Hollywood melodrama may not have resonated within Ethiopia to the same extent as Bollywood films,

the concept of melodrama as an underlying mode (or tendency) in cinema finds expression in multiple and various contexts and styles, each asking similar questions but representing specific world views. By discussing the idea of the melodramatic imagination in different contexts, interesting similarities arise in the structure and centrality of melodrama to cinema across the globe, with localized ideologies resonating from similar narrative structures focusing on moral oppositions, high emotion, and sensational events. In this sense, then, melodrama becomes a form that goes "beyond genre" in the reified, conventional sense, representing the underpinnings of commercially oriented cinema (L. Thomas 2009).

Conclusion

As cinematic genres manifest themselves in different ways in different places, pertaining to different functions and varying definitions, instead of seeking universal archetypes, notions of genre can be better apprehended when their meaning and purpose are considered in context. Here, the discussion on the influence of the idea of the Ethiopian melodramatic imagination on commercial cinema in Ethiopia has offered new ways of perceiving local genres in context. The comparison with other global melodramatic forms, seemingly universal in structure yet projecting culturally specific ideologies, helps identify the influences of foreign cinema in Ethiopia but also how local cultural and historical developments have inflected an Ethiopian melodramatic imagination infused with *fiker*.

To this end, this chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of how the genres of commercial cinema operate in the Ethiopian context, with a particular focus on the *yefiker film* and *assikiñ yefiker film* genres. It has also been made clear that generic regimes and genres have multiple interpretations and forms and are organized vis-à-vis a logic inherent within their particular cinematic context in which foreign (English in this case) normality and academic critical assertions should be questioned. Instead of measuring each generic regime against the classic Hollywood model, it is necessary to investigate the very manifestation, role, and purpose of cinematic genres in each locale, leading to more refined and less restrictive understandings of genre in cinema. Indeed, in order to apprehend the very concept of "genre" or "a film's type" it is necessary to explore from where generic systems emerge (both local and foreign sources), their ideological and social purposes, as well as their cinematic credentials.

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Women's Participation in Ethiopian Cinema

Eyerusaleam Kassahun

History is often presented as being linear and one-sided, often overlooking key issues related to a certain historical phenomenon. Research into and around cinematic history has developed dynamically over the century, but studies that have been conducted on the participation and contribution of women are limited. On Ethiopian cinema, very few researches have been conducted. Scholarly studies from outside of the country include research by Alessandro Jedlowski (2015), Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2003), and Michael W. Thomas (2015), and Ethiopian contributions include work by Hailu Kebede (1986), Fantahun Engida (1985), and Fikadu Limenih (2013). But none of these solely focuses on the significant contributions of female filmmakers and film professionals, an area this chapter seeks to bring to the fore.

It is a commonly held belief among cultural commentators in Ethiopia that men dominate the Ethiopian film industry, but in most cases, starting from the first film production in the country and continuing to the present day, women have been very much active and continue to contribute in key areas to the dynamic and fast-growing nature of film productions in Ethiopia. The most significant achievements made by female filmmakers are in the areas of directing, editing, and distribution. Two of the early narrative movies, *Behiywet Zuriya*/*Around Life*

(Birhanu Shibiru, 1989) and *Aster* (Solomon Bekele Weya, 1991/1992), and many documentaries were edited by the first female film editor in the country, Tamir Abera. And, in 2002, when digital films began being screened in cinemas, again a female director, Helen Tadesse, was a pioneer with the screening of her film, *Yeberedow Zemen*/*The Ice Age* in cinema halls.

Nowadays, many films are being produced in Ethiopia, but for almost all local films, except a select few, reaching the international audience is beyond their remit. Even though achieving international acclaim is difficult and not sought after by all, the female filmmaker Hermon Hailay and her film *Yefiker Wagaw*/*The Price of Love* (2015) have been the most recent to tour international film festivals. In fact to date, this film has participated in thirty film festivals and won thirteen awards (Hermon Hailay, interview, Addis Ababa, May 23, 2016). In Ethiopian film history, a little known fact is that the first person to introduce the broadcasting of Amharic movies on television was the female producer Feven Tadesse. But because of the lack of adequate attention to the participation of female filmmakers, there is little acknowledgement afforded to those female leaders who did a lot to develop cinema in Ethiopia. A major concern of this chapter, then, is to disclose the value and capacity of women in changing the Ethiopian film industry in every professional aspect of filmmaking in the country.

This chapter presents the position of women filmmakers by analyzing their role and by interpreting their films. All the data has been collected through different mechanisms, utilizing written archives such as magazines and newspapers, observing closely the local film movement, and interviewing filmmakers. The chapter is divided into four sections: the first section traces the role of theater in facilitating female filmmakers for work in cinema; the second and the third sections focus on the central themes of Ethiopian female filmmakers and the images of female characters in their films; the fourth section reveals the participation of entrepreneurial women in the film business. The chapter ultimately seeks to offer greater exposure to the role and efforts of women filmmakers in the development of film production in Ethiopia.

The Role of Theater in Facilitating Female Filmmakers

Many filmmakers whose films have achieved popular acclaim in Ethiopia come from theater or radio backgrounds. In the Ethiopian art movement, working in

television, film, theater, radio, writing, directing, producing, and acting are not so distinct professionally with many people crossing freely into various and multiple artistic ventures. An individual may do all of these things or may use the success of one sector to propel their career in their chosen field. From all other artistic fields in Ethiopia, theater often plays a pivotal role as a hotbed of emerging talent and as a facilitator into the film industry in Ethiopia. If we look closely, women are also a key part of the particular history of this artistic movement.

The first Amharic movie, *Hirut, abatwa manew?*/*Hirut, Who Is Her Father?* (1964), written by Ilala Ibsa and directed by Lambros Jokaris, cast some actors and actresses with plenty of stage experiences in major roles. One of the leading roles was performed by Askale Ameneshewa who had also previously acted in many stage plays. In fact, before Askale, an actress named Selamawit Gebreselassie was requested to appear in the production of a movie project that had the working title *Salsawe Dawit*/*King David III* and was written by Mekonnen Endalkachew in 1950 (Ashagrie 2012). Unfortunately, after Selamawit rehearsed the script for months, the film was halted due to financial issues.

Hirut, abatwa manew? was premiered at the Ethiopian National Theater (where most films are still premiered) in the presence of Emperor Haile Selassie. Askale recalls the premiere of *Hirut* as follows: "the emperor gave an order to bring me to his palace. After commenting on the content raised in the movie, he gave me 200 birr and a small gold cross as a reward"; she also mentions that this was the only remuneration she got from her role in the film (Askale Ameneshewa, interview, Addis Ababa, January 12, 2015). Interestingly, Askale cannot read or write so her partners used to read her the dialogue for the stage plays and films she appeared in. The well-known stage and screen actor Debebe Eshetu recalls her extraordinary ability to memorize dialogue when explaining: "after you read her the dialogue for the first time, she would ask you to read it again, and that was enough for her to remember all the dialogue in a play" (Debebe Eshetu, interview, Addis Ababa, March 7, 2016). The actress who played the lead role of Hirut, Abebech Ejegu, became an instant celebrity whose performance was highly rated by many commentators (Milkias, 2011), but she never appeared in any movie after *Hirut*.

Toward the end of Haile Selassie's reign, many foreign-made films featured Ethiopian actors with many Ethiopian theater and music professionals taking on minor roles in the few films shot on location in Ethiopia. In addition to the popular stage actors and more well-known film performances of Debebe Eshetu, there were actresses, too, who acted in those foreign movies. Elleni Mekuria, who

was a journalist and who organized school theater productions with the popular director Abate Mekuria, acted a small part in *Una stagione all'inferno*/*A Season in Hell* (Nelo Risi, 1970), made by Italian filmmakers. The other actresses to feature in films were Asnakech Worku, a popular singer and actress who played around forty stage plays, and Telela Kebede, both of whom featured in *Ferenj*/*European Foreigner* (director unknown, 1990/1991). Almaz Haile, who worked at the Ethiopian National Theater as an actress and did the makeup of many performances backstage, also participated as a makeup artist in this film. Zenebech Tadesse, another actress who had a theater and music background, portrayed the controversial prostitute character in *Shaft in Africa* (John Guillermin, 1973). When this film was premiered in the presence of Emperor Haile Selassie at the Ethiopian National Theater, the emperor walked out upon seeing Zenebech's scene as he was outraged at the image of an Ethiopian actress semi-naked on screen (Debebe Eshetu, interview, Addis Ababa, March 7, 2016).

During the Derg era, only two Amharic narrative films were produced, *Behiywet Zuriya* and *Aster*; both of these films centered on the lives of female protagonists, which opened the door to new aspiring actresses. When *Behiywet Zuriya* started scouting for actors and actresses, the director of the film, Birhanu Shibiru, went to Addis Ababa University's Department of Theater Arts to host auditions. This is where and when educated actors started coming into the film industry. Elsabet Melaku gained her first film acting experience through this opportunity as it was during her time as a third year student in the same department. Elsabet had performed in many theater productions at the school and in different theater halls around Addis, but it was her role in this film that acquainted her to the cinemagoing public in 1989. She took a supporting role in the film with Jemanesh Solomon, her schoolmate, before also performing in *Aster*. After gaining these film experiences, she focused on theater acting, writing, and stage management, only returning to cinema in 2013, performing the lead role in the critically acclaimed film *Lomi Shita*/*Scent of Lemon* (Abraham Gezahegn). The film won a lot of awards in different Ethiopian film festivals with Elsabet winning in the category of best actress for that year at both the Ethiopian International Film Festival and the Colors of the Nile International Film Festival.

Besides selecting actresses for films it produced, the state-run Ethiopian Film Corporation (the sole producer of films during the Derg era) also facilitated and encouraged women to take part in other departments of film production. So, in order to integrate women into different departments, selected women were granted

scholarships to train in technical specializations abroad. Tamir Abera was one of the individuals who was afforded this opportunity. She is considered the first female film editor in Ethiopia after she attended her training in film editing in Kenya for two years. Interestingly, Tamir also had a theater background. Before she joined the film corporation, she completed two years training in acting, directing, makeup, and stage craft from the school of drama that was established under the guidance of the Ethiopian National Theater. Among the most significant films Tamir edited are *Aster* and *Behiywet Zuriya* as well as many documentaries produced during the Derg regime.

Women with a background in theater also started taking multiple roles in a single film as was the case after Kidist Bayeliñ wrote, performed in, directed, and produced the movie *Hiywet Indewaza*/*Life as a Mockery* (1998), in VHS format. Among a raft of up-and-coming women interested in film production during this time was Aster Bedane, another graduate of the Addis Ababa University's theater department, who continued this trend and even took on editing too. She edited both of her feature-length narrative movies, *Firtuna*/*Fate* (2008) and *Dibibikosh*/*Hide and Seek* (Aster Bedane, 2012). She commenced her career in Birhanu Shibiru's film *Yemot Fiker*/*Love of Death* (1996/1997) as an actor and has since acted in more than seven movies. Aster tries to enhance her skill in filmmaking and took short-term training abroad for two months. She also participates in film festivals, one held in Burkina Faso (FESPACO) and another in France (Nantes Film Festival) with her short film "Phenomena" (Aster Bedane, interview, Addis Ababa, May 6, 2016).

Aster has proven her versatility as she has deployed her skills in different mediums including writing five children's books and being host of a radio program called *Fontenina* at Fana FM 98.1 radio station. This diversification into other artistic mediums as well as juggling multiple roles in films, as stated previously, is not uncommon in Ethiopia. A well-known film director, Alemtsehay Bekele, is also an example of this. Like Aster, Alemtsehay moves freely in different mediums. She started her career by directing a popular TV serial drama titled *Fozia*. She also directed plenty of stage and film productions besides acting in different films, theater productions, and radio productions made by other professionals.

When cinemas were permitted to screen digital films in 2002, Helen Tadessa's film *Yeberedow Zemen* became one of the first to be screened in Ethiopia (Jedlowski 2015). The film was intended to be a TV sitcom and so was made in the format of four thirty-minute-long episodes that were then edited together for cinema exhibition (Thomas 2015). Tilahun Gugsa, owner of the company that financed the production,

says that there were many complaints from the audience because of the different ideas raised in each episode. He also says *Yeberedow Zemen* was the foundation for *Betoch*, the first Ethiopian sitcom that has been on air since 2013 (Tilahun Gugsa, interview, Addis Ababa, May 8, 2016). The film was also shown in auditoriums and cinema halls in different regions of Ethiopia. In 2006 Helen directed her second movie, *Sara*. This film was about a girl called Sara who lost her mother and was raped by her stepfather at the age of seven. The man kept her as his wife at home by force until she told her grandparents that he sexually abused her. The story ends with the man being legally tried for all the crimes he committed. As did the other women filmmakers mentioned in this section, Helen also emerged from a background in theater when she took part in Tewedros Theater and music clubs and at Ras Theater.

Even film professionals who have become more strictly focused on working within the film industry, such as Birtukan Befikadu, have their roots in theater. Birtukan joined the film industry around 2006. In her home town of Debre Birhan she participated in an amateur dramatics club, then after moving to Addis she enrolled in Holy Land Art Academy to study theater. It was here where she got her first chance to participate in movies when she got cast as a supporting character in *Hermela* (Yonas Birhane Mewa, 2005). After a year, Birhanu Nigussie, her teacher at Holy Land Academy, opted for her to play the major role in his film *Fiker ena Dance*/*Love and Dance* (2006).

So far, Birtukan has received two awards for her performances. The first was given to her at the fourth Ethiopian International Film Festival for best actress in a leading role for her portrayal of the eponymous character in *Dezdemona* (Monyazewal Endeshaw, 2009). The other, also for best actress, came in 2014 and was awarded by the Colors of the Nile International Film Festival for her lead role as the eponymous hero in *Nishan* (2013), a film she cowrote and coproduced with her husband Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn. Birtukan has become a committed film actress and believes that as an actress one must always be ready to do whatever the character demands. In *Yigbagn*/*Appeal* (2012), a film adapted by Henok Ayele from an Amharic stage play of the same name, she shaved her head for the sake of the character that she played. In an interview, Birtukan recalls this film as a unique experience because of her attachment with the story and her character who deals with questions of euthanasia in the face of an aggressive cancer. Having experienced how cancer can affect loved ones, she says, "I know how it changes, so I did not want to lie to myself and the audience so I completely cut off my hair to play that

character and this is my belief about acting" (Birtukan Befikadu, interview, Addis Ababa, July 1, 2016). It can be said that Birtukan has been one of the leading actresses in the film industry who has helped create a more professional and respected atmosphere around her career choice. She is also highly selective and thorough in her choice of roles, which has enabled her to give more calculated performances and in return earn more respect from industry personnel and cinemagoers alike. The main reasons for her to play only for cinema are, first, she does not get the opportunity to take part in other mediums and, second, that she believes some stage plays she was asked to play were not suited to her.

Central Themes of Female Filmmakers

Ethiopia has a rich history with diverse narrative folklores that deserve to be discovered through the medium. However, according to the Addis Ababa Culture and Tourism Bureau, which compiles data on the film industry, most movies instead tend to be romantic comedy and romantic melodrama, based around themes of romantic love. One of the reasons for producing movies under these genres is in order to make money. In the highly commercialized environment of the Ethiopia film industry there is an emerging generation of female filmmakers who have managed to use romance and other generic platforms to engage with wider social, cultural, and political issues.

Starting from the years of the VHS format video films until now, women have been commenting on issues such as migration, mental health, identity, displacement, prostitution, and pedophilia. The predigital-era film *Hiywet Indewaza* (1998) by Kidist Bayeliñ was one of the earliest films to focus on migration. The film is about four female friends who go to an Arab country hoping to change their lives. Unfortunately their story ends up following a downward trajectory as the film structures its narrative on the suffering of these four friends as they come face-to-face with physical abuse and even death, cut off from the relative advantages they had in Ethiopia. The film is a stark warning of the risks and crimes committed against women who pursue the life of an economic migrant abroad. Since 2015, this same idea can still be seen as a central theme in many films but in particular the movie *Enkopa* (2016), directed by Alemtsehay Bekele, as it draws upon the real-life experiences of its writer and producer, Yodit Getachew (Alemtsehay Bekele, interview, Addis Ababa, June 6, 2016). This film reveals many problems

faced by migrants in their journey abroad and focuses on the specific issues she faced in her five years stuck in transit in Sudan. This was Yodit's first foray into the film industry in Ethiopia with the film being nominated at the tenth Ethiopian International Film Festival in the category of best screen play for her script, for best directing (Alemtsehay Bekele), best cinematography (Abraham Demissie), and best film (Yodit Getachew).

Another popular theme in movies from 2015 and 2016 in Ethiopia has been stories that focus on characters with mental health issues, and one of the most successful movies to deal with the theme is *Meba* (2015) by one of the most prolific filmmakers of her time, Kidist Yilma. The film is set in a hospital for patients with mental illnesses, portraying a number of characters with a variety of mental disorders, yet it also systematically criticizes the kinds of treatments the patients receive by such institutions. The main character, Meba, is one of the inpatients who is portrayed as a messiah-like figure, helping others at any cost. This film in particular sparked debates in Ethiopia around assumptions of mental illness in the country and how these issues are understood in society. As well as *Meba*, Kidist's recent films have told stories that provoke emotional responses from her audience and that engage with local issues. Kidist strongly believes that a film should reflect the real-life concerns of the society and that film is not purely to fantasize or about escapism. Kidist stipulates that the thing she worries most about when making a film is making the audience emotionally engaged with the central idea/theme and character. She states that through this she intends filmgoers to accept and take her themes and characters into their lives and beyond the emotional engagement that she creates on-screen. This for her is the ultimate reward, beyond the appreciation she gets from the audience. She recalls a particular encounter to explain this point:

> I was shooting another movie that involved the actor who played Meba. In the movie, the actor was playing a soldier who is totally different from Meba and yet a passer-by saw this actor and hugged him, telling him that he is a special person who sacrifices himself to others, believing his on-screen persona to be true. After a while, when we started shooting, the same passer-by saw the actor wearing a soldier's uniform and said, "take off those cloths. You are not such a person." For me, this scene means a lot. I want to see people who sympathize with the character Meba and who want to be like him. This is my accomplishment as a filmmaker. (Kidist Yilma, interview, Addis Ababa, June 30, 2016)

Identity and displacement also appear as central concerns to some female filmmakers. In Hermon Hailay's feature debut, *Balageru*/*The Country Man* (2012), these two major themes are explored through the experiences of the two male protagonists, farmers who win the lottery and come to the capital Addis Ababa from their rural home only to come across unforeseen obstacles in an unfamiliar and at times inhospitable urban environment. The camera frames older Ethiopian traditions that remain very popular and functional in the rural areas of Ethiopia and juxtaposes these with influences from outside cultures that have manifested themselves on people who live in Addis Ababa. Examples of these are evident in scenes such as showing public kissing between sexual partners, and where the protagonists mistake a man for a woman due to his hair style and ear studs, all highlighting a dichotomy between rural and urban lifestyles in Ethiopia. *Balageru*'s critical acclaim is mirrored in it being placed as the third best film at the fourth festival that Maverick Films held in Dire Dawa in 2016. Hermon reflects Kidist's sentiments as she states that for her "film is a means of self-expression" and that she makes movies when she has something to say to others and when she feels moved by something (Hermon Hailay, interview, Addis Ababa, May 23, 2016).

Hermon's third movie, *Yefiker Wagaw*, brings into focus the representation of prostitution in Ethiopia with Hermon focusing on the humanity of prostitutes (Thomas 2016). Hermon mentions that when she first came to Addis from her hometown Dire Dawa, she was looking to set up a small business in order for her to make a living. She decided to sell cosmetics and some beauty materials in a part of Addis called Chichinia, as it has become a place where prostitutes live and operate. She made friends there and got close to the prostitutes who came to her shop to buy cosmetics. It was during her time there that she found the insight to write about the experiences of prostitutes who also featured as characters who offered sanctuary to the rural protagonists in *Balageru*. In *Yefiker Wagaw* Hermon went a step further by centering the narrative on a taxi driver and his relationship with prostitution (both being born to and then falling in love with a prostitute). Hermon portrays the prostitute as a supportive character striving to escape her life and unsavory work in order to build a respectable life with her newfound love. Showing a more human and sensitive side to prostitution in Ethiopia can be problematic due to the negative and stereotypical view many people hold of the work. But women filmmakers like Hermon confront the situation by using cinema as a means to influence and change public opinion on specific social issues. Hermon states:

> Our culture does not give much chance to stand against things that are unjust and entrenched within society. I have opposed these unjust norms of society since childhood, but now film has given me a means through which I can voice my views. So in order to get the satisfaction that I want, I tell stories through that medium. Cinema is not something that only creates laughter, tears, or ephemeral emotions but is something so much more than that. (Hermon Hailay, interview, Addis Ababa, May 23, 2016)

Another sensitive social issue to have been raised by a female filmmaker, Mekdes Tsegaye, and that has only been approached in Ethiopia by the previously mentioned film, *Sara*, is the crime of pedophilia in the film *Yeadam Gemena*/*The Secret of Adam* (2011). This was her first experience directing a film and a risky project as Mekdes focused her story on an issue very rarely mentioned or even acknowledged in Ethiopian society. Besides directing, she also wrote, produced, and played the lead female role in the film. The film is about a romance between a couple who are close to a reputable patriarchal figure who turns out to be a pedophile after the discovery of a raped boy. Even though the pedophile (Manyazewal) committed many crimes, the film uncovers all these crimes almost at the end of the second act of the film. Until then, it leads the viewers by giving very subtle visual and audio indications about Manyazewal's deeds. One of Manyazewal's victims who tries to kill the perpetrator in the very first scene of the film finally gets revenge by shooting the pedophile, bringing the film to a striking conclusion. Mekdes tells of how she was desperately moved upon her discovery of such stories in Ethiopia, saying, "when I conducted research into the area there were around forty-three pending cases in the court. I know that people might discuss such issues clandestinely, but as a filmmaker I decided to uncover the secrecy surrounding it" (Mekdes Tsegaye, interview, Addis Ababa, June 7, 2016). She also recalls that most of her friends and fellow filmmakers advised her not to make the film, suggesting that it would not make a profit and that the idea would not be welcomed by viewers. Her goal, however, was not about making money but to evoke discussions and raise the general awareness of such issues. Unexpectedly to many, the movie was generally well received (Mekdes Tsegaye, interview, Addis Ababa, June 7, 2016).

Images of Women in Women's Film

It is important but also difficult to reflect on the presentation of women in films produced in a patriarchal society such as Ethiopia. But since filmmaking is an attempt to narrate human behavior and experiences, exploring the multifaceted and dynamic portrayal of women in films is important as it has yet to be studied in depth in the Ethiopian context. Of course there are representations of women in films by men, and these can be most revealing, but as this chapter is primarily concerned with the participation of women in film, the focus here will be on how female filmmakers see and present female characters on the big screen.

In the nascent Ethiopian film industry, some of the films directed by both men and women homogenize and depict women as one-dimensional characters who are keen to gossip about money, prosperity, and clothes with these characters often dependent on and unfaithful to their beloved ones. But there are many filmmakers of both genders who do try to reveal the merits of and complexity of the human condition through women characters.

Female filmmakers like Kidist Yilma, Alemtsehay Bekele, Hermon Hailay, Roman Befikadu, and Aster Bedane often portray women in their movies as complex characters who act independently on their own intuition, which is often refreshing when compared to the more one-dimensional representations of women characters in many popular comedy films. Alemtsehay mentions that as a female film director, she is always conscious about the portrayal of women in films that she is involved with. She makes it clear that she wants to see females not through an objectifying gaze, which some Ethiopian directors can be guilty of, but rather in a way that women see themselves. In her recent theater production *Wend Ayigebam*/*No Place for Men*, a stage play that features only female characters, and in most of her movies female protagonists are portrayed as independent and strong women. Aster is similarly known for having strong women characters in her films and also believes that cinema is a wonderful weapon for women filmmakers to combat misogyny in Ethiopian society. She uses it as a means to express women and their world. In both her feature-length films *Firtuna* and *Dibibikosh* she portrays women as complex and rounded characters who are capable and independent individuals concerned with traditional Ethiopian expectations of how women should behave.

Roman Befikadu, another female filmmaker of significance, had no experience of watching Ethiopian movies until she was cajoled by Alemtsehay to play the leading role in the film *Kistet*/*An Occurrence* in 2007. Through this process she

realized cinema's power, and so she too forayed into the industry, using cinema to communicate issues that are highly relatable for women. "Most scriptwriters, directors, and producers are men, and I do not think female beliefs, interests, emotions, and attitudes are expressed well in their movies. Most of the time men filmmakers represent women in a way that they believe they know women, but they lose us. On the contrary, my movies do the opposite" (Roman Befikadu, interview, Addis Ababa, May 15, 2015). As a filmmaker who has both local and international experience, she demonstrates how women should be critical when they are living under existing norms and rules in their culture. She seems to have moderate approaches toward the representation of women in cinema. She does not position herself as a filmmaker who always portrays the positive and strong part of women just for the sake of making them positive and strong. Rather, she reveals the position of women in society by showing weaknesses too.

In her film *City Boyz* (2012), she makes an oppositional statement about the cultural identity of Ethiopian women. She clearly shows that women are capable of managing all the finances for a family, which is supposedly a man's role in Ethiopia. In addition, being a single mother is not appreciated in Ethiopian culture; the leading character of the movie, however, is portrayed as a single, capable, and wealthy mother who takes care of her son diligently. Besides her financial capacity, the female character's educational credentials are explored through different scenes showing her as an engineer who runs her own company. Roman enhances this character's merit by comparing her with two men who are portrayed in the movie as dependent city boys who want to solve their financial problems and run their lives by engaging in sexual relationships with older wealthy women, until one of the city boys falls in love with the leading character and the story turns out to be a romance between this couple.

Roman also comments on women who willfully ignore the cultural expectation of their role in Ethiopian society. In *Adinas* (Henok Ayele, 2015) she plays an intellectual woman (Elleni) who is educated abroad and comes back to Ethiopia to run her father's leather company. Roman portrays a complex woman character who wants to transfer the orderly and timely work experience that she got abroad onto one of the rural areas in Ethiopia without understanding the culture of the society. The film, however, focuses on the struggle Elleni is confronted with as she attempts this miscalculated social experiment. The character ends up learning how to live in the rural society by compromising the norms that she developed abroad. She also develops her role in this culture as a woman and as a business

person. Even in *Baletaxiw*/*The Taxi Driver* (Yonas Birhane Mewa, 2009), within the narrative of a simple love story, Roman shows how a woman's life can be unfairly closely scrutinized in the larger cultural context of Ethiopia. The protagonist, played by Roman, is an independent woman who establishes a business, but the film shows how making money alone is not the only route to a fulfilling life for Ethiopian women. Instead, through this character, the film reveals the society's unconstructive attitude toward single women.

Another major movie that portrays complex depictions of women is *Rebunni*/*Teacher* (2014), directed by Kidist Yilma. The film shows a strong young woman (Adey) who unbeknown to the audience lives with cancer but appears throughout the film as a very happy character valuing life with her family. She fights to protect her grandfather's land from urban developers while teaching corporate hotshots different meanings of social responsibility. In the film's closing scenes the strongest philosophical thoughts of culture and identity are expressed through a montage of flashbacks of the protagonist's dialogues and actions that are then shown to be taken up and articulated by others.

The next film Kidist released was *Keletat*/*Once Upon a Time* (2016). This is a movie predominantly made by a group of women who projected their strength as female filmmakers onto the story and onto their audience. The idea of producing this particular film came from the female producer, Etsehiwot Abebe, who was a fashion model and later became an actress. Kidist wrote a script about two young women who get equal grades in their pre university exam, enabling them to join university. Although these girls are from different economic and social positions, the film plots each of their narratives simultaneously, weaving in and out of both characters' lives. The film starts by showing these two young women interacting with their families. The first character, Biruktawit, however, is unable to join university even though she has the highest exam grade because she discovers she is pregnant. Then the movie cuts to the other character, Simiret, who is from another corner of life, as she celebrates her results with her father and mother. As the narrative progresses, Biruktawit tries to cope with her baby boy while Simiret, now at university, unexpectedly gets raped by a popular student and also falls pregnant. Unfortunately Biruktawit loses her baby boy while Simiret, in the other narrative strand, tries to abort her pregnancy but fails and instead shortly afterward gives birth. This is where the connection between Biruktawit and Simiret begins. Simiret accidentally puts her baby boy in the grave of Biruktawit's son and Biruktawit takes the baby home as a gift of God and raises him. Biruktawit is a strong woman who is

portrayed in a way that reflects the typical and expected social norms of Ethiopian women as she is virtuous and responsible for her family at large and sacrifices much for the life of her children. But the conflict between Biruktawit and Simiret starts when the real mother (Simiret), who succeeds in achieving the top position in her career and becomes a woman who sets her own agenda rather than waiting for a man to dictate, comes to know that the baby is hers and wants to take him away from Biruktawit. The film portrays both female characters as very strong, positive, and complex people but in different ways. Both women experience high and low points throughout the film and learn a lot from each other and achieve happiness in different ways, rather than showing one woman worse off than the other in the end.

However, not all representations of women characters by female filmmakers are entirely positive as Hermon Hailay shows in *Yaltasebew*/*Unrevealed* (2013), which presents a female character in a way that is unusual compared to other Ethiopian films. *Yaltasebew* opens with a scene showing the daily struggles of a street boy named Abush with his voice heard narrating his hardships in the opening sequence that depicts the abuse he suffers at the hands of his mother and from society. His mother forces him to beg for money while she drinks alcohol on the street. When the two quarrel after Abush gets the money he begged for taken by another street boy she tells him to leave her. After he is left by himself he cleverly wins the sympathy of two male friends who live and work together. They take him home and start to care for him as if he were their own child only for the mother to come back in search of Abush.

What Hermon expresses here is that women, like men, can be abusive parents and susceptible to addiction and neglectfulness. She does not want to consider herself a filmmaker who shows only the positive aspects of women. In fact Hermon often states that she draws upon real people that she knows in order to inspire her complex characters. Hermon states, "People do not want to think about mothers who are bad to their children but it is difficult to conclude that all mothers are good. My mother does not have a place in my life. She failed in her responsibility as my mother. So I know these kinds of mothers" (Hermon Hailay, interview, Addis Ababa, May 23, 2016).

The complexity of Hermon's female characters are none more evident than in her representation of the prostitute Fere in *Yefiker Wagaw* as she deliberately avoids objectifying the character's sexuality unlike the treatment of female characters in some films that seem to purely look at women from the point of view of their sex, having them wear short skirts and tight tops with close-ups of legs, breasts,

and backsides in clubs. Hermon, however, consciously shows Fere in a way that blocks the audience's mind to the sexual nature of her profession as she wears a baggy dress that does not expose or cling to her figure. In a scene in which a man demands sex with her in the back of a taxi we do not see the sexual acts between them, but we get an awkward still shot of the taxi as it shakes violently from side to side with the next sequence portraying a close-up of Fere as tears silently sully her cheeks. In another scene where she is raped by the boss of an illegal trafficking business, the painful screams and aggressive thuds are all we hear as the camera lingers outside the room with its focus on the closed door. These two particular scenes in the movie clearly show the director's attitude toward the objectification of females by sexual predators.

Entrepreneur Female Filmmakers

Even though since 2002 over eight hundred films have been produced in Ethiopia, the absence of a centralized film economy and a lack of attention given to film by government makes film financing particularly challenging in Ethiopia. Because of these problems, individual financing usually dictates the business of producing a film in Ethiopia. There are, however, plenty of women who are involved in the creative aspects of commercial filmmaking in Ethiopia. The active participation of women in film financing and in creating alternative distribution mechanisms is visible today with females being present in the business side of film since the 1990s, with Rukiya Ahmed considered one of the first female producers who joined the film industry with the early video film *Tsetset*/*Remorse* (Tesfaye Sinke, 1990/1991). This film was first premiered in 1990/1991 at the Hilton Hotel Addis Ababa and screened only once after in Ethiopia at Addis Ababa Municipality Theater before it was screened abroad in 1993/1994. Since 2002, the infant film movement has grown into a multi thousand-birr creative industry. In these booming times filmmakers produce, on average, a film per week, and entrepreneur females occupy considerable positions of power and influence.

Mentioned earlier for her acting, Roman Befikadu started producing movies in 2009 after making some money abroad and deciding to invest in various business ventures in Ethiopia. She has produced three feature movies, namely *Baletaxiw*, *City Boyz*, and *Adinas*. Producing was not the only role she took in the filmmaking process. She is credited as coscreenwriter with others, and she also plays the leading

roles in all the movies she has produced. She says of this, "I have an excessive desire of playing the major character in a story. In *Adinas*, the director challenged me not to take the role so I asked him to find the perfect actress but it was hard because I portrayed the female character so aptly" (Roman Befikadu, interview, Addis Ababa, May 15, 2016). Like Roman, in many other movies produced by women, those producers often play the main characters of their films. Roman believes that staying in the film industry gets her greater recognition and puts the filmmakers in the public spotlight. Besides, for her at least, it seems to have made her a comfortable living.

The other figure who is similar to Roman, in that she finances, produces, and often performs the lead roles in her films, is Mekdes Tsegaye. Also like Roman, she started participating in the cinema industry when she came back to Ethiopia after making some money abroad and earning a degree in international business at Berkeley College, a business school in New York. When she got back to Ethiopia (after being away for five years) she set up a company called Mekdi Production. She worked part-time as a model in the United States, and although this was not her dream she says it gave her the experience and confidence to express characters that she played in front of the camera. She financed and produced her first movie, *Tisisir*/*Interrelationship* (2010), which was directed by Yonas Birhane Mewa. Mekdes wrote the script while she was living in the United States, and like Roman, she took the leading role in the film. The second movie she produced was the aforementioned *Yeadam Gemena* that she directed as well as produced, wrote, and played a leading role in. She also took a leading role in the third movie she produced, *Zeraff* (Naod Gashew, 2011), which she neither directed nor wrote.

After *Zeraff*, Mekdes turned her attention to television. She had a talk show that was broadcast every week on Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS) television and ran for roughly two years. On the show, in which she was the host, she attempted to deal with different social issues and interviewed different individuals from various professions. According to her own explanation, the talk show dragged her down a lot and took so much of her time that she barely had time to make movies. Using her business savvy she was able to negotiate with the station to stop the talk show and instead changed her contract to produce a television serial drama *Mogachochu*/*The Resistant*. This serial drama has been broadcast on EBS television once per week for almost two and half years. Mekdes also participates in this serial drama, playing the lead role and directing some of the episodes.

Mekdes Bekele is another prominent female producer who has made around eleven movies so far. Her first movie, *Yeberha Abeboch*/*Desert Flowers*, was produced

by her and premiered in a hotel, but due to a disagreement between her and the editor, the film was not commercially released. A year after this, she produced a film about the Ethiopian Airlines plane that crash-landed in the Comoros after being hijacked. The film was entitled *Comoros* (Abreham Kenaw, 2008), and she says, "I was lucky to have the captain of the flight at the premiere" (Mekdes Bekele, interview, Addis Ababa, July 25, 2016). This film opened many doors for her and earned a good profit at the box office. As she says, this film was her masterpiece and has changed the course of her professional journey in film for the better.

Mekdes Bekele is also writer, producer, director, and played a role in the movie *Yesetoch Guday*/*Women's Affair* (2012). Mekdes not only produces her movies on a relatively high budget, but she is also known for encouraging her crew and cast by giving presents. When *Yesetoch Guday* was premiered at the National Theater, for example, she gave a car to the actress who played the leading role in the film. Another quirk of her business acumen in film was that she often collaborated with different institutions and individuals. For example, *Yenes Adam*/*Where Is My Adam* (2014) was cofinanced by Edna Mall Cinema.

It is often observed that there are popular and successful films in the world in which the producer takes on multiple tasks including playing the leading character. But in the Ethiopian context, filmmakers produce movies with fewer preproduction preparations and have very limited training. This clearly has a big impact on the quality of film production when individual female filmmakers try to do multiple things at the same time. It seems complex to argue against the multitasking female filmmakers in Ethiopia, for Ethiopian filmmakers of both genders face many problems as it is still an infant industry. But to develop the film industry as well as the filmmakers' potential, it is important to consider each film's technical and artistic quality.

These producers get their money back in different ways. The first and primary way of gaining revenue is from box office receipts at cinemas. Currently, Ethiopia has more than fifty private and government-owned cinema houses only in the capital, but out of all these cinemas, only the Eyoha chain of two cinemas are female owned, by Ayu Alemu. Ayu surveyed different Ethiopian cinema halls before she opened hers. Her intention was not only to open a cinema for the sake of making money but also to contribute something to the film industry. She says that she has faced plenty of problems since 2012 but also mentions that these issues have nothing to do with her gender. One of the problems at the beginning was a shortage of movies to screen in her cinema, and she planned to produce her own films in order to

solve this problem but this also proved a difficulty for her. She learned that giving filmmakers warm welcomes and great hospitality when they screened their films was a way to become better respected by the industry professionals who began to look upon her more favorably. So Ayu focused on creating a better atmosphere and improving the infrastructure in her cinemas as she strongly believes that her job is to create a good space for filmmakers and filmgoers to better appreciate Ethiopian cinema (Ayu Alemu, interview, Addis Ababa, June 23, 2016). In 2015, one of the marketing strategies her cinema deployed was to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Ethiopian cinema for two months. During this celebration the cinema also gave awards to seven movies and some professionals who were regarded as pioneers in Ethiopian movies including the previously mentioned Askale Ameneshewa. In the future, Ayu aims to expand her business by increasing the number of cinema halls operated by her company.

Another means for producers to get their money back, after films had their theatrical runs, is to distribute their movies on video CD (VCD). More recently alternative distribution platforms such as Maverick Films, distributing to television and the Internet, have been contributing by creating new distribution channels for audiences and filmmakers alike. Feven Tadesse, a female entrepreneur, introduced one of these alternative platforms of distribution in 2014. As VCD sales were open to huge discrepancies due to problems of piracy, she started a company called Maverick Films PLC in order to show films on Ethiopian television. The company also started a film festival that is an alternative to existing film festivals. Even though it awards movies made in different years, the evaluation takes into account the technological advancement of the year of production for each movie. Only films that are bought by the company participate in this festival under the best film category. Besides broadcasting advertisements during film broadcasts, the company also developed a text-based voting business idea in collaboration with Ethiopian Telecommunications to make money. The text messages help the company to identify two things: one is to know the viewer's vote for every single movie in order to adjudicate the awards, and the other is collecting money from viewers by deducting two birr from each viewer's phone account balance per text message. On top of this, Feven runs her own company that focuses on producing television commercials and adverts. She has also produced two critically acclaimed movies, both directed by Abraham Gezahegn, namely *Mizewochu*/*The Groomsmen* (2008) and *Lomi Shita*/*Scent of Lemon*.

In fact, when Feven started Maverick Films in 2014, her primary aim was to

look for another means of screening *Lomi Shita*. Feven stated, "*Lomi Shita* was not supported by ticket sales despite it being well received and appreciated by festival juries, so, I was thinking what other means are there for showing this movie. I believe that besides the profit of the cinema, there should be another means of reaching the masses" (Feven Taddese, interview, Addis Ababa, May 16, 2016). In Ethiopia, the distribution trend was to give all the authority to distributors in a single sell, and the producers would give up all rights there and then, but Feven says that the aim of broadcasting films on the national Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation is to help the producers rather than the distributors (Feven Taddese, interview, Addis Ababa, May 16, 2016). Since its establishment, Maverick Films has been helping producers by changing the huge distribution disparity in the film industry and the film market, helping to broadcast on TV around 104 films over the last two years.

Conclusion

Revealing and uncovering an exhaustive history of women's participation in cinema in Ethiopia is difficult as women have been involved in films in many ways since cinema's inception in Ethiopia. Their participation has many facets, and this preliminary history can hopefully act as a useful guide that can be built upon by further research in the field.

The influence of female filmmakers is clear to see throughout the development of cinema in Ethiopia. Their involvement in various departments of film production put them at the forefront of the considerable changes and trends the film industry goes through each year. They communicate to filmgoers by showing diversified cultural and sociopolitical issues and delivering complex women's images through a cinema that asks questions and challenges norms.

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The New Frontiers of the Ethiopian Television Industry

TV Serials and Sitcoms

Bitania Tadesse

The history and development of Ethiopian cinema and the film industry has received limited attention in the academic debate. This is particularly visible when it comes to the rapidly evolving TV industry that has grown out of film production, witnessing the expansion of TV dramas and sitcoms. Among other factors, the relative infancy of TV serial dramas and sitcoms has contributed to the absence of literature around the topic. This chapter will therefore fill an important lacuna and contribute to analyzing the growing production of screen content in Ethiopia.

Ethiopian TV serial dramas and sitcoms have achieved immense popularity and are emerging as a critical cultural force among the domestic audience and also in the diaspora.[1] This is all the more striking when we bear in mind that TV serials and sitcoms are a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. In the past, when TV serials were broadcast they were only limited to a few episodes, whereas shows can now run for multiple years often surmounting one hundred episodes.

Gemena/*Family Confidences* was one of the pioneering TV shows in this regard, with episodes running for a full year and divided into two seasons. Similarly, works such as *Gorebetamochu*/*The Neighbors* and *Betoch*/*Houses* signaled the advent of sitcoms in the Ethiopian TV industry.[2] Both genres are very popular among the

TV-watching audience with their entertaining stories able to serve as moralizing didactic devices as well.

As far as TV in Ethiopia is concerned the scope of the changes is profound. Despite the broadcasting of TV serials going through various phases of development, they do not have a long history in Ethiopia. Until very recently TV entertainment was only transmitted through the airwaves of the government-owned Ethiopian Television (ETV) (now known as the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, EBC, since a rebranding in 2015), but more diversity has emerged since the proliferation of satellite TV.

This study will analytically describe and assess the production process of TV serials and sitcoms and their broadcasting by EBC and Ethiopian Broadcasting Service (EBS), a satellite station that commenced its operation in 2008 and is based in the United States. The study will explore the structures and dynamics behind agreements between producers and TV stations, and also describe the broadcast process. The proliferation of TV serials and sitcoms is a manifestation of, and also reflects, the continuing evolution of a hybrid production environment defined by state control and the growing prominence of financially independent entrepreneurs. This has not only led to the expanding standardization of production but arguably represents a marriage of convenience between state-controlled broadcasting and market forces.

The chapter will also delve into the reasons behind the increased output in the production of TV serials and sitcoms in recent years. It will explore the correlations between increased technological innovation, capital flow, the proliferation of production companies, and how all these in combination have accelerated production. Finally, the chapter will assess the impact on the future of the TV industry in Ethiopia.

Methodologically, the chapter is based on on personal interviews and discussions with a range of key figures in the TV sector such as directors, producers, and scriptwriters, combined with my own participatory experiences and knowledge both as a researcher on the Ethiopian film industry and a consumer of Ethiopian TV products. Importantly, this chapter assesses the various phases of the development of TV serials and sitcoms by looking at the trendsetting works, the boom that is being experienced since 2013–14, the challenges that have accompanied this development, and the future of the industry.

TV Serials and Sitcoms in Ethiopia

A key issue should be mentioned in terms of classification centers on definitional issues. While there is seemingly a clear distinction between sitcoms and TV serials or dramas, the reality is that distinctions are blurred in many ways as alluded to by authors discussing television products in other contexts (Mumford 2010). Mumford suggests that definitions of TV genres are not only a matter of industry and academic definition but also defined by audience expectations and understandings.

What is interesting about the TV serials in the Ethiopian context is the similarity they share in terms of origins with Latin American telenovelas. While Latin American telenovelas emerged in the mid-twentieth century, their emergence also had roots in an earlier cultural form, namely the radio-novellas that were aired on radio in weekly or daily installments (Benavides 2008). In the Ethiopian context, long before local TV serials and sitcoms acquired their current prominent position in the cultural landscape, they were preceded by the weekly aired radio-novellas that were avidly followed in urban Ethiopia.

Television as a cultural medium assumed importance in the twentieth century. In this period, it was instrumentalized as both a didactic and political tool in the building of the modern nation-state. However, in the past two decades, television and the consumption of films in the domestic confines of a household space has challenged cinemagoing as a feature of the urban lifestyle. This process was facilitated by the liberalization and deregulation of African economies, which also affected the hitherto state monopolized TV sector in Ethiopia. Hence the distribution of cultural products through television has assumed greater importance (Adejunmobi 2015).

Jedlowski's contextual conceptualization of the modes in which films are produced and distributed in Nigeria and the concept of small-screen cinema is also applicable and relevant to the Ethiopian context. Features that define Nollywood productions such as their interstitial character, continuous remediation in the face of constant fluidity and changing condition, artisanal nature of production, and informality are also applicable to Ethiopian media productions (Jedlowski 2012). However, there are also important differences that would qualify the applicability of the notion of small-screen cinema to the Ethiopian context. A critical distinction between Nigeria and Ethiopia revolves on the distinctive role and weight of the state in media production. In the Ethiopian context the state is a major player in media productions and defines the space for private-sector players.

Another key distinction between Nigeria and Ethiopia also centers on language. The Ethiopian context represents a specific case given not only its rapid expansion, but also because the Amharic language is the main language of both film and TV productions. This also means that the profit and popularity Nollywood has received at the regional and global level has not been replicated by its counterparts in Ethiopia, where television productions and feature films are consumed locally (Thomas 2015). On the other hand, consumption by the Ethiopian diaspora has increased immensely given that TV serials, as well as sitcoms, are uploaded on various online platforms and are also transmitted on satellite TV.

Beginnings

In the African context, television and the emergence of film are intimately linked in terms of both production and distribution. A case in point would be how the development of television serials paved the way for the formation and growth of Nigerian videos (Haynes 2016). This process put Nigeria at the forefront in programming for television and also for the growth of the biggest film industry in Africa (Adejunmobi 2015). As Haynes (2007) further emphasizes, Nigerian video films derived their technical personnel, aesthetics, and video technology invariably from television.

In the Ethiopian case, on the other hand, other sectors such as the cinema and theater paved the way for the recent boom in TV productions in Amharic. It is important to note that the development of TV production and films proceeded apace in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian film industry in general, and the production of TV serials in particular, emerged from and bear the imprints of the sociocultural contexts in which they arose in the 2000s. The vibrant theater scene in places such as Mazegaja, Beharawi, and Hager Fiker played a key role in producing actors, script writers, and directors that later went on to play a key role in the film industry and TV productions (Tadesse 2016). The fluidity between the various visual and performing arts allowed for cross-media work by actors, writers, and directors. For many people involved in the broader industry this provided them, and still provides others, with the option to switch from one sector to the other for multiple economic and professional reasons. Several cases can be adduced to explain the above pattern. A case in point is the renowned actor Abebe Balcha, who received praise after his appearance as a villain in *Sew le Sew*/*Man for Man*.

Abebe Balcha, however, first received recognition in his role in the Shakespearean tragedy *Othello*. Similarly, his partner in *Othello*, Fikadu Tekle Mariam, has also achieved prominence through TV serials. Mulualem Tadesse is also a well-known actress for both her performances on the stage as well as roles in feature films. One could also refer to figures such as the scriptwriter Azeb Worku, who has attained visibility through her TV work in *Gemena II* and *Dana*, but who began her career as an actor and scriptwriter in plays and short TV dramas. In other words, many directors, producers, and actors in TV serials had their first debut, and garnered experience initially, in theaters and then often went on to feature films before entering TV serials (Hailu Tsegaye, interview, Addis Ababa, January 19, 2016). Of course the above-mentioned pattern should not be applied too rigidly as there is also a new and upcoming generation of writers and actors who do not share a similar background. An intriguing aspect of the Ethiopian TV serials scene and the film industry is the continuing close relationship with the stage as exemplified by the many actors and actresses in the various TV serials who still perform in various theaters, such as Alemayehu Tadesse and Shimelis Aberra.

Aboneh Ashagrie (2010) identifies five phases (or stages) in the evolution of television broadcasting in Ethiopia. The first phase was the inaugural moment of Ethiopian television during the imperial era with the initial experiments in television broadcasting associated with important state occasions such as the silver jubilee of the imperial coronation and the founding summit of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 (Reta 2013). The actual launching of regular television broadcasting in Ethiopia began in 1964 (Reta 2013). The second phase saw ETV expanding its programs so as to include news, music, and foreign films. ETV also began broadcasting the stage production of works by Tsegaye Gebremedhin and Mengistu Lemma. The third phase was signaled by the commencement of the transmission of TV dramas that were filmed outside of theaters, the pioneering work being Paulos Ñoño's book *Lijeyew/The Son*. However, until the mid-1970s the TV penetration was limited to Addis Ababa, and audiences outside Addis were able to get access only after the 1970s. The fourth stage saw the development of TV serials that reflected the ideological inclination of the governing Derg regime; this included books adapted into TV dramas such as Berhanu Zerihun's *Yenuzazew Mezez/The Troubles of the Will*,[3] and Yilma Habteyese's *Dem Yenekaw Ijj/Blood Drenched Hands*. This adaptation process greatly contributed to the development of early television productions. The fifth stage, which unfolded during the early 1990s, coincided with the economic and political transformations in Ethiopia during that time. The

ethnic federalism encouraged the emergence of TV dramas in different Ethiopian languages, mainly in Tigrinya and Oromo.

Until the end of the 1990s TV dramas were produced internally by the then ETV, and in this period the TV station was the sole producer and distributer. A critical development was the emergence of the outsourcing of television dramas to private production companies. In the early 2000s independent producers of TV serials emerged. With the onset of outsourced production, ETV experienced changes in its administrative structure. Structurally, the TV station is headed by a board and a CEO, supported by a deputy CEO who deals with content supervision, and then come the departments of entertainment and sport, education and news, and current affairs. Within entertainment there is an in-house production unit, then the outsource production council was established as an independent body to assess the content of TV serials, the artistic quality, and the capacity of independent production companies. According to Bekri Nassir there is an outsource department that facilitates the work of the council (Bekri Nassir, interview, Addis Ababa, December 31, 2015).

The following sections will discuss the various steps in the development of TV serials in Ethiopia, starting with the airing of *Gemena I*, then to the period post–*Gemena I*, that is, the post-2009 period when television serials and sitcoms in Ethiopia experienced a boom in production.

The Advent of *Gemena I*

The narrative and plot of *Gemena I* revolves around the research project of a university student specializing in psychology, Blen, played by Meseret Mebrate, and her professor, Dr. Leikun, played by Fikadu Tekle Mariam. The research project required the student to go undercover as a maid and be hired in different households to conduct research. As the story unfolds it provides a view from the inside (from the point of view of the student/maid) into the quotidian existence and issues that face a supposedly typical urban family. It also brings up a host of practices in the form of witchcraft and characters such as criminals, pimps, and sugar daddies that would ordinarily be part of the "private transcript" of the family. In this second sense, the name of the series—*Gemena*—becomes particularly apt and ironic at the same time as it signifies the uncovering what is customarily "hidden" as *Gemena*.[4] Romance and melodrama are also present as

the research student finds her true love in the house where she is an undercover maid. Ironically the psychology professor's own family life breaks down while studying the dynamics of other families.

When *Gemena I* was first aired in 2009 it was a major breakthrough for the Ethiopian TV industry. It was a pioneering event that crossed boundaries and took the development of the Ethiopian TV serials a step further. *Gemena I*'s impact was profound on several levels. For those who were closely involved in the production of the TV serial, a key innovation was the rigorous selection process of actors and script writers, and the creation of a conducive working environment that enabled actors to fulfill their respective roles on a more professional level. *Gemena I* fundamentally transformed the way actors viewed roles in TV series, which had not been favored in the past compared to roles in feature films. According to Iqubaye Berhe, *Gemena I* is also widely regarded as breaking new ground in terms of music composition, editing, camera work, costume, and other aspects of mise-en-scène (Iqubaye Berhe, interview, Addis Ababa, January 22, 2016).

Apart from its innovations at the level of production, *Gemena I* was also acclaimed for its content on the part of viewers and critics (Iqubaye Berhe, interview, Addis Ababa, January 22, 2016). *Gemena I*'s close-up look of family affairs from the perspective of a domestic maid gave it a very personal and intimate outlook on the everyday experiences within households. In urban households, the lives of the family are intimately linked with the help, and issues among family members are discussed in the presence of maids with no discretion. This resonated deeply with the mainly urban audience, who could easily relate to the storyline in *Gemena I*. The TV serial was also acclaimed for the time and space it afforded to its female characters who are independent, confident, and in some instances even rebellious.

As *Gemena I* transformed the image and the perception around TV serials it also shifted the trend of TV sponsorship. In the past, companies preferred their advertisements to be aired during particular time slots especially coinciding with sport shows or events, which have traditionally had the biggest audience numbers in Ethiopia. After *Gemena I*, however, the trend changed with sponsors diverting advertising to the commercial breaks during TV serials (Iqubaye Berhe, interview, Addis Ababa, January 22, 2016). TV serials increasingly became a viable income and profit source for TV stations, production companies, and actors.

Despite the popularity and success of *Gemena I*, it was not completely free of problems and hurdles. Right after the completion of the first season, its production

company, Mega Production, was closed and the production process was handed over to Da'amat Multimedia Production, also managed and owned by Iqubaye Berhe. There were also differences that arose between the writer and the production company due to payment issues. The production of *Gemena I*, nonetheless, was an eye-opener for those who were involved in the making of TV serials. It was a new form within the growing film and screen industry. Subsequently, crew members from Da'amat went on to produce new works. After the production and broadcasting of *Gemena I* the industry became much more competitive as sponsorship deals became more lucrative, which in turn encouraged the emergence of more production companies.

The Post–*Gemena I* Era and the Boom in TV Serials

After the completion of *Gemena I*, two other major TV serials made their debut in 2011: *Gemena II* and *Sew le Sew*. The audience of TV serials by this time was already accustomed to the concept of weekly episodes that would last for at least a year, and with the beginning of *Sew le Sew* (aired on EBC every Wednesday evening) and *Gemena II* (every Sunday afternoon, in the same slot of *Gemena I*) the interest became more intense.

According to Azeb Worku, in the post–*Gemena I* period the expansion and booming TV serials market also experienced further shifts in the production process, some of which have been alluded to earlier (Azeb Worku, interview, Addis Ababa, January 7, 2016). Azeb Worku, a famous figure in the theater and TV serials sector (Kassa 2015), argues that during *Gemena I*, the TV station did not put much pressure on TV serial makers. Azeb explains, however, once producers and the EBC realized how lucrative the business had become, and the popularity of locally produced TV serials, the competition had become fierce.

An equally significant development in the post–*Gemena I* era has been the increasing stratification and complexity of production. This is exemplified in how EBC advertises a tender for the production of a TV serial, to which candidates (production companies) submit a synopsis (which would include the names of actors and actresses) as well as technical proposals including the technical capacity of the producer in terms of human and resource capacity. The technical proposals and synopses are assessed by the independent body of experts based on a range of criteria such as political and social sensitivity, time and date of broadcasting,

and artistic value. The names of the production companies that compete for the tender remain anonymous during the assessment process to prevent corruption and preferential treatment, and each company is represented by a number code. In addition to the synopsis and the technical proposal, producers are asked to submit a sample episode and four episode scripts. The body of experts then submits its decision, which is announced publicly (Bekri Nassir, interview, Addis Ababa, December 31, 2015).

The next stage involves the signing of a contract between EBC and the producer. Profits are generated by sponsorship fees from advertising with both EBC and the production company involved in approaching sponsors. The standard procedure is a profit-sharing scheme that is split 60:40 between the producer and EBC or 70:30 depending on the costs that the producers incur. However, there are situations where the scheme may vary (Abdu 2015). Once the TV serial is aired by EBC it becomes the property of the TV station and it can be aired anytime the station wishes. In cases where the drama brings additional profit when airing the show for the second time, the TV station is then expected to split the profit with the original producers based on the initial agreement.

Several sources have stated that while the amounts agreed for sponsorship deals have risen exponentially, the costs of production have also increased mainly due to rising payment for actors and actresses given the popularity of TV serials (Solomon Alemu, interview, Addis Ababa, March 9, 2016). Increased profits and incomes derived from larger sponsorship deals have benefited many actors, directors, producers, and even TV stations. The rising popularity of TV serials has tended to turn actors who appear on them into celebrities and has facilitated the professional recognition of new artists (Tesfaye G. 2010). In addition to this, it is a widely held consensus among figures associated with TV production that the post–*Gemena I* TV serials production has benefited from an increase in skills and growing aptitude with technology.

A development that deserves mention is the tendency toward the blurring of roles in the production of TV serials that has increasingly become the norm. Individuals often carry out multiple functions simultaneously leading to situations where a single individual is a director, producer, lead actor, and scriptwriter in the same serial. This phenomenon is exemplified by Solomon Alemu's experiences in *Sew le Sew*. In a similar vein Bisrat Gemechu, a supporting actress in *Sew le Sew*, appeared as a producer, director, scriptwriter, and lead actress in the TV serial *Wazema/Eve*.

The increase in the number of production companies has also coincided with an increase in the number of TV channels. Until recently, the sole TV station was the government-owned-and-run EBC that subsumes under it several channels broadcasting in Amharic, Oromo, and Tigrinya. In the past few years, private TV stations have made their debut, such as EBS. In 2016 four new channels were launched: Nahoo, Ethiopian News Network (ENN), Kana TV, and JTV. This increase in the number of TV stations has meant a bigger platform for screen content such as TV serials as well as providing a more lucrative business platform through the increased demand in advertisement content (Nardos 2016). A very recent station, JTV founded in 2015 by the artist and talk show host Yoseph "Jossy" Gebre, is an example of a new station becoming an additional option for TV serials such as *Wazema*/*Eve*, the first season of which was broadcast on EBC. In 2016, EBS broadcast five TV serials, namely *Mogachoch*/*The Debater* (every Wednesday evening), *Welafen*/*Flames* (every Thursday evening), *Bekenat Mekakel*/*In Between Days* (every Friday evening), *Dana* (every Sunday afternoon),[5] and *Zemen*/*Era* (every Sunday and Tuesday evening). EBC on the other hand broadcast two TV serials: *Meleket*/*The Horn* (instrument) (every Sunday afternoon) and *YeBet Sira*/*House Work* (every Sunday evening).

In this context it is necessary to point out that while the post–*Gemena I* period has proved undoubtedly positive for the production of TV serials in Ethiopia, there have also been many hindrances. The trajectory of the production of *Sew le Sew* exemplifies these issues. *Sew le Sew*, one of the most watched TV serials since it was first aired in 2011, ran for three years in 140 episodes. The longer duration came also with inconveniences, as many actors and actress had to set aside their roles in the drama due to prior commitments to roles in feature films or stage plays. The producers of *Sew le Sew* also faced another challenge in the form of pressure from the TV station to complete the narrative arc and bring the serial to a close. However, this problem in part seems to have also emerged due to the absence of an agreed time frame when the contract was signed (Solomon Alemu, interview, Addis Ababa, March 9, 2016).

The Advent of Situational Comedies (Sitcoms)

For decades, comedy shows on ETV came in the form of what are known as *chewewet* and stand-up comedy.[6] The main proponents of these forms of TV comedy were

through the work of comedy duo acts such as Limeneh Tadesse and Alebachew Teka, Dereje Haile and Habte Mitiku, and Engidazer Nega and Abebe Belew. The works of these comedians were shown on TV programs such as *Hibre Tryeet*/*Mixed Show* and *Meto Haya*/*One Hundred Twenty*.[7] *Hibre Tryeet* was aired twice a week, and *Meto Haya* was shown once a week. The work of these comedians was flexible and exploited humorous situations and settings through short skits. These duos impersonated drunks, the elderly, recent rural migrants, and the mentally unstable, and employed satire, physical humor, and wordplay. Interestingly, these comedians played gender transcending roles (played female characters) through dressing-up in female clothing and voice impersonations, which in the context of the patriarchal system and narrow notions of masculinity that dominate Ethiopian cultural production can be considered progressive. *Meto Haya* was later replaced with *Ihud Meznagna*/*Sunday Entertainment*, which is currently one of the major platforms through which TV serials are shown. These programs laid the foundation for the development of successive comedy works.

Very recently a new form of TV comedy has been produced in Ethiopia—the sitcom. Although there were attempts since early 2000 in producing sitcoms (e.g., *Yeberedow Zemen*/*The Ice Age*), the first sitcom show in Ethiopia, *Gorebetamochu*, was aired on EBS only in 2012. *Gorebetamochu* ran for thirty-one episodes, which in relative terms compared to what has become the norm for Ethiopian sitcoms was quite limited. However, this show in terms of its focus and plot foreshadowed in some important ways the future evolution of sitcoms in Ethiopia. *Gorebetamochu* had a cast of recognizable comedy actors, and its plot, revolving around the interactions of condominium dwellers, was easily relatable to a substantial proportion of the population of Addis Ababa. Shortly after, another sitcom, *Nuroachen*/*Our Lives*, was produced and began to be shown once a week. Unfortunately, the sitcom did not last more than a few weeks.

The advent of *Betoch* was a landmark event. It was broadcast weekly for four years in five successive seasons and 158 episodes until 2016. Each episode of *Betoch* ran for twenty-five minutes as is the common standard of sitcoms worldwide. The plot of each *Betoch* episode revolves around the family of Zeru Molla, his wife, and their five children. In addition, the two maids and one guard are part of the family. Each episode of *Betoch* takes an urban sociocultural issue as its core theme. The family dynamic and the characters of the maid and the guard are integral to the comedic juxtaposition that has made the show widely popular.

Sitcoms in Amharic are a new genre for most of the domestic TV audience in

Ethiopia. While TV viewers in Ethiopia are familiar with foreign productions such as *Mr. Bean* and *Charlie Chaplin*, these have tended to rely on physical comedies that were easier for Ethiopian audiences to relate to. More often than not, the receptivity toward standard foreign sitcoms has been limited.

What is also very intriguing are the linkages between sitcoms and older forms of the visual arts. An example would be the role of Tilahun Gugsa. Tilahun Gugsa was not only the producer of *Betoch* but also had a leading role as Zeru Molla in the sitcom. Tilahun had achieved fame decades earlier for his role as a lead character in the stage comedy *Menteko*/*The Miser*. The lead characters in both *Menteko* and *Betoch* (played by Tilahun) share another similarity in that they are both miserly and avaricious male characters whose exaggerated greed and penny-pinching generate many of the humorous scenarios in both shows.

Although the show was a success, challenges were not completely absent in the broadcasting of *Betoch*. Like with TV serials, the commissioning of sitcoms is conducted through a process of tender in which proposals get to be reviewed and assessed by an independent panel. Tilahun Gugsa argues that due to the novelty of the form and the perception of risk, it requires a lot of work to persuade commissioning bodies of the potential for success. Sitcoms in Amharic are not only new to the Ethiopian audience, but also new to actors and actresses. With respect to the production of *Betoch*, Tilahun stated that the first five or six months were particularly challenging because of the widespread perception on the part of actors and producers that the genre was "silly." The show also faced financial challenges during the early stages due to a lack of sponsorship (Tilahun Gugsa, interview, Addis Ababa, June 9, 2016).

Right after the success of *Betoch*, another sitcom, *Demb Amist*/*Regulation Five*, started being aired on EBS in 2015. The airing of another sitcom on EBS right after the popularity of *Betoch* partially demonstrated an eagerness to exploit the newfound popularity of sitcoms. *Demb Amist* takes on similar themes and ideas that *Betoch* employed, with interesting comparisons to be made in terms of the crafting of characters and stories. This is also an indication of the growing competition between TV stations as they attempt to seek success by replicating templates that had been successful in the past. *Demb Amist* takes on a different but also very relevant urban theme by focusing on the lives and interactions between individuals and families living in a shared compound, another living arrangement quite common in Addis Ababa.

The nature of the comedy that is deployed in Ethiopian sitcoms has its parallels

with the rest of the continent. One could point to the kind of comedy that is also prevalent in Nigerian sitcoms that focus on ordinary people living in shared urban compounds such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Basi and Company*. Another very common trope in TV comedy exploits the humorous antics and language of the household help who are often recent migrants from rural areas (Haynes 2007).

Challenges amid the Boom

The boom in demand for TV series and the rising number of production companies has intensified competition. According to several sources, all the entities involved are beset with a number of challenges.

Time Constraints

A key constraint facing directors, producers, and scriptwriters is the issue of time. While the expanding professionalization and sophistication of the production of TV serials and sitcoms is a fact, it could be argued that the gaps that still persist affect efficiency. Producers and scriptwriters often find it difficult to adhere to the time lines expected by TV stations.

Revenue and Profit Sharing

The rising popularity of TV series and their profitability have been alluded to earlier. It has also created greater dissension between TV stations and the production companies over the division of profits, final ownership of the product, and disputes revolving around contractual obligations such as time lines and number of episodes to be delivered.

As mentioned earlier, the increase in the number of TV stations has meant that producers and production companies have more choice while it also creates another source of possible conflict. An occasional complication has been situations where the production company has made arrangements with two different TV stations to broadcast different seasons of the same TV series. A case in point is the series *Dana*, whose first two seasons debuted on EBC and the subsequent seasons on EBS.

Distribution Rights

A related area of contention revolves around online distribution. In the past, contracts signed between producers and EBC did not specify whether the broadcasting of the TV series would only be through TV or additionally through websites as well. There have been instances where producers or production companies have made arrangements with websites to broadcast their TV series online, bypassing EBC. This is disadvantageous as far as EBC is concerned as the TV station loses out in terms of revenue, and it also raises questions about ownership of the TV series. New mechanisms are being formulated that seek to ensure that in the future both websites and EBC would share revenue derived from online viewing of TV serials and sitcoms (Bekri Nassir, interview, Addis Ababa, December 31, 2015).

Conservative Pushback

It is also critical to mention that the expansion of TV serial and sitcom production has generated an adverse reaction from critical cultural commentators who complain about the technical quality as well as the content of TV productions. According to Abebe Beyene these critics see TV serials and sitcoms as having abandoned their didactic role and becoming too profit oriented (Abebe Beyene, interview, Addis Ababa, January 16, 2016). This criticism is also directed toward the film industry by conservative critics who also fail to realize the relatively small profits most cultural producers receive. In addition, as Solomon Alemu points out, TV productions stretch over longer periods of time requiring extensive preparation and larger capital, human resources, and time than feature films (interview, Addis Ababa, March 9, 2016). Hence, it is useful that criticisms take these significant differences into consideration.

Relationship between Producers and TV Stations

The experiences of Tilahun Tafere, director and producer of *Gemena I*, *Gemena II*, and *Dana*, exemplify the challenges facing producers and production companies in making TV series. Tilahun Tafere was a former colleague of Iqubaye at Mega and then Da'amat; after the completion of *Gemena II* he decided to pursue his own work with his own production company, East Africa Film Production. His first TV serial after *Gemena II* was *Dana*. When his proposal won the tender and in the midst of

the airing the TV serial, differences emerged with EBC. Tilahun's company intended *Dana* to be an eleven-season series, each season covering different topics and issues, while EBC expected the production company to complete *Dana* in a period not exceeding one year in fifty-two episodes. According to Tilahun, the differences could not be reconciled, and he abandoned EBC and successfully negotiated with EBS (Tilahun Tafere, interview, Addis Ababa, June 9, 2016). According to him, he made this switch because EBS was more flexible regarding time frame and slots and was more oriented toward audience desires (Tilahun Tafere, interview, Addis Ababa, June 9, 2016).

On the other hand, according to Bekri Nasir, EBC faces competing interests and seeks to reach a balance that is difficult to achieve (Bekri Nasir, interview, Addis Ababa, December 31, 2015). He argues that EBC has to satisfy growing demand for airtime between competing producers and always seeks to ensure that as many as possible get the opportunity to utilize the space. He also explained that disputes between EBC and production companies (and/or producers) arise due to the vagueness of contracts that do not specify the time frame in which the TV serial is to be finalized, a gap that apparently has been remedied since, through more detailed and clearer contracts.

The Future of Ethiopian TV Serials and Sitcoms

As has been alluded to earlier, EBS and EBC are the two main stations that transmit Ethiopian TV serials and sitcoms. Several additional channels catering to the Ethiopian TV audience have also made their appearance on satellite TV. This is an additional positive in terms of expanding the space for broadcasting TV serials and sitcoms. But this development has also brought in its train new challenges. One of a few new TV stations, Kana TV, has introduced the novel practice (in the Ethiopian context) of dubbing Korean, Turkish, and Indian TV serials into Amharic, which has proved to be a highly successful strategy (see, for instance, Christian Tesfaye's [2016] treatment of the Kana phenomenon). Kana also schedules the showing of different TV series at least five times a day in contrast to Amharic TV serials and sitcoms, which are aired once a week on other stations. Kana's offerings and overall strategy have made it widely popular among the urban television serials market.

The onset of Kana TV, its strategy and expanding popularity, has generated intense debate and led to extensive discontent on the part of many Ethiopian

film and TV producers. The principal point of disagreement is around the effect of dubbed films on local TV serials and the film industry in general. On the one hand there is a concern that its programs would have a diluting effect on Ethiopian culture, custom, and norms (Sinesibhat 2016). Debates in the media (C. Tesfaye 2016) and discussions with key figures in the sector such as Tilahun Tafere (interview, Addis Ababa, June 1, 2016) reveal a widely held perception that the filmmaking industry, and more specifically Ethiopian TV serials and sitcoms (due to their infancy in production values in the realms of content, acting skills, and visual and sound quality), would find it difficult to compete against Kana's foreign dramas dubbed in Amharic as they have relatively higher visual and sound qualities.

However, others argue that a phenomenon such as Kana TV should be welcomed as the competition pressures filmmakers and TV producers to aim for better production values and quality in order to maintain and even expand their target market. Tilahun Gugsa is among those who do not consider Kana a threat to the development of the blooming local TV industry (Tilahun Gugsa, interview, Addis Ababa, June 9, 2016) mainly due to his perception that these products ultimately cannot dislodge local TV serials and sitcoms.

Conclusion

The growth and expansion of the TV industry benefited immensely from the advances that were made in the Ethiopian film sector and vice versa. The flexibility and cross-sectoral engagement of people in the film and TV industries continues to be beneficial to the development of both sectors. The launch of private TV channels such as EBS played a seminal role in promoting and facilitating dissemination not only of TV serials and sitcoms, but also of Ethiopian feature films. This allowed an additional avenue for audiences to have access to feature films through TV. On the other hand many of the artists that gained extensive experience in the film industry have contributed to the growth and development of the TV industry, which is true inversely as well.

The emergence and rapid growth of TV serials and sitcom production in Ethiopia reflects the growing economic and commercial significance of cultural industries in the country. Although production companies are officially registered entities licensed to undertake various artistic activities, including the production of feature films, advertisements, and TV programs, some companies have, however,

opted for specialization. For instance, Solomon Alemu and Mesfin Getachew's Sparks Film Production Company, after the success of *Sew le Sew*, has recently completed another TV serial, *Zemen*, which is aired on EBS. A similar case is Iqubaye's Da'amat Multimedia Production company, which after *Gemena I* continued with *Gemena II* and has plans to produce more TV serials.

The rising professional and technical proficiency exhibited by directors, producers, and actors is increasingly apparent in domestically produced TV serials and sitcoms. The growing structural complexity of the production process and the professionalization of production is a related facet of this process. The greater financial rewards that directors, producers, and actors are receiving coupled with popularity and critical acclaim is testament to their success.

The situation in Ethiopia in 2016, while positive, is not completely devoid of problems and finds itself at a critical juncture. This chapter has relied on crucial interviews with key players in the industry to better grasp how the growth in the production of TV serials and sitcoms, and their resulting profitability, has brought in their wake intense competition and contention between domestic production companies and foreign-based satellite TV channels broadcasting in Amharic. Technology, too, has not been an unalloyed blessing due to challenges surfacing as a result of Internet-based broadcasting of TV series and sitcoms. The popularity and profitability of domestically produced TV series has also led to differences regarding acceptable profit margins between domestic TV stations (mainly EBC) and production companies.

Criticisms that are directed toward Ethiopian cinema are also leveled at the TV industry. There is an increasing concern of striking the right balance between quantity/output and quality. Similar to films, there has been a substantial output increase in Ethiopian TV serial and sitcom production. However, there is a strong argument from critics as well as from industry insiders that quantity alone will not ensure the sustainability of the industry. The rise in domestically produced TV serials and sitcoms should soon also be accompanied with quality, and much more attention should be paid to the technical problems that still characterize many TV productions as well as feature films.

Many informants have underlined the importance of collaboration between filmmakers to allow the industry to achieve its full potential. But at the same time it has to be understood that the intense competition and internal politics have contributed immensely to the growth of the industry. This industry, just like any other, operates in the context of a liberalizing economy and, therefore, competition

is what drives it. Cultural production in general, and in particular TV, has for decades been state controlled with government continuing to dominate the sector. Several key players in the production of screen media also have affiliations to the state and seemingly have been able to utilize these links successfully. However, the emergence of various channels on satellite TV including EBS, Kana, Nahoo, and JTV has somehow impacted the monopoly of the state. It is a sign of a gradual liberalization and inclusion of the private sector in the industry.

While the informality of TV (and also film production) are undoubtedly a feature common to both Africa, in general, and Ethiopia in particular, the greater role and control exerted by the state over television even in the era of satellite TV channels renders the Ethiopian experience somewhat distinctive. The medium in which TV serials and sitcoms are produced has meant that Ethiopian television outputs are geared toward an Ethiopian (to be more precise, an Amharic-speaking) audience.

NOTES

1. In this chapter the term "TV serials" is used to refer to dramas broadcast regularly on TV that stretch over a year or more in various seasons. "Sitcoms" are defined as regularly broadcast comedies that focus on a fixed set of recurring characters; sitcoms usually have episodes of twenty to thirty minutes each.
2. The literal translation of *betoch* is "houses" or "people who live in a household." In Amharic it's also a common expression to say "betoch" when people enter into a house to let the people in the house know of their arrival and for the people already in the houses to respond by saying "dejoch," which means "people coming from outside"; it's a way of welcoming people into one's house.
3. *Nuzaze* can be translated as "will" (legal document specifying the division of his/her property among the descendants upon their passing away).
4. *Gemena* can be loosely translated as shortcoming or embarrassment that should be kept hidden.
5. Dana is the name of a popular radio show in the TV serial.
6. The direct translation of *chewewet* is "a light and playful conversation"; in this context it means short sketches or skits that can go on for anywhere between three and twenty minutes (Ashagrie 2010), are comic in nature, and usually involve two people.
7. The literal translation of *Hibre Tryeet* is "mix of shows." It was a half hour mainly

Ethiopian music show that also sometimes featured non-Ethiopian songs and *chewewet*. *Meto Haya* was a Sunday afternoon entertainment show.

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Ethiopian Cinema and the Politics of Migration, at Home and Abroad

Alessandro Jedlowski

Until less than ten years ago, it was hard to find traces of anything called "Ethiopian cinema" in newspapers and academic journals outside of Ethiopia. Little was known about the state of the film industry in this country of the Horn beyond the work of a few renowned Ethiopian filmmakers and critics based in the United States such as Haile Gerima, Salem Mekuria, Yemane Demissie, and Teshome Gabriel. But since the early 2000s a new wave of digital film production has emerged in Ethiopia, helping to revive a filmmaking tradition that produced important works, such as Michel Papatakis's *Gumma/Blood Money* (1974) and Solomon Bekele Weya's *Aster* (1992). Beyond this homegrown phenomenon, a new wave of diasporic Ethiopian films has also seen the light. Zeresenay Berhane Mehari's internationally acclaimed *Difret* (2014) and Yared Zeleke's *Lamb* (2015) are probably the best known among them, but other examples could be mentioned, such as the works of Rachel Samuel in the United States, Mikael Ayele in Sweden, and Dagmawi Yimer in Italy.

These two emerging film-production trends, in Ethiopia and within the Ethiopian diaspora worldwide, are profoundly different in terms of both their production strategies and their aesthetic and narrative choices. The most relevant difference is probably related to the target audience these different production trends have in

mind: a local, wider, and more popular audience for locally produced, commercially oriented Ethiopian films; a rather international, more politically and artistically sophisticated audience for the diasporic films. This difference can induce the researcher to opt for interpreting these emerging trends separately, as the result of a series of cultural, social, economic, and political factors too different to be compared. And this is what most of the very little existing scholarship about Ethiopian cinema has done until today. In this chapter, on the contrary, I will argue that a closer comparative analysis can produce interesting results, especially when it comes to the study of the way films from each of these trends discuss issues that are relevant for the understanding of contemporary Ethiopian politics and society. Youth emigration is undisputedly one of them (Fernandez 2010; Fransen and Kuschminder 2009; Hassan and Negash 2013), and the works of the two film directors this chapter focuses on, the fiction film director, producer, and actor based in Ethiopia Tewodros Teshome and the documentary filmmaker based in Italy Dagmawi Yimer, propose interesting as much as diverging ways to think about it.

In the first section, I will set the general background context for this analysis by providing some information about the phenomenon of outward migration from Ethiopia and about the representation of this issue in contemporary Ethiopian cinema. Then, in the second and third sections, I will focus on the analysis of Tewodros Teshome's and Dagmawi Yimer's lives and works, highlighting the interrelations existing between their biographic experiences and the content of their films. Their different takes on migration help us understand the position that this issue occupies in present-day Ethiopian politics and highlight the role that cinema plays today in the discussion of this phenomenon, both in Ethiopia and throughout the diaspora.

The Phenomenon of Outward Migration in Ethiopia: Reality and Fiction

Over the past few decades, migration fluxes from Ethiopia toward other non-African countries have developed as a consequence of different factors, including "political instability, decline or stagnation in the agricultural sector, and the 1980s government resettlement program" (Andersson 2014, 4). These factors have transformed over time and shifted from mainly political "to more economic motives" (Fransen and Kuschminder 2009, 10; see also Bariagaber 1997). Nevertheless, recent reports

underline how, particularly since the postelectoral violence that occurred after the 2005 elections (Abbink 2006), political persecution, lack of freedom of expression, and ethnic discrimination have come to represent some of the most relevant factors driving people away from Ethiopia (Hassan and Negash 2013; IRIN News 2011). Within this context, for a long time the most popular destinations were the United States, Germany, Sweden, Italy, and Israel (particularly for the Ethiopian Jewish community, known as the "Beta Israel"), but over the past few years preferred destinations have progressively shifted to Middle Eastern and Gulf countries such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Fernandez 2010; Kebede 2002). With the increase in the number of people willing to migrate from Ethiopia and the proportional decrease in the chances to achieve such a project legally, the itineraries of these journeys have fallen under the control of criminal networks involved in human trafficking and smuggling, a phenomenon that has reached an unprecedented scale in Ethiopia and in the Horn region in the recent past (Fernandez 2010; Triulzi 2013; UNHCR 2013).

Within this context, the Ethiopian government has played an ambiguous role. On the one hand, it tried to regulate and protect Ethiopian migrant workers through a complex system of authorization and registration monitored by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.[1] But, on the other hand, it also implicitly fostered the development of illegal human trafficking and smuggling networks by delegating the task of securing employment contracts abroad to "private employment agencies" (see Fernandez 2010), whose lack of transparency provoked rumors about connections between government officials and criminal cartels (Hassan and Negash 2013). Besides, through the establishment of the Expatriate Affairs General Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002, the government made an explicit attempt at attracting diasporic investments and remittances to the country. Critical reports suggest, however, that this attempt overlooked (and somehow participated in reigniting) the historical tensions existing among the different politically affiliated groups within the diaspora, most of which do not support the actions of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and would prefer to boycott rather than promote its political and economic action (Lyons 2007; Fransen and Kuschminder 2009). Beyond these controversies, the increase in outward migration fluxes has undoubtedly created concern among government officials, who are aware that the scale of this phenomenon contrasts with the official claims of double-digit economic growth (Hassan and Negash 2013). As a result, over the past few years, the Ethiopian government has implemented a

number of actions to contain migration fluxes, which included the use of media to spread propaganda messages warning the population against the dangers of illegal migration and, in some cases, criticizing the life of Ethiopians abroad in order to demystify widespread Eldorado imageries about life in the diaspora.

As this brief summary emphasizes, issues connected to migration fluxes and the life of the Ethiopian diaspora catalyze tense political debates in Ethiopia. This reality is reflected by the growing number of films on the topic produced over the past few years. In Ethiopian cinema, films of this kind can almost be considered as a narrative genre on their own, with a number of subgenres proposing different variations around the same theme. There are, for instance, locally made, commercially oriented films such as Biniam Worku's *Vacation from America* (2010), whose plots, even if often on melodramatic, family-based, or romantic themes, somehow comply with the government's propaganda agenda for the containment of outmigration fluxes by focusing on the contrast between the life that Ethiopians conduct abroad and at home. In these films, diasporic Ethiopians are often portrayed as materialist, egoistic, and hedonist, with little interest in Ethiopian culture and traditions, and with little or no respect for family hierarchies and moral principles. In opposition to them, local characters are often depicted as morally irreprehensible guardians of Ethiopian "traditions" (portrayed as homogeneous and static entities, immune to both global processes of cultural hybridization and dynamics of ethnic and political differentiation happening within Ethiopia). The moral objective of many of these films is to convince the audience that the apparent wealth and welfare of people living abroad is the result of wrong moral attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately provokes the radical alienation from local culture and traditions.

Parallel to this orientation, there are also films such as Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn's *Nishan* (2013), Ermias Tadesse and Joseph Ebongo's *Yefiker Kal/Love's Word* (2014), and Wondewosen Yihub's *Yegeter Lij/The Country Girl* (2016), which avoid the creation of binary interpretational frameworks (those who migrated versus those who decided to remain) and instead focus on the commitments and pressures on the younger generation to provide for their extended family, and on gender-related issues that often ground the desire to leave the country and migrate in search for better opportunities of social and economic mobility. These films try as much as possible to stay away from politics and from the hot debates that surround the issue of migration that circulate on (mainly diaspora-based) social networks and blogs, but implicitly provide some insights in the social and economic conditions that push the youth to migrate.

If these can be seen as the most common representations of migration and life in the diaspora in local commercial films, a different perspective is proposed by documentary and docu-fiction films produced by Ethiopian filmmakers, both locally and internationally. There are, for instance, films such as Daniel Worku's *Ethiopian Diaspora: Illusion and Reality* (2013) and Rahel Zegeye's *Beirut* (2006) that portray the harsh, often dramatic reality of Ethiopian migrants abroad in an attempt to inform the Ethiopian youth about the perils of migration. While in *Ethiopian Diaspora*, Daniel Worku, a filmmaker based in Addis Ababa, travels to Germany to collect the experiences of Ethiopian refugees living there, in *Beirut* the drama of human trafficking is discussed through a series of fictional portraits of Ethiopian female domestic workers in Lebanon, inspired by real stories collected by the film director during her own experience as a migrant in the Middle Eastern country. In both films, the directors' most explicit intention is to deconstruct rosy imageries about life in foreign countries. Contrary to commercial films, however, this goal is not pursued by staging a radical opposition between local and diasporic cultural habits, life at home and life abroad, local tradition and foreign modernity. Rather, it is achieved through the narration of dramatic stories (sometimes slightly overdramatized in an attempt to radicalize the film's message) that are presented as testimonies of the truth about migration, the truth that the (often boastful) attitudes of many returnees hide behind tales of success and achievements abroad.

Finally, beyond the trends that I just highlighted, another, less developed tendency may be observed. It is constituted of commercially oriented films about migration produced by members of the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States, Australia, and Europe. The most relevant example in this sense is probably Yonie Solomon's *An Ethiopian Love* (2012), a commercially oriented romantic comedy film shot by a group of Ethiopian Americans in Los Angeles, whose main objective is to show a different face of Ethiopia to white American audiences and to produce an entertainment product specifically targeted toward American people of Ethiopian descent (McGloster 2012). Rather than showing any particular concern with contemporary migration fluxes from Ethiopia, films of this kind are focused on proposing a reified as much as commoditized definition of cultural identity and belonging to people of Ethiopian descent who are born in the West but feel attached to their cultural heritage, a heritage that they are proud of, despite often having only a limited knowledge of it.

A common feature of the films grouped in these trends is the general lack of in-depth analysis of the political and economic causes behind migration.

In many of these films the decision to migrate is seen either as an unpatriotic option, made by people in search of easy and rapid wealth, or as a risky adventure, which is often followed by violent and tragic consequences. As I will argue in the next sections, if the work of Tewodros Teshome can be seen as exemplifying this type of representation of migration in Ethiopian films, Dagmawi Yimer's work proposes a different perspective. However, both film directors' decisions are, in my view, a direct consequence of their biographical experiences and, particularly, a result of the position that these directors implicitly or explicitly decided to adopt in relation to the Ethiopian government and to the market. In each of the next two sections, after discussing the directors' life experiences, I will develop these thoughts by analyzing two of their films that focus on the most iconic and dramatic moment of the migration itinerary: the trip across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea.

Between Didacticism, Nationalism, and Strategic Alignment with the Government: Migration in Tewodros Teshome's Films

Tewodros Teshome occupies a particularly relevant position within the landscape of the emerging Ethiopian video film industry and can undoubtedly be considered as one of the best known and most powerful filmmakers and producers in the new wave of Ethiopian commercial film production that has emerged over the past few years. He was born and raised in a middle-class family of coffee producers, in the southwestern part of the country. After graduating from a local business school he began to work as a studio photographer in Addis Ababa, and later ventured into wedding film production. During this period, he began producing fiction films with local nonprofessional actors and crew, and through this activity he got in touch with one of the biggest companies in the country, MIDROC Ethiopia (owned by the Saudi-Ethiopian billionaire Sheik Mohammed Al-Amoudi), which hired him to make corporate documentary films to advertise the company's achievements. While working at MIDROC, he wrote and produced *Kazkaza Welafen*/*Cold Flame* (2002), a film project focused on HIV-related issues that became one of the first video films to be screened in local cinemas and the first to achieve substantial commercial success, thus importantly participating in the emergence of the local digital-film production phenomenon. With the profits of this and a few following successful releases (and with the money made through a few other business

initiatives), Tewodros built a multiplex cinema in Addis Ababa and began playing a major role in film distribution in the country. This happened at a time when the number of locally produced films was rapidly increasing—venturing into theater-hall development and film distribution turned out to be a commercially profitable move. In the following years, Tewodros went on to open eight cinema theaters and became the biggest theater owner in the country.

Around the mid-2000s, just after the highly contested 2005 elections, which were marked by politically and ethnically motivated killings and violent repression of opposition parties, he released *Qey Sitet*/*The Red Mistake* (2006), a historical film set during the Red Terror, the period of violent repression by the Derg regime against its opponents in the late 1970s. This expensive film, whose plot focuses on a politically sensitive topic, was produced thanks to the support of foreign crew and funding. It was premiered in one of the biggest and most expensive hotels in Addis Ababa in front of many diplomatic representatives, with an introductive speech by the Ethiopian minister of foreign affairs. According to Tewodros, the reasons for this highly politicized film premiere are to be found, most of all, in the fact that the film had received the economic support of a foreign country, an exception in the landscape of contemporary Ethiopian film production. But local audiences saw this premiere as a confirmation of existing rumors about Tewodros's complicity with the government and read the film as a celebration of the victory of the EPRDF-led rebellion against the Derg regime.[2] Incidentally, during one of the interviews I had with the director in Addis Ababa, he underlined that his intentions were profoundly different from those the audience saw in the film (Tewodros Teshome, interview, Addis Ababa, December 14, 2014), but despite the attempts he made to clear his reputation, it took him a long time to regain credibility as an independent artist. At the same time, the film release, and the incidents that followed it,[3] somehow effectively pushed Tewodros to develop closer relationships with government officials, who seemed to like the film and who, thanks to it, became probably better aware of the potential that the new boom in video film production had for the circulation of propaganda messages.

After the controversies connected to the release of *Qey Sitet*, for a few years Tewodros abandoned filmmaking and focused only on film distribution. He came back to film production in 2011, with the release of *Abay vs Vegas*, his first feature film to deal with migration and life abroad. According to Tewodros, this was one of the highest budget local commercial films ever released in Ethiopia: it was partially shot in the United States, with a Red One camera (one of the most

expensive cameras on the market at the time), and included the participation of some international actors and crew. According to Tewodros (interview, Addis Ababa, December 14, 2014), the light, romantic-comedy genre of *Abay vs Vegas* was intended to make audiences forget the controversies around *Qey Sitet*. The film follows the story of Salsawi (played by Tewodros himself), an Ethiopian man who conducts a lavish life in the United States. He is unhappy because he cannot find the right woman to marry, so he decides to travel back to Ethiopia in order to find a wife from his homeland. In Addis Ababa he meets Mena, a girl who wants to migrate at all costs and is ready to follow the first man able to make it possible for her to leave the Horn of Africa. The two begin a romance and start planning their wedding, but things suddenly become complicated when Mena, during a trip to Bahir Dar, meets Nigus (which symbolically means "king" in Amharic), a morally incorruptible young farmer from the Blue Nile waterfalls region. Nigus is introduced to the audience as a proud nationalist who embodies the Ethiopian (or, more precisely, Amhara) cultural traditions in opposition to the hedonistic and corrupted attitudes of the diasporic Salsawi. From this point on, the film develops around Mena's dilemma about who to choose as the love of her life: the straight but poor farmer from Abay (the Blue Nile), or the wicked but rich businessman from Vegas? The final choice, preceded by beautiful and nostalgic scenes of iconic Ethiopian landscapes, coupled with songs praising motherland Ethiopia and criticizing life in the diaspora, falls on the farmer. Mena finally decides to stay in Ethiopia and move with Nigus to the countryside.

The film, which is successful in keeping an entertaining, comedy-like style all throughout its duration, repeatedly touches upon themes that are central to the government developmental agenda, such as rural development, the containment of rural–urban migration fluxes, and the economic exploitation of the Blue Nile's waters. Throughout the film, Nigus is represented as a positive hero, an Ethiopian countryman who is respectful of local moral traditions and shies away from the pleasures of modern life. Inspired by him, his cousin, who studied at Addis Ababa University, decides to move back to the countryside to make uneducated farmers understand the benefits of harnessing the water flow of the Blue Nile through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project (a project initiated by Meles Zenawi and central to the EPRDF's developmental policies; see Carlson 2013). Explicitly unveiling its didacticism, the film ends with the following sentences, motionless on the screen: "50 percent of young Ethiopians would like to emigrate; 75 percent of the Ethiopians living abroad would like to come back; 85 percent of the Blue Nile water

leaves Ethiopia without being exploited; if the Dam project will be completed only 5 percent of the Blue Nile water will be used: there is no reason for other countries to oppose this project."[4]

According to the data provided by Tewodros's production company, Sebastopol Films, the theatrical release of *Abay vs Vegas* was highly successful with local audiences, and seemingly made (at least part of) them forget the controversies that followed the release of *Qey Sitet*. Reassured by this success, Tewodros quickly ventured into a new film project, also about migration: *Sost Mazen*/*Triangle* (2013). This film moves away from the romantic comedy genre adopted in the previous film to focus on the migration journey, and particularly on the drama of human trafficking and smuggling. The film's central characters are Mahamer, a young Ethiopian (played by the Ethiopian film star Solomon Bogale) who decides to migrate to the West by land, and Winta, a young Eritrean woman (played by Mahider Assefa) whom Mahamer meets while crossing the Sahara Desert. The trip they embark upon, together with a group of young Ethiopians and Eritreans (many of whom die in dramatic circumstances during the journey), metaphorically (but also unrealistically) condenses different itineraries of illegal migration as portrayed by both local and global media over the past few years. After leaving Ethiopia, the group crosses northern Sudan, Libya, and the Mediterranean Sea, but once they reach Italy, the plot takes a turn that makes the film become less realistic: the few survivors in fact end up in the hands of an Italian smuggler who sells them fake passports to go to Mexico and continue their journey by road to the United States.[5] The film focuses closely on the trip's difficulties (the heat, the lack of food and water, the absence of privacy, and the bad hygienic conditions), the violence of the intermediaries (the human smugglers in Libya and Sudan, the intermediary in Italy, the traffickers between Mexico and the United States), and the natural obstacles delaying the journey (a sand storm in the Sahara Desert, a sea storm in the Mediterranean Sea, etc.) in an overt attempt at highlighting and dramatizing the experience of illegal migration. Interestingly enough, however, in order to give a more entertaining tone to the film, throughout the plot the focus progressively shifts from the trip to the relationship between Mahamer and Winta, who end up promising each other love and a life together in the United States. This promise is to be fulfilled, as the closing credits reveal, in part two of the film.

Less aligned with the government's agenda than the previous film, *Sost Mazen* produces a representation of migration that is based more on nationalistic sentiments than on explicit attempts to criticize the economic and political reasons

that push young Ethiopians to migrate. All throughout the film, the protagonists' resistance and rebellion to the smugglers (in the Saharan Desert, in Italy, and above all in Mexico and the United States) are emphasized and their heroic behavior is celebrated,[6] with the film repeatedly moving from drama to action in an attempt to keep the audience's interest alive through the use of special and visual effects. In a similar nationalistic vein, the love story between Mahamer and Winta (an Ethiopian man and an Eritrean woman) blinks at the ideal of reuniting Ethiopia and Eritrea in order to recreate the "Great Ethiopia" that, according to the Ethiopian nationalists' perspective, first Italian colonialism and more recently the EPRDF-implemented politics of ethnic federalism have divided.[7] In this sense, the film highlights Tewodros's political eclecticism and makes it harder to associate him directly with the government's agenda. Nevertheless, the films' particular take on migration equally shows the director's will to avoid direct political criticism in order to concentrate on nationalist sentiments that, by virtue of their populist appeal, can help the film obtain larger support from local audiences.

Between Denunciation and Artistic Experimentation: Migration in Dagmawi Yimer's Films

Dagmawi Yimer began his career as a filmmaker "*per caso*/by chance" (Yimer in Guerini 2013, 116). In fact, while he already had a few experiences as an amateur filmmaker before migrating to Italy, he never really thought of making films for a living. Before the 2005 elections, he was studying law in Addis Ababa and had decided to become a lawyer, but after the postelectoral violence he felt threatened and decided to leave a country in which, in his words, "judges are put into prison for their judging" (Yimer in Triulzi 2012, 104). With a group of friends, he decided to migrate to Europe by land and undertook a very long and difficult journey that profoundly marked his life.[8] Once in Italy, he took part in a workshop on participatory video film production organized by the Italian language school he was attending. The workshop was mainly aimed at giving the asylum seekers who were attending it an instrument to better tell their stories and participate in the creation of an "Archive of Migrant Memories."[9] This experience pushed Yimer to develop a particular interest in filmmaking, and when the short-term workshop ended, he did his best to develop a relationship with the workshop instructors in order to consolidate his training and become a full-time filmmaker.

In this period he codirected his first documentary film,[10] *Come un uomo sulla terra*/*Like a Man on Earth* (2008, codirected with Riccardo Biadene and Andrea Segre), which narrates the migration journey from Ethiopia to Italy through the prism of Yimer's and some of his friends' experiences and denounces the Italian and European migration laws that provoked the tightening of border controls in the Mediterranean area. This film had great local and international success and participated in transforming Yimer into one of the best-known representatives of the emerging wave of African diasporic cinema produced in Italy (Jedlowski 2011; De Franceschi 2013a). In the following years he directed other documentary films focused on issues of migration and racism in Italy, such as *C.A.R.A. Italia*/*Dear Italy* (2009), one of the first documentary films to be shot within a residential center for asylum seekers in the peninsula; *Soltanto il mare*/*Nothing but the Sea* (2010, codirected with Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barracco), in which Yimer documents his return to Lampedusa, the island where he landed when he reached Italy from Libya; and *Va' Pensiero, storie ambulanti*/*Va' Pensiero, Walking Stories* (2013), a documentary film that narrates the experiences of three Senegalese men who were the victims of violent racist attacks in Milan and Florence between 2009 and 2012. Moving progressively from a focus on his own experience as a migrant to a wider interest on issues related to migration, politics, and racism in Italy, Yimer made a conscious attempt at moving his public image from that of "someone who landed in Lampedusa and managed to make a few films" to that of a filmmaker "whose work comes before his biography" (Yimer in Guerini 2013, 114).

Among Yimer's films, *Like a Man on Earth* is probably the most relevant for the argument I intend to develop in this chapter. While, in fact, all of Yimer's documentary films look at migration issues, it is with *Like a Man on Earth* that Yimer tries explicitly to face the memories of his journey to Italy and the motivations that pushed him to leave Ethiopia. In the film, Yimer is the leading character, a first-person narrator who, by combining his own experiences with those of other people he met during the trip, initiates the viewer to the hidden tragedy of illegal migration. The film opens with him connecting his personal biography to the historical factors that influenced it, and explaining the political motivations that pushed him to leave his country.[11] This initial sequence has an important role in the film: on the one hand, it inscribes the recent phenomenon of illegal migration from Ethiopia and Eritrea within the larger historical framework of the colonial relationships between Italy, Libya, and the Horn of Africa—a relationship that has for long time been erased from the Italian collective memory (cf. Triulzi 2006; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo

2012)—and, on the other hand, it connects the migration phenomenon to the most recent manifestations of political authoritarianism in Ethiopia (Abbink 2006). The dramatic atmosphere of the film is underlined by the slow and dark soundtrack that accompanies most of the film's sequences in which both Ethiopian and Eritrean people who migrated to Italy along with Yimer narrate the experiences of abuse, exploitation, and violence they lived or witnessed throughout the trip. By making these witnesses public the film makes an explicit attempt at locating the political responsibilities for the situation in which migrants find themselves. In particular, the film explicitly refers to the undemocratic nature of the Ethiopian and Libyan governments, to the deals signed between the Italian and Libyan authorities for the control of migration fluxes in the Sahara Desert and on the Libyan coast (at the time of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya and Silvio Berlusconi's government in Italy), and to the role of the European Union and its border control agency, Frontex, in the perpetuation of this system of violent exploitation. As Yimer has emphasized in interviews, in this film he had the responsibility of selecting and collecting the stories while, at the same time, "canalizing" them toward a specific narrative structure that aimed at highlighting the drama of illegal migration and the political and economic factors determining it (Yimer in Guerini 2013, 119). These multiple responsibilities gave Yimer the chance to appear in the film not only as the "object" of the story, but also as its "active and responsible subject," a person who does not only want to tell the audience about his "suffering and difficulties," but who instead has "his own ideas" and personal standing on the causes of the experience he went through (Yimer in Guerini 2013, 115).

This attitude positions Yimer in the tradition of politically engaged African diasporic cinema that emerged in Europe in the early 1960s, a filmmaking tradition connected with the Third Cinema movement that appeared around the same years in Africa and Latin America (Blackwood and Givanni 1988; see also Guneratne and Dissanayake 2003). By doing this, Yimer clearly distances himself from locally produced Ethiopian cinema: he does not only focus explicitly on controversial political issues, he also explicitly denounces the Ethiopian government. This attitude is evident in the concluding lines of one of the written descriptions of his journey from Ethiopia to Italy, which are worth quoting at length:

> If I could go back in time, I wouldn't set out on this journey again, at least I don't think so. At every step, I cursed my government for having thrown away the lives of so many young people and forced them into flight. I was ashamed of belonging to

> a generation with no other option but to flee from their country. This journey isn't comparable to the imprisonment one would suffer in my country for manifesting dissent against the present government. If I compare this journey to being in prison, I think that if you survive prison, people consider you as a witness to the history of your country. Whereas if you survive this journey, you're nothing except to yourself. You're just one of those who left. This journey is a worse punishment than prison. And yet we leave because there's nothing else to do. In Ethiopia there isn't even the privilege of sacrificing oneself or dying for one's country in the hope of real change. At present, the death of one of us in Ethiopia would be a useless sacrifice. (Yimer 2013, 252)

As I underlined earlier, Yimer's political concerns have progressively shifted from issues directly related to migration fluxes from Ethiopia to topics connected to racism and migration policies in Italy, and this move has contributed in pushing Yimer's films to the forefront of the African diasporic film production scene in Italy. At the same time, this same move has also participated in progressively distancing Yimer from Ethiopian audiences, who have hardly had any chance to access his work.[12] Yimer's films are barely known in Ethiopia, and their political content would make it difficult for them to pass the tight censorship system that regulates film circulation in the country (Jedlowski 2015). Furthermore, because of his status as a political refugee, Yimer cannot travel back to Ethiopia to promote his work, and this situation inevitably pushes him to interact and dialogue more with other African and Ethiopian diasporic filmmakers than with the directors who are participating in the development of video film production in Ethiopia, such as Tewodros Teshome.

Conclusion: Ethiopian Cinema and the Politics of Migration

In this chapter I discussed the way migration is represented in contemporary Ethiopian cinema, and particularly in the work of two, very different film directors, one living and working in Ethiopia, the other one based in Italy. The analysis of their biography and their work has pointed out a number of relevant differences in the way migration is discussed and highlights the relevance that the specific cultural and political position from which a film is enunciated has on its contents and aesthetics. As Stuart Hall has emphasized,

> the practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of enunciation. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say "in our own name," of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never exactly in the same place. (1996, 210)

As highlighted through the brief discussion of Tewodros's and Yimer's biographies, the two directors come from very different social and professional backgrounds. While throughout his career Tewodros has cultivated a tight relationship with the Ethiopian political and economic elite in order to become one of the key players in the local media production and distribution industry, Yimer, because of his family background, his political orientation, and his migration experience, has progressively positioned himself at the margins of (if not as an antagonist to) the Ethiopian elite that runs the country. At the same time, since his arrival in Europe he has also acquired an influential position as an intellectual and artistic spokesman for the minority of African migrants living in Italy.

As a result, Tewodros's position of enunciation is firmly inscribed within the cultural and political environment that defines the life of the Ethiopian ruling elite, and his films make both an implicit and explicit attempt to meet the opinions of these elites so as to reinforce the strategic position Tewodros holds as key stakeholder in the local film industry. In contrast, Yimer's position of enunciation is the result of the double marginality that characterizes his position as an exilic, migrant filmmaker (Naficy 2001; see also Sayad 1999), and his films direct the attention of Italian and international audiences toward the social and political causes of this marginality.

These biographical aspects result in Tewodros's and Yimer's films having profoundly different "addressivities," that is, profoundly different "ways of 'turning to' an audience" (Barber 2007, 202). Tewodros's films target (and by targeting make an attempt at creating) a rather homogeneous Ethiopian, Amharic-speaking constituency, and in order to do so, they stage a nationalistic (some might say populist) discourse about migration, in which the causes that push people to migrate are rarely investigated in depth. As a result, the complexity and difficulties of the migration experience and life abroad are moved to the background of his films' plots, while the emphasis is put on the courage of the Ethiopian protagonists who manage to achieve their objectives against all odds (*Sost Mazen*), or who are

able to show the values of Ethiopian traditions against the corruption of life in the diaspora (*Abay vs Vegas*).

Yimer's films, on the contrary, target international audiences (mainly Italian but also increasingly transnational), and in order to do so they focus on the analysis of issues related to migration and racism in Italy. This focus made Yimer's work become the vector for a wider political discourse on migration in Italy, but at the same time created the risk, underlined by Yimer in several interviews (Yimer in De Franceschi 2013b; Yimer in Guerini 2013), of him being seen by both audiences and critics as a passive object rather than as an active subject, as a "migrant who happens to make films" rather than as a director who "happens to make films on migration." Precisely in order to counter this risk, in recent years Yimer has made an explicit effort to develop the artistic qualities of his work, an effort that is clearly achieved in his latest, widely acclaimed film, *Va' Pensiero*.

What, then, does the work of these two filmmakers tell us about the way migration is discussed and represented in Ethiopian cinema and, in more general terms, in Ethiopian society today? No easy answer can be formulated. But it is evident that the profound differences between Tewodros's and Yimer's works underline the unease surrounding the discussion of this topic in Ethiopia, where a frank debate about the political and economic causes of mass migration seems to have trouble in finding the necessary space to exist. This situation deeply influences the kind of cultural and cinematic production about this issue produced both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora and makes, at least for now, the creation of an artistic dialogue about this topic between local and diasporic directors hard to imagine.

NOTES

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1. Some have expressed fears that this system could be used also to prevent members of the political opposition from leaving the country.
2. It is important to note that in the EPRDF's discourse, the Red Terror era is the most evident expression of the Derg regime's political violence, which somehow justifies all

episodes of violence committed afterward and in order to defeat the Derg.

While the political and scholarly debate around the reelaboration of the memory of the Red Terror is complex and articulate (Tronvoll, Schaefer, and Aneme 2009; see also Triulzi 2002), it is important to underline that, for audiences still traumatized by the way the EPRDF had handled the 2005 elections, Tewodros' film sounded as a provocation, something like a propaganda message aimed at justifying postelectoral violence by reminding audiences of the violence that characterized the Derg regime.

3. The audience reaction reached particularly violent levels in the days that followed the film's release, with Tewodros's car being vandalized and him feeling threatened to the point of deciding to leave the country with his family for a while.
4. The transcription is based on my notes, and thus respects the overall meaning but not the precise formulation of the film's closing credits.
5. Some of the foreign locations were recreated in Ethiopia, while others (such as the scenes in Mexico and the United States) were shot abroad.
6. In one of the last scenes of the film, when the group has finally reached the United States, before sacrificing himself to save the other Ethiopian migrants who traveled with him, one of the protagonists says to the smugglers: "Your uncles the Italians didn't scare me, let alone you. I'm an African, a warm blooded Ethiopian!" (the quote is a literal transcription from the film's subtitles in English).
7. On the extremely complex issue of the political relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and of Ethiopian nationalists' dream of regaining access to the Red Sea, see, among others, Iyob (2000) and Abbink (2003).
8. Beyond the films that I will mention in the following pages, Dagmawi narrated the experience of his journey from Ethiopia to Italy in a number of articles and interviews (Yimer 2013; De Franceschi 2013b; Guerini 2013; see also Triulzi 2013).
9. The archive saw the light in the following years, and Dagmawi is today its vicepresident (Triulzi 2012; http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en).
10. During the workshop he attended, Dagmawi had already directed a couple of short documentary films, but they had little circulation.
11. The beginning of the film is very clear in this sense as we hear Dagmawi Yimer's voice saying: "I think that this story should begin one hundred years ago, when our grandfathers met each other. With the war, when Italy tried to invade Libya and later Ethiopia."
12. *Like a Man on Earth* has been screened in Addis Ababa to a limited audience, thanks to the efforts of some of the people who collaborated in the realization of the film. This experience is reported in Triulzi (2009).

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A Wide People with a Small Screen

Oromo Cinema at Home and in Diaspora

Teferi Nigussie Tafa and Steven W. Thomas

The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia (at least 34 percent of the population by a conservative estimate), and some also live in Kenya and Somalia. Since the 1990s, significantly large diaspora populations in the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway, and other countries have fostered a cohesive transnational community, including the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) with its own annual academic journal. The Oromo are just one of more than eighty ethnic groups, each with its own language, who have played important roles in Ethiopia's complex history, but the participation of most of these ethnic groups in modern forms of culture such as the novel, theater, television, and cinema is little known to scholars of African literature and cinema (Hassen 2008; Tafa 2015). Scholarly work on what is called "Ethiopian" literature and cinema has focused almost entirely on works in the Amharic language. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century until the revolution in 1991, the Oromo language was banned by the Ethiopian government from use in print and broadcast media (Bulcha 1994; Hussein 2008). The Oromo are a somewhat unique case in Ethiopia because their size is larger than the two dominant groups, and this presents a challenge to the organization of the nation-state. The new multiethnic federalist government constituted in 1994 has been nominally committed to a pluralistic Ethiopian

culture, allowing Oromo-language literature, theater, radio, television, and cinema to emerge. Nevertheless, Oromo artists, alongside artists from many other ethnic groups, have had to overcome political obstacles and cultural barriers in Ethiopia as well as abroad.

Our essay is the first to examine cinema made primarily in the Oromo language. It surveys a range of feature-length movies, short films, and television dramas produced in Ethiopia as well as in the United States and Norway. It also draws upon interviews with Oromo directors and media professionals. It raises questions about what it means to categorize a cinema culture by its ethnic identity in both national and global contexts. Is what makes a movie Oromo simply the language spoken by the actors, the cultural symbolism in the movie, or the political affiliation of the director? Is the narrative structure and cinematic style of Oromo movies any different from other movies made in Ethiopia? The global and modern characteristics of ethnic struggle for political recognition have led many scholars to critically examine the relationship of ethnicity to modernity in a way that radically questions the assumption of a nation-state's isomorphism with its media culture. In scholarly study of how African cinemas travel across national borders and how local communities respond to globalization, such as the essays collected in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (Şaul and Austen 2010) and *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Krings and Okome 2013), it is clear that different ethnic groups have articulated their identities in relation to national politics and the economic forces of globalization in different ways.

Considering the context out of which Oromo cinema emerged, our essay argues for the importance of three aspects of indigenous Oromo cultural practices that not only have influenced the content and style of the narrative, but also have oriented the community organizations that support the filmmakers. The primary aspect is the *Gada* system, which is an indigenous form of egalitarian, rotational, age-set democratic government. Structurally related to the *Gada* system are two important cultural practices.[1] One is the ethical orientation of *guddifacha*, which literally means "adoption," but more broadly is the practice of including war captives or even just outsiders into their community. The other is *siiqqee*, which is the traditional form of women's empowerment in indigenous Oromo culture. Our essay will show how the movies articulate and adapt the indigenous cultural practices of the *Gada* system, including *guddifacha* and *siiqqee*, in a context of political oppression and marginalization. These cultural concepts are not just the

thematic content and political symbolism of the movies, but are also part of the social infrastructure that has empowered Oromo filmmaking—the collaborative nature of its production and the community-centered form of its distribution and exhibition. Hamid Naficy has surveyed a diverse range of diasporic, exilic, and ethnic films from around the world to theorize the concept of the "accented style," which includes "the film's visual style; narrative structure; character and character development; subject matter, theme, and plot; structures of feeling of exile; filmmaker's biographical and sociocultural location; and the film's mode of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception" (Naficy 2001, 21). Similar to Naficy, we consider the relationship between the mode of production, distribution, and exhibition and the content and style of the movies (Naficy 2001, 64). Operating outside of the capitalist networks for financing movie production, and within a social context of marginalization, Oromo filmmakers depend upon the complex organization of their ethnic community to make and show their art, and consequently, through their art, these filmmakers engage in dialogue with the ideals of Oromo culture around which their community identifies.

Both inside and outside Ethiopia, the filmmakers whom we interviewed indicated that they were very deliberate and self-conscious about drawing from these cultural practices, especially the principles of the *Gada* system, sometimes in obvious, but sometimes in more subtle ways. Inside Ethiopia, the first Oromo-language feature-length movie was *Eelaa/Rancid Body* directed by Abraham Jalata in 2005. More recent productions include the detective movie *Samaloo* by Mohamad Dawud in 2015 and the television drama *Dheebu*, directed by Kelbessa Megersa, that ran for several seasons from 2014 to 2017. Outside Ethiopia, Gammado Jamal in Norway has directed several suspense thrillers dramatizing Oromo political oppression. But in the United States, rather than overtly political films, independent filmmakers Dhaba Wayessa, Keyirat Yusuf, and Samsoon Marqoos have made movies that very subtly adapt Oromo traditions to the immigrant experience. Their films have been widely distributed among Oromo from Canada to Australia as well as inside Ethiopia.

We have limited our study to fictional movies with explicit markers of Oromo identity—movies in which Afan Oromo is the primary language spoken by the main characters and in which Oromo cultural symbols are represented. Certainly, there are Oromo filmmakers who make films in Ethiopia's national language about other subject matter. For example, Michael W. Thomas's exhaustive survey of Amharic films showcases Paulos Regassa as the first director in Ethiopia to make an epic

period drama (Thomas 2015, 29–30). Paulos is also one of the only filmmakers in Ethiopia currently doing the sort of independent, creative documentary that takes years of patiently gathering video (Paulos Regassa, interview, Addis Ababa, December 17, 2014). But although Paulos self-identifies as an Oromo whose family is from the Wollega zone, he has so far not made that identity an explicit part of his filmmaking (Paulos Regassa, interview, Addis Ababa, October 29, 2016). Another example is the director of the Oromo-language film *Samaloo*, Mohamad Dawud, whose earlier films were in Amharic. Since Amharic is the national language, the relationship of Oromo filmmakers to Ethiopia's popular culture is complex and multifaceted, and the subject matter of interest to filmmakers of all ethnic groups is diverse. Considering that Amharic films have so far received all of the scholarly attention—and sometimes that scholarship has proceeded with the incorrect assumption that the movies all reflect a singular culture—our study focuses on films that are "accented" (to use Naficy's term) as ethnically Oromo in order to highlight one part of Ethiopia's rich diversity.

In this essay, we aim to show that inside and outside of Ethiopia, Oromo cinema places ethnic traditions and ideals into conversation with a rapidly changing world. One could use Arjun Appadurai's (1996) theorization of ethnoscapes, ideascapes, and mediascapes in his analysis of modernity and globalization to argue that Oromo cinema idealizes selected elements of its traditional ethnic culture ("ethnoscapes") such as the *Gada* system by translating those elements into the buzzwords of globalized modernity such as "democracy" and "human rights" ("ideascapes") via the communications technologies of digital photography and Internet distribution ("mediascapes"). However, our essay complicates Appadurai's model of culture by demonstrating that Oromo filmmaking emerged out of community organizations that have dialectically adapted Oromo traditions to changing political and socioeconomic conditions. As our argument foregrounds the historical role of such organizations for theorizing the Oromo identity that filmmakers have self-consciously made a part of their art, our essay will first narrate a historical overview of the transnational Oromo cultural movement that supported its cinema. Then it will theorize what it might mean to define Oromo cinema in relation to iconic Oromo traditions such as the *Gada* system, *guddifacha*, and *siiqqee*, but that is also responsive to the changing conditions of the twenty-first century. Finally it will closely analyze four movies—three of which were produced in Ethiopia, one in the United States—to demonstrate the importance of the *Gada* system for Oromo cinema.

Oromo Cinema in the Context of the Oromo Cultural Movement

The history of the Oromo cultural movement and political struggle is too complex for the scope of this essay, and scholars continue to debate many of the details, but a brief overview of the version of history that influences Oromo filmmakers will aid in a theorization of Oromo cinema. One thing that makes any generalization about Oromo culture problematic is its diversity. Indeed, the Oromo are quite literally a "wide people" extending from the northeast corner of Ethiopia approaching the border of Djibouti to the far west border with South Sudan and south across the border into Kenya. Some are Muslim, some Orthodox Christian, some Protestant, and some still practice the indigenous monotheistic religion *Waaqefannaa*. The relationship of the Oromo to the rest of Ethiopia also has a complex history. Before the development of capitalist infrastructure and state bureaucracies throughout the world, the Oromo culture was an aggregate of different, relatively diffuse, and decentralized clans including the Borana, Macha, Tulama, Arsi, Wello, Itu, and others. Some Oromo communities were pastoralists, others agriculturalists; some formed Muslim kingdoms, others practiced *Gada* democracy; some were allied with the Habesha kingdoms through the intermarriage of elites over the course of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, and others remained quite distant from the Ethiopian Empire even after it was consolidated following World War II with British and American support (Hassen 1990; Holcomb and Ibsa 1990). Likewise, structures of social organization are also diverse. Clearly, the form of *Gada* that Asmarom Legesse (1973) observed in his groundbreaking anthropological study of the pastoralist Borana Oromo in the 1960s on the Kenyan border, with its close structural relationship to polygamous marriage practices and interlocking family, clan, and *Gada* classes, is somewhat different from what one would find in other locations. Pastoral social organization differs from agrarian, which differs from urban; likewise, the mostly Muslim east differs from the largely Protestant zones in the west.

Nevertheless, in an influential collection of essays by both Oromo and non-Oromo scholars, *Being and Becoming Oromo* (Baxter, Hultin, and Truilzi 1996), as well as in earlier anthropological studies (Lewis 1974; Baxter 1994), scholars observed a remarkable consistency of core Oromo concepts, values, and practices adapted to different and overlapping historical circumstances. Indeed, the anthropologist Herbert Lewis (1989) observed during his 1960s fieldwork in the communities around the city of Ambo, just 125 kilometers west of Ethiopia's capital city, the

ongoing practice of distinctly Oromo procedures of self-governance and law as the magistrates of the Ethiopian Empire looked the other way.

Scholars generally agree that the consolidation of different Oromo communities and the modern articulation of its ethnic identity occurred dialectically as a response by Oromo intellectuals and leaders to the imperial expansion and development of the Ethiopian state over the course of the twentieth century (Lewis 1993; Jalata 1993). Land redistribution, urbanization, the institutionalization of secondary and tertiary education, access to educational opportunities abroad, and the professionalization of the military all contributed to the formation of an Oromo elite whose ethnic consciousness developed as they confronted the degradation and repression of their language and culture alongside the appropriation of their land. Moreover, since organizing politically around ethnic identity and expressing this culture in modern forms of print and radio was outlawed by the government, much of the early scholarly recuperation of Oromo history and traditions was done by an expatriated elite living in the United States, Sweden, England, and elsewhere (Virtanen 2009; Gebissa and Holcomb 2011; Posey 2014). The writings of Oromo intellectuals were influenced first by Marxist theories and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s and later by liberal theories of democracy, human rights, and cultural pluralism in the 1990s, and so their explanations of Oromo culture and politics often borrowed from the language of these other theories. Therefore, the contemporary articulation of their ethnic identity is in part a transnational phenomenon. Since the expatriated intellectuals are separated from the rural communities within Ethiopia, some argue critically that their adaptation of *Gada* principles to contemporary socioeconomic issues is a problematically idealized and abstracted representation of culture that may miss some of the pragmatic decision-making of daily life, the socially transformative effects of transnational capital, and the mixing of local and global cultures.

Like other cultural and political movements, Oromo identity was also based on collective memory of past struggles against imperial Habesha (or "Abyssinian") conquest in the late nineteenth century. From the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries, Oromo territory had expanded considerably, and there has been much debate about how this happened. For example, a well-known seventeenth-century treatise by a monk, Abba Bahrey, complained that the Oromo's egalitarian social organization might have some military advantages over the class divisions of his own Habesha kingdoms (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954). Scholars such as Mohammed Hassen (1990) and Donald Levine (1974) have explored in more depth

the role that the *Gada* system and the practice of *guddifacha* may have played. After the construction of the Suez Canal expanded Europe's economic and military reach, the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II responded to Europe's colonization of the African coast in the north and the expansion of the Oromo in the south by consolidating the Habesha kingdoms (Jalata 1993; Bulcha 2002). By the end of the nineteenth century, with the assistance of European weaponry and a new railroad, Menelik had expanded his territory and centralized his administration in the city of Addis Ababa, formerly an Oromo town called Finfinne that had been conquered by King Sahle Sellasie a few decades earlier (Marcus 2002). Sometimes the military conquest was brutal, not just the conquest of the Oromo, but also of other ethnic groups and even other Amhara and Tigray kingdoms. Land was appropriated for military officers as part of a feudal tenant system (Ta'a 1984; Jalata 1993). Following World War II, as opportunities for education were universalized for the whole nation, Oromo elites became conscious of their economic, political, and cultural rights. They encountered a national language policy that disparaged their culture, and they encountered history books published in both Europe and Ethiopia that either ignored the existence of the Oromo entirely or characterized them as barbarians (Baxter, Hultin, and Triulzi 1996). In response, they fostered an Oromo cultural movement that deployed art—especially music and poetry—to reject national subordination and cultural assimilation. Hence, dialectically, the expansion and domination of the Ethiopian Empire in the Horn of Africa not only created collective grievances among ethnic groups, but also created a condition in which indigenous intellectual and professional organizations could grow. Some members of these elite groups gradually recognized the irreconcilability of the contradictions between the dominating structures of the old regime of Haile Selassie and the emerging bourgeois class. To cope with the situation, they started to recuperate a common cultural heritage of the Oromo people across religious and regional differences.

Out of this dialectic of modernity emerged the Oromo cultural movement. It is our view that the foundation for a twenty-first century Oromo cinema began in the 1960s with various Oromo cultural institutions that were created in different urban centers including Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. The first Oromo play, *Barumsa*, was produced in 1965 in the city of Bishoftu and was written by Mamo Mazamir who was also a cofounder of the Macha Tulama Self-Help Association (MTSHA). At that time, Oromo communities faced hardship due to ethnic disparities, so the MTSHA built roads, clinics, and schools in addition to fostering the arts. Similarly,

popular music synthesized traditional styles with electric guitars such as the Afran Qalo Cultural Band based in Dire Dawa and featuring the pop star Ali Biira. Their recorded songs broadcast a cultural consciousness. Radio Mogadishu, in which politically controversial music, programs, and radio plays in the Oromo language were broadcast into Ethiopia from Somalia, also helped to grow the Oromo performing arts. These self-consciously Oromo cultural and business organizations eventually stimulated the rise of the more militant Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

Oromo performing arts showed remarkable growth after the fall of the Derg regime in 1991—a revolution that was in part accomplished by a loose alliance of various ethnic fronts and democratic movements, including the OLF, Tigray People's Liberation Front, Eritrean People's Liberation Front, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, Ogaden National Liberation Front, Sidama Peoples Liberation Front, and others. Immediately following the revolution, the new government encouraged ethnic pluralism, and so Oromo performing arts started to flourish, and plays were performed in theaters where only Amharic-language plays had been performed before. Oromo-language television also began with the program *Dhanga*. Even though *Dhanga* broadcast only for an hour and contained a hodgepodge of news, interviews, and musical performance, it was also well known for its drama series featuring well-known actors from the National Theater, Ras Theater, and Hager Fiker. According to our interview with one of the founders of *Dhanga*, the writer and director Worku Gaddisa, it become one of the most popular TV programs in Ethiopia despite a lack of scriptwriters and a shortage of broadcast time (Worku Gaddisa, interview, Addis Ababa, May 25, 2016). Following its success, the first TV drama series called *Afaan Koo*/*My Language* was written and directed in 1995 by Worku Gaddisa. It was about the importance of using one's mother tongue for education, administration, courts, and media, but after twenty-two weeks, it was cancelled allegedly for political reasons. Another TV drama, *Jibicha Masa*/*Untrained Ox*, suffered a similar fate, canceled for what some suspect were political reasons.

Oromo TV drama led to Oromo cinema in 2005 with the production of *Eelaa*, written and directed by Abraham Jalata, who had modest training from a private film school. Initially *Eelaa* struggled to find a venue that would show the movie (Abraham Jalata, interview, Addis Ababa, May 20, 2016). Since most people who live in Addis Ababa speak Amharic, theater managers generally assume that Amharic-language films can attract a wider audience. As Alessandro Jedlowski (2015) has explained in his study of the Ethiopian film industry, filmmakers are somewhat at the mercy of cinemas whose selection process lacks transparency and

whose owners may harbor prejudicial assumptions about what they believe will be commercially successful. In addition to Jedlowski's findings, Oromo filmmakers told us in interviews that some cinema managers (though certainly not all) expressed opposition to Oromo-language movies. But after a private hotel finally offered to show *Eelaa*, its popularity encouraged the Agone Cinema and the Addis Ababa City Hall to show it as well, and it eventually was screened in national universities across Oromia. *Eelaa* convinced people that it is possible to make a successful film in a language other than the national language, and an MA thesis at Addis Ababa University was even devoted entirely to its analysis and appreciation (Damtawu, 2014). Other Oromo-language movies were soon made, such as *Cancala Jaalala*/*Shackle of Love* (Mulugeta Gurmu, 2007), *Rawwi*/*Done* (Tatek Tadesse, 2009), *Dhuga Lama*/*Double Truth* (Buzayo Ejere, 2012), and *Waada*/*Promise* (Seblewongel Tesfaye, 2013). However, these films were not as successful as *Eelaa*. Consequently, the development of Oromo film stagnated while Amharic-language film leaped forward both in quality and in quantity.

This gap in the entertainment industry worried some Oromo educators, students, filmmakers, and government officials. At a symposium at Rift Valley University in Addis Ababa in 2013, concerns were raised about the lack of skilled filmmakers and screening venues for Oromo films as well as the relatively small number of Oromo-speaking urbanites and the failure of Ethiopian films to reach rural areas. However, this situation has begun to change for the better since the completion of the Oromo Cultural Center in the heart of Addis Ababa in 2015 that includes a large cinema hall and stage theater. One result of the Oromo Cultural Movement is that in November 2016 UNESCO voted to recognize the Oromo *Gada* system as an intangible world heritage. At the same time, the independent organization Sandscribe Communications began facilitating training workshops that eventually enabled production of short dramatic and documentary films in the Oromo language. It was founded by Dhaba Wayessa, who, in 1991, soon after the revolution, was the first playwright to produce a play in the Oromo language at Addis Ababa's prestigious National Theater. He later emigrated to the United States to study film at Howard University and was the first in the Oromo diaspora to produce a short film, *Fallen Beats*, about the immigrant experience in Washington D.C.

In the diaspora, the development of independent Oromo film production alongside an independent Oromo television media is very recent, and its relation to film and media production in Ethiopia is complex. The politically controversial Oromo Media Network (OMN) was established in Minneapolis in 2014 to broadcast

news and political commentary via satellite. Before OMN, several online newspapers such as the *Finfinne Tribune* at Gadaa.com, *Oromia Times*, and *OPride* disseminated political analysis and music videos via the Internet, but OMN's former anchorman Abdi Fite has claimed in an interview that OMN is the first uncensored Oromo video broadcast to reach rural Ethiopia (Abdi Fite, interview, Minneapolis, June 18, 2016). In the United States, amateur filmmakers Samsoon Marqoos and Keyirat Yusuf distributed DVDs of their movies *Agartuu Barraaqa* (2014) and *Asaantii* (2015). In Norway, Gammado Jamal has produced numerous movies, including *Mijuu Haqaa* (2012) and *Amaanaa* (2016), which are primarily political thrillers that aim to dramatize the oppression of the Oromo at the hands of a corrupt Ethiopian state. These young filmmakers lack formal training and financial resources. They fund their projects out of their personal savings and with support from their local communities. They make use of transnational networks, annual gatherings, and communication via the Internet to stay connected with Oromos in other diaspora communities in countries around the world from Canada to Australia.

Scholars Mekuria Bulcha (2002) in Sweden, Greg Gow (2002) in Australia, Solomon Getahun (2006) in the United States, Pekka Virtanen (2009) in Finland, and Zakia Posey (2014) also in the United States have contributed to historical and ethnographic understanding of the Oromo diaspora. The diaspora's self-identity as Oromo complexly intersects with other forms of identity: their racial identity with other Africans and African Americans, their immigrant identity in common with Asians, their religious identity with other Christians and Muslims, and also their Ethiopian identity. Their relation to the Ethiopian diasporic community is not uniform or predictable; some Oromos identify themselves as Ethiopians, while others may feel they are different or even express an identity that is in antagonistic relation to the dominant idea of Ethiopian-ness. The Oromo community is richly diverse, including Muslims, Christians, and *Waaqefannaa* (Oromo indigenous religion), among other ideological orientations, some of whom are intensely politicized and some of whom are not. Since the Oromo are relatively unknown in their host countries, they often must articulate their identity as "Ethiopian" even though many were forced to leave their homeland precisely because they were in conflict with the Ethiopian state. Other Oromo immigrants were more assimilated into the dominant national culture of Habesha and the use of the Amharic language. Depending on circumstances, Oromos may have both positive and negative relationships with their fellow Ethiopian immigrants. For example, in the American context in particular, Oromo students may study at Howard University in Washington D.C. with Ethiopian

professors, notably the world-renowned filmmaker Haile Gerima, but at the same time, they might conceive of their own creative efforts as responding to an entirely different community base and contributing to a different cultural dynamic. When Oromo diaspora novelists, artists, and filmmakers wish to participate in a larger "world" culture, they discover a set of conflicting pressures since remaining true to their Oromo roots may not sell well in a market that already has preconceived ideas of what "Ethiopia" is. The Oromo experience does not fit any of the master-narratives of world history, and so its identity is not recognized on the world stage. While an Amhara expatriate such as Haile Gerima would eventually find himself valorized within an African American culture that had for two centuries idealized Ethiopia as a symbol of black liberation, the Oromo may feel alienated from that idealization.[2]

Distribution of movies made in the diaspora generally occurs in three stages, and importantly, they occur both in the diaspora and within Ethiopia. First, the films are exhibited at Oromo community events where a theater is rented for the occasion and tickets sold. In the diaspora, the difficulty is the low population density of Oromo immigrants that makes audience size small and scarce. Inside Ethiopia, filmmakers risk censorship. For instance, the Oromo Cultural Center in Addis screened *Agartuu Barraaqa* for several days until an official noticed that one of the characters wears an OLF pendant in one scene. Since the Ethiopian government now considers the OLF to be a terrorist organization, the movie was no longer screened. After such initial exhibition, the movies are then sold as DVDs or video CDs primarily at Oromo events and through private individuals—such as Birhani Geleto in Washington D.C.—who are entrusted with local distribution, sometimes out of their own homes (Birhani Geleto, interview, Washington D.C., February 12, 2016).

Filmmakers generally express frustration at the low returns on their investment, even when the Oromo community is positively receptive to their work. Many individuals in the Oromo community that we interviewed also expressed frustration that the independent OMN has not broadcast their films or other forms of Oromo culture. Largely due to the financial constraints and the expense of purchasing broadcast time, the OMN instead remains focused entirely on news and political commentary. Filmmakers in Ethiopia share a similar frustration with Ethiopian broadcast media, though the development and proliferation of new television stations in recent years promises to open up new possibilities for filmmakers. Consequently, eventually most films will be put on YouTube and other Internet platforms, which provide little to no financial remuneration for the filmmakers.

However, despite the low production values of many Oromo films and the lackluster distribution, what they do offer is a uniquely "accented" Oromo cinema.

Toward an Oromo Film Theory

Based on the historical context narrated above, we propose a preliminary and tentative Oromo film theory rooted in the *Gada* system. It is not enough to blandly claim that such filmmakers contribute to Oromo culture simply by existing as self-identified Oromo artists and by making movies where characters speak Afan Oromo (though simply existing is no small matter considering the suppression of Oromo-language literature for most of the twentieth century). Rather, what we argue is that these filmmakers are self-consciously charting a distinctive way of making movies—that is, plot lines, a character's relation to their community, symbolism and cultural reference points, the arrangement and iconography of the mise-en-scène, etc.—that are Oromo in their expression (or "accent" to use Naficy's term). We may compare their efforts to other filmmaking traditions. For example, Andrew Higson's (1995) definition of "heritage film" in his analysis of how British filmmakers aimed to distinguish their style from the Hollywood style suggests that not only the content, but a "documentary-realist" style invented a national heritage for the screen. Similarly, Manthia Diawara (2010), Jacqueline Bobo (1998), and other theorists have debated the ways in which pan-Africanist filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène in Senegal and Julie Dash in the United States self-consciously charted a different way of making movies in which decentered narratives and camera techniques reverse the racist gaze of Western cinema, foster a community-oriented aesthetic, and provoke a political consciousness. In the case of the Oromo films examined in our essay, their films contribute to the expression of the *Gada* system—the ancient form of Oromo political culture that encodes consensus building and inclusive politics. These filmmakers are in many ways rooted in grassroots community organizations such as the Macha Tulama Self-Help Association in Ethiopia and also diaspora associations such as the International Oromo Youth Association and the Oromo Studies Association that discuss and practice *Gada* democracy.

The *Gada* system emphasizes inclusion and participatory governance where leaders are elected for terms and rotate out according to age grades. The symbol of the *Gada* system is the *oda* tree (a kind of sycamore) under which the community

would come together to deliberate. As Ezekiel Gebissa remarks, "Over the last decade, gadaa emerged as a unifying symbol of the Oromo community everywhere. The sycamore tree, which symbolizes the gadaa assembly, has become the ubiquitous trademark of Oromo political groups inside Ethiopia and abroad" (2014, 63). The movie *Eelaa* includes this symbolism when its main character, a doctor at a rural hospital, is given the gift of a wallet with the symbolic *oda* tree imprinted on it. He thanks his staff by remarking, "This is the greatest gift in my life. I do not put this wallet in my pocket. I will put it in my heart."

The recuperation of Oromo culture is complex, especially since many of the leading scholars who have worked to recuperate and theorize Oromo culture live in the diaspora. Zakia Posey has analyzed "Oromo Transnationalism" through her own concept, what she calls the "identisphere" in response to Arjun Appadurai's notion of "scapes" (Posey 2014, 33). Appadurai explores the complex interaction of ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes to emphasize flows and movements of culture across geography. For Appadurai, ethnoscapes are in some ways works of imagination constructed by means of media technologies such as television and film whose representation of ethnic identity draws upon ideological concepts such as "freedom" and "nation" with no fixed meaning. This constellation of "scapes" are the relational techniques through which "groups seek to annex the global into their own practice of the modern" (Appadurai 1996, 4). In contrast, in Posey's analysis of a transnational Oromo culture, rather than cultural flows and fluid semiotics, she observes active and self-conscious negotiations of identity and difference through community organizations and social infrastructure in the context of diverse environments and in response to hegemonic power.

Our argument about Oromo cinema follows Posey's conceptualization of a transnational culture rooted in organizations that are simultaneously intellectual, social, practical, and material. For instance, OSA is a hybrid organization that was created in the United States in the 1990s in the wake of Ethiopia's second revolution. Although officially it is an academic organization with an annual conference and scholarly journal aimed at recuperating and analyzing Oromo culture and relevant issues, it is also a community organization where children come to learn about their heritage, young men and women socialize, musical groups perform, and leaders debate politics. It is important to understand this scholarly production in relation to the community from which it emerged, since OSA conferences are as much community events as they are scholarly events, where entire families meet, reconnect, and reassert their identity (Holcomb 2013). In some ways the OSA conference resembles

the various *Gada* meetings that occur throughout Ethiopia, bringing representatives from across the country together. Such community organizations, some local, others transnational, provide social cohesion and make an effort to maintain the practice of democratic governance that is *Gada*, the inclusive ethos that is *guddifacha*, and the sense of gender equality symbolized by the *siiqqee*. As these organizations are instrumental for the distribution and exhibition of Oromo-language movies, it is within such an environment that diasporic Oromos attempt to transfigure such principles in their art.

Four Oromo Movies and the *Gada* system

Movies made in Ethiopia and in the diaspora emerged out of community organizations invested in the concepts of the *Gada* system, and therefore they tend to reflect those aspects of their culture. Our essay will first analyze three movies made in Ethiopia, each of which foregrounds a different concept: first *Gada* in the movies *Samaloo* and *Gumaa*, second *guddifacha* in the movie *Eelaa*, and third *siiqqee* in the short film *Qanafaa*. Next, it will analyze how *Agartuu Barraaqa*, made in America, adapts all three concepts to a diasporic context.

The movie *Samaloo*, a detective story released in Addis Ababa by Mohamad Dawud in 2015, foregrounds *Gada* democracy. The story is about a hardworking young man named Abdisa who is suspected of murdering his own brother. Abdisa admits that he had a dispute with his brother about his family's land but maintains that he did not commit murder. When the police start searching for him, he flees to the forest and plans to live there, "until the day that brings the truth." In the meantime, his former lover Aaduu arrives from America and searches for him in the forest. After she discovers him and is convinced by his explanation, they petition the *Abba Gada* (president in the *Gada* system) to look into the case. The suspicious *Abba Gada* promises that he will, and within a short time, the *Gada* court assembles. Finally the *Gada* court discovers that the killer is not Abdisa after all, but instead the local militia. Justice is served through the traditional *Gada* system rather than through the modern Western legal system adopted by the Ethiopian government. When Aaduu realizes this, she despairs of the Western model for justice and even the Western way of life that she had grown accustomed to in America. She breaks off her relationship with a white boyfriend and determines to remain in her birthplace and marry Abdisa.

Samaloo is plotted as a conflict between modernity and tradition. To begin with, the name of the film itself alludes to the historical person who is believed to have reformed the *Gada* system three hundred years ago. The word also refers to the *Gada* court. The story exposes the weakness of modern sociopolitical systems and glorifies the *Gada* system. In it, the corrupted modern political and legal system only serves the few people who manipulate it for their own interest. The local militia had convinced the police officers that Abdisa is the murderer. Consequently, the police were so intent on capturing him that they did not hesitate to really consider the words of the men who reported the case. Through this scene, the film comments on the Ethiopian legal system in which the words of a local cadre are taken for granted without further investigation. When the truth is distorted, it results in the alienation of individuals from their society, lack of respect among peoples, and an insecure environment. On the other hand, the methods of the *Gada* court create a space for all viewpoints to receive a hearing and for the community to deliberate on the truth.

In addition, the film also shows that both the Western legal system and modern Ethiopian legal system are punitive systems whereas the *Gada* legal system is restorative. Restorative systems aim to restore both the victim and the offender within the community by repairing social relationships through reconciliation (Lewis 1974; Godana 2014). In contrast, the Western justice system aims to punish and often separate the offender from the community. Analogously, Western crime dramas often have linear plots that lead to the punishment (or death) of the criminal. A short film that dramatizes one feature of *Gada* procedures is *Gumaa* (Kumsa Tamana, 2016). The Oromo word *gumaa* can be roughly translated into English as "reparations." In this short film, a young man kills his rival for the woman he loves. Consequently, the families of the victim and the offender become hostile to each other, and the community fears that a cycle of violent revenge will divide them. The *Gada* leadership steps in to resolve the conflict through "reparations" where the murderer must stand in the town square with his hands in chains in order to collect donations from the community to give to the victim's family. Similarly, the movie *Samaloo* also narrates the process of a restorative justice system, which addresses both the offender and the victim. Both parties are consulted in the film. Justice is fulfilled when the needs of both parties are addressed.

One aspect of the restorative justice system is its inclusive social ethos that the Oromo call *guddifacha* (adoption). The movie *Eelaa* foregrounds the conflict between the ethos of *guddifacha* and the ethos of bourgeois class distinction.

Montage editing juxtaposes and contrasts the lifestyles of bourgeois Oromos living Western lifestyles in Ethiopia with poorer Oromo communities. The story is about Chaltu, a houseworker who falls in love with her employer, Dr. Rabbirra. As their relationship develops, she becomes pregnant. However, he has been awarded a scholarship and is about to go to America. Rabbirra brings her to Addis Ababa to live with his family so that he could go to America. As Chaltu's pregnancy becomes increasingly apparent, Rabbirra's mother grows suspicious because of a letter Rabbirra wrote to Chaltu. She confronts Chaltu and discovers the truth. Worried about the reputation of her son, she discharges Chaltu from her home. On the way to her home in a rural area, Chaltu gives birth to a girl. After Rabbirra returns home, he searches for her and brings her back to his family, before returning back to America. Again, Rabbirra's mother expels Chaltu, but this time taking away her daughter, and Chaltu returns to her rural village. After living there for several years, she decides to reunite with her daughter. Fighting with the guard of the house, she receives a head injury and goes mad. The movie concludes tragically when Rabbirra and their daughter encounter her dying in the hospital where Rabbirra works. The symbolism of Rabbirra's relationship to the hospital is emphasized by the gift Rabbirra had earlier received from his staff of a wallet with the symbol of the *Gada* system on it. The movie gives a clear glimpse into the Oromo middle-class and presents urban Addis Ababa and rural Ethiopia in all of their contradictions of poverty and wealth, tradition and modernity. It provides a critical look at modern Oromo migration to the cities and the place of women in that society.

Thematically, the conflict in the movie is between the indigenous Oromo cultural practice of *guddifacha* and the class stratification of modern bourgeois society. The word *guddifacha* literally means "adoption," like when a family adopts a child. It also includes the integration of newcomers and war captives (Hassen 1990; Blackhurst 1996). "In both cases, the society takes an oath in a guddifacha ceremony . . . not to alienate or discriminate against the new members socially, economically, and politically" (Abbas 1982, 15). In the movie, this ethos is illustrated by the welcome party prepared for Chaltu in Rabbirra's house and by the repeated exhortation of Rabbirra's father not to discriminate against Chaltu under any circumstances. According to Oromo culture, Chaltu has a right to live a free life as long as the family accept her in the first place.

Rather than simply portraying the cultural practice, the film dramatizes how *guddifacha* is endangered by class-based ideologies. Even though Chaltu is accepted as a member of the family, in the house she faces discrimination and is

disrespected by Rabbirra's mother, who believes Rabbirra deserves a wife from the same upper-middle class to which he belongs. Rabbirra's father held a prestigious position as a captain in the Ethiopian Navy. Chaltu is an orphan from a rural area who migrated to the city to serve as housemaid. Allegorically, Rabbirra represents an Oromo nationalism that cuts across class differences. This is illustrated when his sister, looking at a photo he has taken with many girls, asks him who he would date, pointing at the white woman in his class. He indicates that rather than wealthy and well-educated women, he prefers the "love of his people who educated him without getting enough education for themselves." His mother's internalization of class distinction, rather than Oromo values, is the central conflict of the movie, and it is clear that the heroes of the movie are Rabbirra and his daughter Simbo who criticize the fetishizing of class status.

Another aspect of the egalitarian and inclusive ethos of the *Gada* system is the position of women. The Oromo scholar Kuwee Kumsa (1997) has analyzed the multiple symbolic layers of the institutions of *siiqqee* and *addooyee* as forms of female solidarity enabling women to support each other to address concerns. When a woman raises her *siiqqee* (symbolic rod), it means the social balance, or *safuu*, has been upset, so both men and women must come together to restore balance (Kumsa 2013). As the activist Tsehai Wodajo (2013) has pointed out, Western feminism's emphasis on equal rights that emerged after the Industrial Revolution is somewhat different from the Oromo emphasis on balance and restorative justice that emerged out of the social organization of small farmers and pastoralists. In 2015, Bayisa Tura and Sagni Dibisa wrote and directed the short film *Qanafaa* with Sandscribe Communications. It is based on an episode in Teferi Nigussie's novel *Asanti* (The Unfolding Flower, 2013), which had already been adapted to the theater. *Qanafaa* was exhibited to audiences in Addis Ababa at the Pushkin Center, which has become a hub of activity for aspiring young filmmakers. The word *qanafaa* is the Oromo-language word for a traditional band that a woman wears on her forehead when she is pregnant and then wears as a necklace after the child is born. Traditionally, it is punishable for a man to disrespect a woman wearing *qanafaa*, and today the *qanafaa* is a symbol of women's rights in the traditional democratic *Gada* system of Oromo culture that values the mutual respect between men and women—somewhat resembling modern-day maternity leave policy.

The movie begins with a birth scene, followed by the ceremonial donning of the *qanafaa*. Later, when the wife is retrieving water from the river, the husband returns home from farming to discover his wife absent from their child, and he is

enraged by her absence. When she arrives home, he beats her. She responds with the traditional symbol of empowerment for women, the *siiqqee*, thus calling together the women in the community who then appeal in solidarity as a group to the village elders. Although the wife eventually forgives her husband, the village elders still must decide how to respond to this infraction against a woman in their community. They demand that he make a sacrifice to the whole community and reform his behavior. The filmmakers, Bayisa and Sagni, are both men in their mid-twenties with BA degrees in engineering from Haramaya University who began taking part in Sandscribe's evening workshops. In interviews, they explained that they want to make films to share the positive traditions of Oromo culture with the world through film (Sandscribe 2016). Hence, the short movie places the indigenous traditions of the *qanafaa* and the *siiqqee* in dialectic with the modern discourse of human rights to chart a uniquely Oromo approach to feminism and feminist filmmaking.

In the diaspora, the two American movies *Agartuu Barraaqa* and *Asaantii* are essentially soap-opera-style dramas that engage with domestic conflict and the personal struggle of immigrant Oromo adapting to American culture. On the surface, they may not seem like political films or explicit representations of cultural heritage, but this is perhaps because they have integrated Oromo concepts into everyday life practices and stories. In our interviews with Samsoon Marqoos, the director of *Agartuu Barraaqa*, and Amenti Megersa, its lead actor, they revealed that their movie was self-consciously working through the ways in which the *Gada* system and Oromo culture could be adapted to an American context (Amenti Megersa, interview, Minneapolis, June 20, 2016; Samsoon Marqoos, interview, Chicago, June 21, 2016). The adaptation of such traditional concepts to modern life and romance dramas is not unique to the United States. In an interview we conducted in Addis Ababa with Kelbessa Megersa, he similarly explained that concepts from the *Gada* system guided the plotting of several episodes of his popular Oromo-language television soap opera *Dheebu*, shown on Oromia television (Kelbessa Megersa, interview, Addis Ababa, June 9, 2017).

Agartuu Barraaqa addresses important themes such as the role of traditions for the immigrant community and the issue of domestic abuse. It tells the story of Gaadisaa, an Oromo immigrant living in the city of Chicago who had gone back to his homeland to find a wife. The opening title montage crosscuts between iconic shots of Chicago and Gaadisaa getting ready to go to the airport with his friend to meet his new wife Teliilee upon her arrival in America. Meanwhile, elsewhere, Gaadisaa's female friends wonder why he decided to find a wife in Ethiopia rather

than find love more locally with their friend Chaltu. At first, the marriage seems to be going well, and Gaadisaa's friends in Chicago have welcomed Teliilee into their community. She has found a job and is going to school. However, Teliilee's immigration to America is discovered by her long-lost lover Abdi, who pursues her and rekindles old passions. Believing that she is following her heart, Teliilee leaves Gaadisaa to live with Abdi in Minneapolis. Gaadisaa is distraught, but as his friends band together to comfort him, he and Chaltu discover the love that their friends always suspected they had for each other. Teliilee's situation deteriorates when she realizes that Abdi is physically abusive, is frequently drunk, and sometimes has sex with other women. He prohibits her from going to school and expects her to serve him. Terrified, she calls Gaadisaa while he is with his friends, sobbing that it is all her fault. The movie concludes with Gaadisaa and his male and female friends discussing what to do, and eventually they decide that, in spite of Teliilee's betrayal, the community must come together to protect women from domestic abuse.

This final scene is an example of the *Gada* system in action. At a point during the discussion, one of the women proposes that they all take turns with their opinions for how to solve the problem. The director originally planned to stage this scene under a tree, as the symbol of *Gada* democracy is the *oda* tree under which democratic deliberation traditionally took place. But he ended up shooting the scene at the beach in front of a bonfire, which although less obviously symbolic of Oromo traditions is perhaps better for more subtly weaving that tradition into ordinary daily life. Likewise, it would be unrealistic for Teliilee to suddenly brandish a *siiqqee* to call for restorative justice in the traditional manner portrayed in *Qanafaa*; instead she uses a cell phone, but the outreach to a deliberative communal body is in effect the same. Even before this scene, Oromo culture guides the plotting of the story. For instance, when Teliilee first arrives, the community actively, though cautiously, welcomes her in. This is narrated in terms of a few short dialogue scenes between Teliilee and Gaadisaa's friends interspersed with montage sequences of the community socializing together. Scholars of Oromo history and ethnography have frequently commented on the inclusive tradition and the way in which Oromo actively adopt outsiders into their communities—the aforementioned practice of *guddifacha*. For the purposes of this essay, what is significant is how the young generation of Oromo American filmmakers have internalized the knowledge of their ethnic heritage that they learned from the OSA and other grassroots Oromo community organizations. Hence, montage and crosscutting techniques are utilized to construct scenes that narrate *guddifacha*.

This manner of telling stories, even stories that are not explicitly about ethnic identity, is what we argue is a distinctly accented Oromo cinema, and it is clear from interviews with Oromo filmmakers that they are self-conscious about telling stories that follow Oromo social practices. Moreover, Oromo filmmakers are not naively and simply reproducing their culture by valuing tradition over modernity. *Agartuu Barraaqa* is actually quite challenging and transgressive of Oromo traditions by showing scenes of sexual encounters including both the positive relations between the unmarried Gaadisaa and Chaltu and the negative scene of Abdi's infidelity with a white woman. It graphically exposes the issue of domestic violence in a way that upset some members of the diaspora community who would prefer such issues not be discussed in public, and it also advocated for a progressive understanding of women's roles in society where men and women are equals in their pursuit of happiness, education, career, and decision making. The movie adapts Oromo culture to contemporary problems of immigrant life and utilizes the core values of the *Gada* system to critically engage with the problems within the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no Oromo cinema without Oromo community. In addition to the organizational infrastructure and social networks necessary for production, distribution, and exhibition, the Oromo community provides a rich set of cultural practices and concepts that collectively are referred to as the *Gada* system. In interviews, filmmakers have said that not only the content of their movies, but also their approach to narrative reflect the *Gada* system. As such, a transnational Oromo cinema is in some ways distinct from other Ethiopian cinema both in terms of the social networks via which the movies are made and watched and in terms of the cultural concepts that have been adapted to filmmaking out of the transnational conversations among Oromo intellectuals and community organizations in Ethiopia and the diaspora. Interestingly, it is the movies that on the surface appear to be mere melodramas about troubled families and romantic conflicts that have most incorporated the *Gada* system into their storytelling and their interpretation of everyday life. Hence, paradoxically, one could argue that the movies that exhibit the most *Oromummaa* (or "Oromo-ness") are not necessarily the most ideologically nationalist or the most overtly loud about their identity politics. In other words,

perhaps a movie guided by Oromo concepts to tell a simple story about family and community dynamics may have more positive social impact than a movie that uses concepts such as "freedom" and "nation" to assert a narrowly defined nationalist agenda. We hope that our essay on the question of how to define and appreciate Oromo films will provoke further inquiry among both filmmakers and scholars. Might films that simply deploy aspects of Oromo culture as politically loaded symbols ironically empty those symbols of their deeper cultural and ethical significance? Might instead Oromo filmmakers imagine a more subtle and complex appreciation for how *Gada* ideals and practices might orient their cinematic experimentation and narrative art?

There also remain open questions about Oromo cinema and its relation to a pluralistic Ethiopian cinema. For example, on the one hand, one could draw distinctions between an Oromo movie about *gudifacha* and the Amharic-language movie titled *Gudifecha*, directed by Tatek Tadesse (2002), one of the early digitally produced movies in Ethiopia that was popular and somewhat influential. Amharic has adopted (so to speak) the word for "adoption" from the Oromo language, but it does not carry the same social and symbolic connotation. Tatek Tadesse's movie is about a woman who has a romantic relationship with her adopted brother, which ends tragically. Although one could read the movie as sympathetic to the brother and sister in complex ways, the plot is organized around the threat to the family posed by the outsider. In contrast, for Oromo "accented" cinema, *gudifacha* carries a more positive connotation so that the problem is not with the adopted other but with the individual who fails to be welcoming. The orientation and structure of the narratives are quite different. However, on the other hand, if we look at another aspect of Oromo filmmaking—the principle of restorative justice encoded in the concept of *gumaa* (reparations)—we might compare the Oromo-language short film *Gumaa* (2016) to the very first Ethiopian color feature film, *Gumma*, directed by Michel Papatakis in 1974. Although Papatakis was not Oromo himself, he was inspired by the Oromo culture practice to make the film (Fantahun 2014). Filmmakers in the 1970s such as Michel Papatakis very self-consciously attempted to chart a progressive course for an Ethiopian national cinema that would resonate with the entire country and that was informed by the richness of its diverse cultures (Michel 2014). It remains to be seen whether the filmmakers located in Addis today will make the effort to appreciate the position of the Oromo and other ethnic groups in Ethiopia as some of the earlier generation of filmmakers did, or whether they will instead be emboldened by international scholars and audiences who naively

fetishize the mythologies of Habesha exceptionalism at the expense of Ethiopia's other cultures.

NOTES

1. We are using the English spelling of *Gada*. The spelling with the Qubee alphabet of the contemporary Afaan Oromo language that was formally adopted in 1991 is *Gadaa*. Both spellings are in use in both scholarly and journalistic publications.
2. For an appreciation of Haile Gerima's importance for African American culture, see Temple (2010), Reid (2005), and Jackson (2010). For an overview of Ethiopia's symbolic importance for African American culture, see Drake (1970), Stuckey (1987), and Moses (1998). For an ethnographic analysis of the immigrant Oromo's relationship to African American culture in Washington D.C., see Posey (2014).

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Hope, Forced Migration, and Desire of Elsewhere in Eritrean Diaspora Films

Aurora Massa and Osvaldo Costantini

Since the beginning of the postcolonial period, the political instability characterizing Eritrea has fueled the growth of a diasporic population, which by the end of the twentieth century had reached around one million people. Nowadays, Eritrea is still a prominent country of refugee origin, due to the authoritarian regime but also due to the younger generation's desire for a "better life" that is molded upon ambition, values, and aspirations shaped within global and local horizons of expectations (Graw and Schielke 2013).

This chapter reflects on these issues by focusing closely on the analysis of the production and the reception of two Eritrean films, produced in two different diasporic contexts. The first one was shot in Ethiopia with the support of the government of Addis Ababa and with the aim of showing the conditions faced by young people in Eritrea and of revealing the "hidden truth" behind the propaganda of the regime. The second one, produced in the United States and partially shot in Eritrea, sketches the gap between migratory expectations and realities, and the emergence of new gender patterns. Focusing on what went on behind the scenes of the production of the first film and on the plot and the reception of the second one, our purpose is to analyze the circular relationship between everyday life and films in what concerns migration processes and the imagination of life in the

diaspora. The comparative analysis allows us to explore migratory imaginaries and their circulation, and to investigate how the culture of migration influences (and is influenced by) diasporic film productions. We interpret these movies also as a form of youth dissent, which is molded by cultural codes and historical values and is encapsulated in networks of meaning and power that are both local and global.

Our empirical analysis is based on two distinct ethnographic fieldworks focused on daily life, past experiences, and desired futures of Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants. Our enquiries have been carried out through in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations and have included the study of cultural artifacts, such as songs and movies, as well as the Internet and social media, which we considered not only as means of communication but as ordinary space for social interactions.[1]

The chapter begins with an introduction to the recent history of Eritrea, to the current political situation, to the diasporic configuration of its population, and to the recent history of film production in the country in order to address the background both to the films' production and receptions and to our analyses. This continues in the second section with the reconstruction of the role played by the media and the Internet in the Eritrean diaspora. The third section discusses the first movie and its backstage analysis and sheds light on attempts made by young refugees to construct new ways of accessing the public sphere by intertwining global and local models. The fourth section focuses on the second movie, which describes the migratory illusions and disillusions of a young Eritrean woman who reaches the United States through an arranged marriage, and is followed by some conclusive remarks.

Historical Background

Eritrea did not exist as a territorial unity before Italian colonization that started in the late 1800s. After the collapse of the Italian colonial system in 1942, the United Nations finally decided, in 1950, on the federation of Eritrea under Ethiopian rule, ignoring calls from within Eritrea for the territory's sovereignty and inadvertently sowing the seeds of discontent. Since then a long nationalistic struggle for independence has taken place, with different armed groups on the field, from which the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) became the main one. The EPLF gained independence for Eritrea in 1991 by entering into Asmara and formalized it

by referendum in 1993. Eritrea has been ruled by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), a renamed version of EPLF, and since independence the dreams of glory and prosperity have been progressively shattered by various events, the most important of which was the sudden war with Ethiopia that broke out in 1998 (Negash and Tronvoll 2000).

After the war with Ethiopia (ending in 2000), the government has remained in a constant state of fear of further aggression by Ethiopia and, consequently, retains a compulsory and unlimited military service (Müller 2011). This conscription recruits every citizen between the age of eighteen and forty (fifty for men) indefinitely (Hepner and O'Kane 2011; Riggan 2011; see also Mekonnen 2008). Furthermore, people in service are pushed into a sort of forced labor in building bridges, roads, houses, and all kinds of infrastructure for a small salary (Kibreab 2009). When the government took this renewed "military turn," the Eritrean populace bore witness to a new flow of exile.[2] According to UNHCR, around four hundred thousand Eritreans have been recognized in the world as refugees (UNHCR 2016), making the phenomenon of exile (*sidet*) one of the most important features of contemporary Eritrean society. Their decision to leave Eritrea is not only based on the fact that they would otherwise have to be soldiers for an unlimited period of time, but is also based on their aspiration for the "better life" they believe they will be able to live abroad. Appadurai refers to aspiration as the broadening of possible lives, caused by the fast flows of various media in the current era (Appadurai 1996). Young Eritreans imagine their lives before they can actually live them (cf. degli Uberti 2014) according to a model of what has been called "global subjectivity" (Graw and Schielke 2013). The term "subjectivity" here is understood "as a form of orientation to the world and embodiment of historically and politically defined norms, values and meanings" (Vacchiano 2014, 21). A "global subjectivity" is molded upon ambitions and discourses stemming from values and aspirations that are already formulated within a "global horizon of meanings," even though they are not totally detached from local worlds (Vacchiano 2014, 2012; Graw and Schielke 2013).

We will better discuss the role of media in the construction of these horizons of meanings in the next section of this chapter. Before doing this, however, it is important to provide some background information on the history and recent development of film production in the country, so as to better contextualize the production of the two films that will be analyzed below. During the colonial era the Italians invested significant resources in building cinema theaters across the Horn of Africa. Many of the theater halls that were built in Eritrea continued to

function also after independence and during the period of annexation to Ethiopia (such as the Cinema Impero and the Teatro Asmara, which are still active today; see Sirak 2009). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s cinemas screened mostly Indian films, which became very popular with local audiences (Tedros 2009). In the 1970s, during the liberation struggle, the EPLF established a cinematographic department in the liberated parts of the country that focused mostly on the production of documentary films and dramas in local Eritrean languages, with the main objective of raising the awareness of the liberation struggle among Eritrean people (Samrawit 2009). However, truly independent film production did not fully emerge until after the country formally became independent from Ethiopia in 1993.

In a development similar to the one that took place in Ethiopia, the introduction of new technologies and the economic stabilization that followed the end of the civil war contributed to the emergence of a local video film industry in the late 1990s, whose economic sustainability relied mostly on the use of the few still existing cinema halls in Asmara for the screening of local productions. The film that is considered to be the industry maker, Bereket Yohannes's *Barud 77* (1997), apparently sold more than 140,000 entry tickets in the first few weeks of screening, quickly inspiring other artists to follow the example. According to Peter Martell (2010), by the end of the 2010s the industry was producing some sixty new low-budget feature films every year and had conquered Tigrinya-speaking audiences both in Eritrea and the Tigray region of neighboring Ethiopia, as well as across the diaspora. Today, countless YouTube channels, streaming platforms, and blogs offer contents in Tigrinya, which includes films made both in Eritrea and in the diaspora.

Almost all forms of artistic and intellectual expression within Eritrean national borders are strictly controlled by the Ministry of Information (Hepner 2009; Kibreab 2009). The film industry in particular is regulated by the Eritrean Film Rating Committee created in 2008, which, by monitoring the technical and aesthetic quality of films, also exercises a strict control on the films produced and distributed in the country. The government maintains tight control over the public sphere by repressing independent media that express dissent as well as by actively producing the national narratives that define the past, the present, and the future of the country (Bernal 2013; Dorman 2005). Consequently, more politically sensitive independent movies such as those that this chapter analyzes are produced abroad and circulate through social media—the only avenues enabling them to reach a geographically dispersed audience.

New Media and Diasporic Lives

In analyzing Eritrean films it is necessary to consider the variety of spaces and times in which they are produced and consumed (Silverston 2000), but also to reflect on the role of social media within Eritrean society both inside and outside national borders. The relevance of new communication technologies and their intertwining with the daily life of individuals is nowadays ubiquitous, fostering the rise of new forms of public spheres and cultural production, and facilitating innovative ways for maintaining and creating intimate relationships. As with other media, the contents shared through social media are not detached from everyday life. Rather, they are constantly introduced and reelaborated upon within the offline sphere of communications. Offline and online worlds are intertwined in a reciprocal relationship: if social media has changed the world, the latter "changes social media" (Miller et al. 2016) as the uses and roles of social media vary considerably from region to region. In the Eritrean case, both social media and everyday life are deeply influenced both by the diasporic configuration of most families and by the top-down method of governing by the state.

During our ethnographic fieldwork among the Eritrean diasporic communities living in or transiting through Ethiopia and Italy, Facebook, Instagram, Viber, and other social media emerged not only as surrogates of social relationships weakened by distance, but as ordinary spaces where new relationships can be composed in relative simultaneity (Weiss 2002). This virtual coexistence in time and space promotes the strengthening of emotional ties and, for those who live in Eritrea, the development of desires of elsewhere, imagined futures, and models of success. Moreover, by facilitating the circulation of critical opinions, global forms of public action, and imaginaries, the Internet plays a key role in the construction of an imagined Eritrean transnational civil society. As Victoria Bernal notes (2004, 2005, and 2014), through debates and dialogue, the websites opened and animated by Eritreans living in the United States have been pivotal in defining Eritrean identity, mobilizing support and opposition to the government, and constructing Eritrea as a nation. Conversely, the decision of the Eritrean government not to ban these websites does not reflect the process of opening spaces of freedom. Rather, it runs in parallel with the strategy to saturate the conventional media platforms (television, radio, and newspapers) with propaganda as they reach a broader audience and to infiltrate websites critical of the government for the purposes of spying and controlling dissent (Bernal 2013). Nevertheless, social media, websites, and

satellite broadcasts immerse people living in Eritrea in complex and multifaceted "mediascapes" (Appadurai 1996), not exclusively influenced by Western culture. Arabic shows, Turkish TV series, and Bollywood movies are all very popular cultural products and, due to the spread of satellite TV, are easily accessible from home, along with American and European productions, and of course Eri-TV, the Eritrean national broadcaster.

Pertaining to the scope of our present enquiry, social media represents a key channel for both the circulation of and access to Eritrean cultural products such as songs, video clips, TV shows, and movies, often gathered in dedicated channels and websites. Both movies at the center of this chapter are currently available on YouTube and thus are accessible both in Eritrea (even though the Internet connection is expensive, slow, and often absent) and abroad.[3] While in the early years of Eritrean video film production, most films had a patriotic undertone and dealt with issues connected with the memory of the liberation struggle (Tedros 2009; Martell 2010), during the first decade of the 2000s, the industry progressively moved toward a focus on love stories, in which generally a girl is in love with a boy but her family (her father, mother, or stepmother) do not allow her to marry because they have already arranged alternative marriage plans. These stories stage the clash of generations with conflicting ideas of marriage (romantic or arranged) and often end with the family approving the couple. On the contrary, films produced abroad, such as those analyzed in the following two sections, tend to focus on more politicized topics, such as the authoritarian outlook of the Eritrean regime and the issue of migration. They thus allow us to shed light on important dynamics within the transnational Eritrean space.

Shidden: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Political Space

For Eritrean refugees, Ethiopia and particularly the Tigray region are peculiar and ambivalent places of refuge, in which others are simultaneously close neighbors and strong adversaries. On the one hand, Eritrea and Ethiopia form a sociocultural continuum where people share languages, religions, and habits and are connected by intimate and familial ties that lend a particular familiarity to the place of arrival.[4] On the other hand, the 1998–2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian War has turned the two nations into enemies with no official relations. In Ethiopia, Eritrean migrants obtain refugee status prima facie and, even though required to

reside in refugee camps, have several possibilities to legally live outside, as well as ways to illegally get out.[5]

Shidden ("hero" in Tigrinya) is a movie made by a group of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia with the explicit aim of criticizing the Eritrean dictatorship.[6] The film tells the story of Solomon, a young man living in Asmara, who escapes from Eritrea and arrives in Ethiopia. The first part of the movie depicts the everyday life of young Eritreans in Asmara, focusing on the common Eritrean experiences of raids by the army who aim to capture deserters and those who dodge national service, and on the persistent desire to migrate. Many scenes focus on military life, on political trainings, and on the disagreements between officials and soldiers. The second part of the movie describes the journey of Solomon and focuses on the fatigue and danger he faces in Eritrea and across the Ethiopian-Eritrean borderland. Finally, the third part outlines the refugee reception system in Ethiopia and the beginning of a new life for Solomon in Addis Ababa.

Due to similarities with Asmara and with Eritrean borderlands, the Ethiopian town of Mekelle—where during 2013 I (the female researcher of the team) was carrying out my fieldwork—was chosen as the setting of *Shidden*. This allowed me, for almost three months, to share time and daily life with the cast and to conduct interviews and informal conversations about the movie.

The cast is made up of Ethiopian actors with a background in the production of local movies and television content and of Eritrean refugees, recruited from the refugee camps and from Addis Ababa, with professional or amateur experience as singers, musicians, and theater actors. The refugees were comprised of about twenty-five participants, including some women and a few children, consisting of people from varied backgrounds with respect to age, educational level, ethnic group, and time spent in Ethiopia.

The first evening we spoke about the movie, Binyam, one of the scriptwriters and the lead actor playing Solomon, described the plot saying: "This is a *true* story, this is *my* story." Both Binyam and his character, Solomon, were enlisted in the Eritrean Army for many years and had fled to Ethiopia after becoming aware of the government's lies. Both had known and faced the risks of illegally escaping to Ethiopia, and both had been surprised by the pleasant and welcoming conditions they received in Ethiopia, which stood in sharp contrast with the warmongering Eritrean propaganda. Oppression, violence, lack of hope, lies, and fears were among the reasons Binyam listed when explaining why he decided to undertake a film project that, unlike the romantic movies he was involved with in Eritrea, had

the goal of "making Eritreans know the 'truth' about their country." The contrast between the movie and the lies of the Eritrean government became a common theme in many dialogues I had with the actors of the movie.

By showing the conditions of suffering and oppression that each of them had personally experienced or witnessed, almost all of the actors agreed that the movie was not a fiction, but reflected their own lives. Even though the movie was not a documentary, the Eritrean cast intended to contrast the "false" reality drawn by government propaganda with what they considered the "authentic" story they were telling. The emphasis on the truth not only is intertwined in the need for victims of violence to have their stories authenticated, but also reflects the relevance that the true/false dichotomy has in the Eritrean context. Indeed, social and political mistrust, theories of conspiracy, and inquisitional attitudes are widespread among Eritreans inside and outside the national borders (Bozzini 2011; Massa 2016).

Although the truthfulness of the story is based on the lived experiences of the actors and the authors, the mimetic register and the construction of the authenticity do not result in the representations of personal and subjective plot lines; rather, biographical elements are codified in stereotypical characters from whom peculiarities are deleted. Significantly, in the case of *Shidden* the realism was based on ideal models that function as exempla in which the audience could identify themselves. The actors, therefore, did not interpret their own story, but a story that would/could have been their own as well as that of all young Eritreans. Paraphrasing Veena Das (2007), the stories can be considered as "true" not because they tell of "how the world is," but of how the world is experienced by the actors and the ideal public. The truth lies in the subjective experience rather than in the objective reality that is represented. This narrative structure thus allows the reciprocal exchange of roles between characters, actors, and spectators—it fosters the identification of the latter with the former and legitimizes both the actors and the story they tell.

The specific "truth" that is established by the movie does not reveal hidden or unknown information, but highlights those truths that are actively silenced by the Eritrean regime. Endless military service and a system of control and limitation of liberties have become part of everyday life for many Eritreans, but in the Eritrean public space these issues are framed in an interpretative horizon that legitimizes them. According to the hegemonic narrative of the Eritrean state, the self-reliant development of the nation and its being under siege, as well as values

such as sacrifice and courage, justify the individual restrictions that mark the lives of young people, pushing them toward a collective duty of servitude. Standing against this background, the movie can be understood as an attempt to redefine the boundaries of what can or cannot be said, challenging the power relations, and questioning the semantic networks and social filters that are in place to silence the experiences of the younger generations. *Shidden*'s goal, therefore, is to undermine the hegemonic narrative not simply by denouncing it, but also by molding a new form of communicating through cultural creativity and filmmaking.

Many of *Shidden*'s actors clearly distinguished their work from the antigovernment activities of other Eritreans in the diaspora, accusing them of never having lived in Eritrea, and from the opposition parties based in Ethiopia against which they hold critical positions.[7] Rather, the opposition they express toward the government is part of a more general criticism toward the political sphere and its traditional languages and forms of action. Framed thus, *Shidden* can be understood as part of a broader process in the elaboration of innovative political codes that go beyond the local Eritrean situation. Indeed, the feeling of detachment toward the conventional political space, considered as a totalitarian sphere that obstructs individual developments and achievements, is nowadays part of the experiences of younger generations the world over (Beck 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2008). In more general terms, the emergence of "youth" as a social category and as a phase of life is historically linked to the active role this group has played in the nation-state-building process (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), and the Eritrean case does not make an exception. In recent years, previous collective frames have been eroded by processes of individualization, characterizing the global (including African) landscape, which have in turn radically challenged the ideal model of youth. The search for new forms of political engagement is, therefore, intertwined with the intergenerational discontinuities and with the attempts of young Eritreans to liberate themselves from the hegemonic models of youth, in which the "self of the nation" was superimposed upon the "individual self," in order to find a new relationship with their motherland. In the aspirations of young Eritreans, the United States and Europe are attractive not (only) because they allow political participation, but for the space they leave open to the individual. The "elsewhere" they dream of is a place where they expect to escape political control and to have "freedoms" that in Eritrea are forbidden, such as the freedom to move, to earn money, to study, to help family, and to get married.

Despite these innovative aspects, the movie does not totally diverge from most consolidated languages, such as the value of national unity (*hadenet*) and the cult of the guerrilla fighters of the liberation war (*tegadelti*), establishing with them a continuity in the discontinuity. Even though *Shidden* adopts an openly critical position against the Eritrean government, the symbolic elements evoked in the movie are interwoven with nationalistic narratives. Starting with the title, the movie establishes continuity between the past and the present and reaffirms the moral superiority in the "time of the struggle" (*gezieqalsi*). Indeed the hero (*shidden*) refers to the father of the main character Solomon, who was formerly a guerrilla fighter, in respect to which Solomon is a "little hero" and, like all those of his generation, is expected to follow the ideal model set by his elders. Interweaving family and national genealogy, the movie aims to promote identification between the audience and the protagonist because, quoting Binyam, "everyone has at least two *tegadelti* among his relatives." Therefore, the narrative tries to reshape the boundaries of the Eritrean social body, accusing the current political and military cadres of violating the founding values and attempting to remodel the intergenerational relationship between small and great heroes. On the one hand, in continuity with government narrative, the younger generation is the heir (*warsay*) of the heroes of the past (*tegadelti*); on the other, in contrast to the hegemonic rhetoric, this bond does not include the current representatives of political power.

Introducing new languages and reasserting previous intergenerational relationships, the movie draws upon both nationalistic values and a model of civil society that represents itself as opposed to hegemonic power (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Hann and Dunn 1996; Mitchell 1991). *Shidden* thus shows the tireless attempt of young Eritrean refugees to balance personal achievements with collective interests while actively localizing the global landscape (Farthing 2010). It also depicts the weaving together of social expectations and hope, as does the second movie we address, *Winta*.

Winta: The Dream and the Reality of Migration

Regarding the difference between generations, the 2011 movie titled *Winta* (Mesfin Sinke, 2011) allows us to analyze how the migratory aspirations of women, the role practically and symbolically played by education, and the new patterns of womanhood are depicted by diaspora Eritrean filmmakers. Winta, the eponymous

hero of the movie, is a beautiful young woman whom we are introduced to in the movie's opening, two weeks before she is due to travel to the United States to marry Asgedom, a member of the diaspora in the United States. The opening of the movie is shot in Eritrea, depicting Winta's life before getting married, and then the setting shifts to the United States, where the main story of Winta's trials and tribulations ensues.

Winta clearly sets its narrative course in the opening as Winta's mother advises her to be a good wife, while her daughter has other ideas as she replies, "I am going to study over there; I don't have to be a perfect housewife." In all the dialogues at the beginning of the movie, the break between the two generations is highlighted: Winta dreams of a better life built upon education, social mobility, good job opportunities; her mother, on the other hand, is worried about Winta's ability to fulfill her marital role. Winta's naïveté is highlighted in these opening sequences and foreshadows the troubles she will encounter later in the movie. Winta's family think she will fulfill her dreams in the United States, and Winta is indeed seen to be greeting everybody with a big smile despite her shy (and jetlagged) demeanor when the action shifts to her welcome party at Asgedom's house.

Milena Belloni argues that the reasons for men and women to migrate are quite different, and we should take into account that "women are often closely related to gendered social expectations and to creative interpretations or diversions from them. Although both boys and girls share the same desire to leave the country, their desire to live abroad mirrors the coexistence of different aspirations for men than for women" (2015, 81). The role of the woman in Eritrean society has to be explored deeper in order to understand what happens in the film. As discussed earlier, life in Eritrea has been significantly impacted by the thirty-years-long struggle for independence. Women played an important role in that struggle since they were involved as fighters, but after independence they encountered difficulty in being reinserted within the Eritrean civil society since they refused to go back to their traditional role as housewife (Dore 2002). In this context, going abroad is seen as the main way to access a better life, but unlike in the case of men, for women not only does this mean being free from military service and poverty and accessing global commodities, but it is also drawn upon the desire of a life emancipated from patriarchal values:

> My girlfriends' desires to migrate were intertwined with the desires to emancipate themselves from patriarchal society and from suffocating Eritrean moral codes, as shown in their preference of partners. As all of us were single, with the exclusion

> of Salam, so how to find the right partner, where to meet him, and when to settle down with him, were among our favorite topics of discussion. The choice of an open-minded and sincere partner who could facilitate a better future outside the suffocating atmosphere of Eritrean society was crucial to achieve independence and fulfil their lifestyle aspiration. (Belloni 2015, 88)

Interestingly, Winta's first appearance in the United States, in a tracksuit and with her hair covered in a shawl (her appearance seems to be of a maid), is greatly contrasted with her appearance in Eritrea and with the smart appearances of Asgedom and his friends. This surprisingly destitute appearance again foreshadows Winta's decline as her new husband, Asgedom, an older mechanic, spends almost all day at work and prioritizes having children over Winta's ambition to enter into education. Unaware that Winta is using contraceptives, various discussions ensue, sometimes involving violence on the part of Asgedom, until Winta meets another Eritrean-American (Suleman) living in the same building as her who offers his help. As Asgedom remains in possession of Winta's U.S. documentation it falls to her new friend, Suleman, to attempt to negotiate the release of her papers while at the same time finding her accommodation with his friend Dawit who starts falling for Winta. The movie proceeds at a slow and deliberate pace as the narrative thrust is heavily reliant on sequences of crosscutting between dialogues. After Asgedom is finally persuaded to hand over Winta's documents through Suleman's sincere efforts, rumors about Winta's relationship with another man force her to leave Dawit's house. In a climactic scene where Dawit uncharacteristically goes drinking one evening and where, out of jealousy, Asgedom has hired a hit man to kill Dawit, Suleman appears to console his friend. A case of mistaken identity then ensues as the hit man, waiting by Dawit's car, murders Suleman after he offers to drive Dawit home as he is too drunk. After we see each character separately mourning Suleman's death, Dawit finally opens up to Winta about his feeling for her, and the two are seen celebrating their marriage in the movie's closing scene as Winta seemingly achieves her American dream.

It is important to underline how the movie is structured and how it uses themes that are widespread in recent Eritrean cinema, by adapting it to a context of migration. The plot and the characters of *Winta* recall many other Eritrean movies produced in the early 2000s: there are bad female characters such as Asgedom's sister, who plays the evil role as she advises Asgedom on how to deceive Winta while searching for Winta's contraceptives. There is also the good woman, Saba, the friend

of Asgedom's sister, who tells Winta about this plot, giving her the time to hide the contraceptives. The other bad woman is Haben, who shares Dawit's house and spreads rumors about Winta, which forces her to leave. The story then moves to a different context, where migration and exile form the backdrop, within a landscape filled with expectations, dreams, and desires. Winta wants a better life, she dreams about the possibility of studying and becoming better integrated into American society. She does not want to live as a marginalized migrant, as a fast-food worker on the night shift. Her situation, however, is conditioned by the consequences of her transnational arranged marriage that reinforce Eritrean patriarchies.

Winta's story highlights how dreams and expectations about migration formulated while in Eritrea clash with reality as the life abroad is not immediately simpler, better, or freer than it was at home, as marginalization and social exclusion become part of daily life. Winta's experience seems to mirror that of hundreds of Eritreans who leave their homeland. Like with Winta, migrants' expectations are high, but often they end up in a limbo of social marginalization and endless "waithood" (Honwana 2012). In order to better understand this point, it is important to briefly analyze the construction of hope among Eritreans. Di Nunzio, in a work on marginality in Ethiopia, distinguishes between social expectations and hope: "A social expectation involves a sense of entitlement: we feel we are owed something" (2014, 155). Hope, Di Nunzio argues, works differently because it addresses a social space where our control is limited. He also sheds light upon the fact that hope reorients our knowledge and, potentially, readjusts our action.

Frances Pine goes a step further than Di Nunzio, reflecting on migratory movements in postsoviet Poland:

> Hope is a complex, many-layered notion resting on the capacity for imagination, on a sense of time and of temporal progress, on a desire to believe in a better future or in the possibility that something can change, and to some extent on uncertainty. *Hope is also always mirrored or shadowed by its opposite, despair*. We hope for a particular future, but we do not know with certainty that it will take place or take place in the way we desire. We fear that the outcome of this uncertainty may be despair or what will happen if hope diminishes and fades away (Pine 2014, S96; emphasis mine)

Pine, like Di Nunzio, underlines the dimension of uncertainty, but he also stresses two important aspects: first, hope is linked with a certain cultural idea about the

future, a better life, a change; second, hope is also always mirrored or shadowed by its opposite—despair. The framework drawn by these two scholars allows us to reflect on Winta's case as a metaphor of contemporary Eritrean migration and of the experience of Eritrean migrants and refugees.

Winta hopes for a new life that she defines as "better" according to the cultural lens through which she looks at the world. To realize her dreams she accepts a transnational marriage by means of which she obtains her U.S. visa. Her modern attitude toward marriage and, more in general, gender equality and family roles conflicts with her dreams, because in the territory of hope she has little or no control over the outcome of her action. Hope (and despair) push her to act against her principles as she ends up accepting a deal (the arranged marriage with Asgedom) that she would have probably refused within Eritrea.

Indeed, arranged marriages (usually) to male members of the diaspora are common in Eritrea, and *Winta*'s narrative is directly addressing an Eritrean/diaspora audience with the movie's final positive resolution of her marriage to Dawit, painted as reconstituting Winta's (and in turn the audience's) hopes and dreams for the future. Like in many Eritrean movies, love and money are also central themes in *Winta*. The fact that the vast majority of the action takes place in the United States, where Dawit teaches Winta how to drive and where Dawit's own gleaming white Hummer inconspicuously acts as a status symbol and symbol of his wealth, reinforces the possibilities and hope of life abroad. So while *Winta* clearly warns of the perils of arranged marriages to achieving genuine love, despite Winta's condition of arriving in the United States with nothing and her entrapment by Asgedom, she is able to rely upon the wider support of the Eritrean diaspora for other needs. Interestingly it is the indebtedness to Dawit, for taking her into his home, sending money to her family back in Eritrea, and allowing her to work, that validates Winta's trust of Dawit and leads to her acceptance of his marriage proposal at the end of the film. Ironically the movie's resolution harks back to the advice given to Winta by her mother in the opening scene telling her that she and her husband must "work together" to be successful. This idea is obviously lacking in the arranged marriage with Asgedom, who controls Winta's life and does not allow her to go to school as she desires, but is evident in Winta's relationship with Dawit. The fact that the film ends with a marriage seemingly built on principles voiced by Winta's mother (a representative of the older generation), but in the context of modern America, has the effect of resolving Winta's original naïveté of not heeding her mother's advice and also reconnects the younger generation with

some of the values of their elders. In this sense, the movie constructs a narrative and conclusion that enable Eritrean/diasporic audiences to relate to their own uncertain futures, dealing with relevant issues of migration. Through the despairing situations in *Winta*, the necessary happy ending allows audiences to reengage with hope, for "When hope is cut, the attainment of desires in the future is no longer possible" (Mains 2012, 54). Winta's personal journey through the movie's narrative allows audiences to think through their own uncertain futures and reinforces an imagination of possibilities and other worlds while at the same time warns of some of the perils associated with migration.

This discourse allows us to highlight the uncertainties of the territory of hope that lies beyond people's control. People are aware that individual choices and actions are always played in a given social structure, but there is another particularity in the case of Eritrean refugees we can also see in Winta's story. From an external point of view the expectations of Eritrean refugees might appear as belonging to the field of hope, while from an internal point of view they are somehow social expectations. People think/believe they deserve to live a better life wherever they want, sometimes legitimized by the main principles of political asylum, according to which someone who is persecuted in his/her country of origin deserves the right of protection. All this tension seems to be expressed by the counterposing between the two marriage situations within which Winta's aspirations are fueled and quashed.

Conclusion

Even though the revolutionary and nationalist ideologies that dominated the Eritrean public space after independence are still at work and their attraction has not diminished,[8] many people are no longer involved in them. The disempowerment of the nationalist ideology has many consequences. If opposition parties, especially in the diaspora, are trying to imagine a collective solution for the future of the Eritrean "nation,"[9] it is possible to observe an ongoing process of shifting into an individual ethic. Many Eritreans, in fact, seem to fall within what Ulrich Beck (1999) defines as the society of the individual solution. People try to reach northern European and Scandinavian countries because of their appealing socioeconomic conditions (job opportunities, welfare state, efficient asylum systems). Others reach other Western countries such as the United States by family reunification and arranged marriages (see Costantini and Massa 2016). They aspire to good education, a stable

family life, and a good job. Aspirations and projections toward the future are not collective anymore (as they used to be during the independence struggle), because they are dictated by the extended family and the small local community (with their transnational linkages) who are involved in the migratory project.

The two movies show, in our opinion, the intertwining of two key dimensions that drive the mobility of the new Eritrean diaspora, namely the interaction between political concerns connected to the political and social repression currently characterizing Eritrea, and the individual aspirations of people who wish to migrate to the West. As *Shidden* shows, crossing the Eritrean border and rejecting the government's way of imagining the position of youth in society induces refugees to rethink their position within the national community, both inside and outside the country. In *Winta*, the protagonist feels stuck in a country, Eritrea, with no opportunities. This pushes her to engage in a transnational marriage. It is important to note that her way of changing her life becomes reliant on her actions as an individual despite her Eritrean family seemingly organizing her arranged marriage. The movie does not suggest any criticisms against the Eritrean government. Winta dreams of going to school and having a good job in her life, but things do not go as planned.

The two movies represent, from our point of view, two opposite ends of the range of experiences that Eritreans nowadays live: attempting to cope with a strong regime that is losing its attraction, and with the hope of a new/better life molded upon a global horizon of expectations based on neoliberal ideals of the nuclear family, personal independence, access to the global market, political freedom, and gender equality. As stressed by Graw and Schielke (2013), migration cannot be only considered as a mere physical movement, because it involves a social group—not only the individuals—at various levels (family, generation, town, region). Different levels of power, expectation, and hope build new networks and imaginaries that are as influential on Eritrean experiences of migration as the deep historical dynamics and political-economical relationships between states.

NOTES

1. Aurora Massa has conducted research on migrant trajectories from Eritrea in Ethiopia and in Italy, while Osvaldo Costantini has focused on the Ethiopian and Eritrean Pentecostal churches in Rome. Even though the work is the result of common reflections, sections 1, 3, and 4 are written by Aurora Massa; sections 2, 5, and 6 are written by Osvaldo Costantini.

2. This flow should be considered a "new flow" because, during the thirty years of the Eritrean guerrilla struggle for independence, a huge number of Eritreans had spread themselves all around the world. This flow was caused by the persecution both by the Ethiopian government against those accused of being supporters of the armed struggle and by different armed fronts (Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001; Bernal 2004; Kibreab 1996).
3. The living conditions of Eritrean refugees in the diaspora are considerably heterogeneous, according to legal status, year of arrival, economic and professional position, social inclusion, relationship with the motherland, and so on.
4. A variety of languages, religions, and ethnic groups characterizes Tigray and Eritrea. Our investigation has been mainly focused on people from the highlands who constitute a relatively homogeneous group, sharing language (Tigrinya), religion (Orthodox Church), and historical and cultural elements (e.g. the political structure, the kinship organization), and who are the cradle of the political leaderships in both countries.
5. In Ethiopia, there are 86,010 Eritrean refugees registered (UNHCR 2014), who mostly live in four camps located in Tigray, the northern region of the country. Since 2010, refugees meeting specific criteria have had the right to reside outside the camps and to attend university.
6. During postproduction, the movie was renamed; however, we decided to maintain the previous title because of the relevant role it plays in our analysis and in order to protect the privacy of the research participants. For the same reason, all the personal names mentioned here are fictitious.
7. Mainly managed by older generations, the Eritrean opposition parties in Ethiopia were often blamed by young people for their use of violence and their factionalism. Although most of the refugees oppose the regime, in fact, values such as national unity and the historic prestige of the fighters were rarely questioned.
8. Here there is no room for a discussion about those Eritreans who, after fleeing the country and once in the diaspora, continue to voluntarily support the regime.
9. The opposition parties have different projects: some groups work to spread information about life in Eritrea, some others try to collaborate with Western institutions to fight for human rights in Eritrea, while yet others try to organize an opposition army to overthrown the current regime.

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Somali Cinema

A Brief History Relating Italian Colonization, Somali Diaspora, and the Changing Ideas of Nationhood

Daniele Comberiati

This chapter explores how Somali cinema from 1950 to the present has contributed to a rethinking of the colonial past and the independence era. With reference to colonial and postcolonial films (from the period of AFIS, 1949–60, to current directors of the Somali diaspora), I intend to show how the brief, but very intense Italian Trusteeship Administration of Somalia (named AFIS, Amministrazione fiduciaria italiana della Somalia) changed the development of Somali cinema history until the present day. Of particular interest during this discussion will be the examination of the ways in which some intense economic and cultural relations were established between Italian and Somali producers during the period of AFIS.

This chapter is structured in three parts. In the first part, I propose to analyze the cinema industry during AFIS with a particular focus on the partnership between Italy, the former colonizing country, and Somalia. In this period there was also a collaboration between Rome's Cinecittà and the first Somali directors: Hajji Cagakombe's film *Miyi Iyo Magaalo*/*Town and Village* (1963) is a consequence of this period of Somali-Italian coproduction. The second part will be entirely focused on Somali cinema of the era of independence, with films such as *Love ma yaqaan dhibaatooyinka hortaagan*/*Love Does Not Know Obstacles* by Hussein Mabrouk

(1961), or the Somali-Chinese coproduction *The Horn of Africa* (Hussein Mabrouk, 1961), which won the most prestigious award at the fourth International African Film Festival held annually in Mogadishu. In this period collaborations also continued with Italy, the most important example being *Dan Iyo Xarrago*/*Reality and Myth* (1973) by Idriss Hassan Dirie, processed in Technicolor in Rome. The third part of this discussion will analyze cinematic production by the Somali diaspora and the Somali-language film industry (dubbed "Somaliwood") to understand how this film industry is important to forming the idea of a "new" nation in the collective imagination.

The AFIS Era: 1949–1960

The defeat of the Italian army by British-led forces during the Second World War brought Italian colonial rule in Africa to an end. After the Allies entered Mogadishu on February 25, 1941, Somalia was promoted as the "first colony to be freed" from the Nazi-Fascist rule, according to the British information service (Hussein 1983, 47). UN Resolution 289 of November 21, 1949, finally allowed the independence of the former Italian Somalia after a ten-year period of international trusteeship. Italy, the former colonial power, was asked to uphold the mandate over Somalia on behalf of the United Nations. According to a statement by the Italian prime minister at the time, Alcide De Gasperi, Italy was accepting Somali trusteeship "in order to work for a better world, to earn friendship among all the people who aspire to freedom and progress" (British Military Administration 1994). The Italian Trust Administration in Somalia (AFIS) was intended to be a form of redress for the previous colonial rule by the Italian post-Fascist leadership in order to demonstrate good will toward African and Asian countries and demonstrate Italy's post-Fascist democratic politics. The most peripheral of the former Italian dependencies became the only example of Italian decolonization within the specific, even paternalistic to a certain extent, framework of the trusteeship system.[1]

During the AFIS period Italy attempted a revolution of the traditional Somali social structure. The most prominent form of Somali culture is its oral poetry; however, Italy tried to change this oral tradition into a bourgeois and written tradition. Education was considered by the Italian administration to be one of the most important pillars for the creation of a local middle class and for the development of the country. However, in this field the challenges were enormous

because in 1950 the level of illiteracy in Somali society was 99.4 percent and, most importantly, a formal system of written Somali had not yet been developed (Del Boca 1993; Palumbo 2003). We can see here evidence of the persistence of a residual rhetoric of the "civilizing mission," which later became fundamental in the process of auto-absolution created by Italy in former colonies. The Italian civilizing mission in Africa was based upon two premises: the first, justified by the nation's aim of scientific progress in relation to the colonized peoples, who should be studied and analysed as objects; the second, linked to the moral and intellectual superiority of Italians, who had gone to Africa to export their qualities.

During the period of Fascist colonization, the newspaper *Il Corriere della Somalia*, published in Mogadishu and funded by the Italian Ministry of Culture, presented some articles about the important role of culture and cinema, in particular, in an attempt to build the consciousness of the new nation. In these articles the possibility for the creation of a future relationship between Italian and Somali cinema was discussed, and a few Italian films made in Somalia over the previous decades were mentioned.[2] In fact, the earliest forms of public film screenings in Somalia were Italian newsreels of key events during the colonial period in Italian Somalia. Examples of such works, all produced by the LUCE (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa) Institute, include *Somalia: Gheledi* (1913), *Somalia italiana* (1913), *Somalia: Le bellezze del fiume Nebi* (1913), *Sotto la Croce del Sud—Somalia Italiana* (1926), *Visioni della Somalia italiana* (1929), and *Viaggio di S.M. il Re in Somalia* (*novembre–dicembre 1934*) (1934). These films all deploy similar aesthetics as used in other colonial Italian documentaries (Farassino 2000): they strive to underline the difference between Somalia before and after the arrival of the Italians. The dual focus is used to express Somalia's continuing experience of hardship: this country before was a poor land, where natural disasters devastated the land and forced the people to live without a real civilization. According to these colonial documentaries, Somalis were primitive nomads who lived with their animals and followed tribal laws. However, the propaganda of the documentaries then shows how Italy has totally transformed the country: Italian people discovered the potential for banana plantations and the fertility of the earth near the rivers; through their hard work Somalia became a wealthy land with a thriving population. During this parallel description, the images and the music help the spectators to invest in this nostalgic discourse. Music, often inspired by an alleged "African" style—percussion, dramatic silence to underline empty and large spaces, some masculine voices singing—is designed to create an atmosphere

full of sadness and mystery. We can observe some animals living on the Somali plateau: antelopes, zebras, and ostriches. This diversity, compared to the Italian fauna, demonstrates the richness and the charm of the former colony, built with the work of Italian colonizers. In the 1930s and 1940s, early Somali actors and film technicians cooperated with Italian crews to produce domestically Fascist films in Italian Mogadishu. Among the latter productions is *Sentinels of Bronze* (Romolo Marcellini, 1937). This film (named in Italian *Sentinelle di bronzo*) was awarded the prize of "Best Italian Colonial Film" at the Festival di Venice of 1937.

This newspaper, *Il Corriere della Somalia*, was important also after colonization and during the 1950s: there were some articles on cinema (1951, 1952, 1953) in which the films presented in Mogadishu cinemas were discussed, in particular the movies screened at Cinema Italia, the most important cinema in the city. We can observe two different kinds of film being shown in this period: Italian and European ones for the former colonial public, and Indian ones for Somali audiences. In this period there are no Somali examples of filmmaking, but collaboration between the Italian cinema industry and some indigenous politicians had begun with the aim to create a new Somali national cinema industry. In particular, in the late 1950s there were a few collaborations between Rome and the first Somali directors. As a consequence, in 1963 the Somali-Italian coproduction by Hajji Cagakombe, *Miyi Iyo Magaalo*/*Town and Village*, became the first full-length feature film to be produced in the Somali language. The movie presents one the most important social problems of the new country: the relationship between countryside and city and, more generally, between nomadic and settled people. The way the characters are dressed immediately outlines their membership of one of the two worlds: Somalis coming from the city use a paternalistic tone to the inhabitants of the countryside, as Italians used to do with Somalis. The influence of Italian documentaries produced by the LUCE Institute is evident even from an aesthetic point of view: the use of the voice-over, which comments on the facts and accompanies the spectator; the use of interviews, which create a hybrid genre between fiction and documentary; the emphatic role of the soundtrack, always used in a pleonastic way and never in a contrastive way. Despite these links with neocolonial productions, *Miyi Iyo Magaalo* also presents interesting and original formal aspects, derived partly from the neorealist aesthetic. In fact, most of the footage is shot outside (a novelty for Somalia), and there is a tendency to use a camera that follows the main characters, just as Cesare Zavattini (1959), one of the most important theorists of neorealism, had promoted. More generally, there is an emphasis upon a reality effect that

becomes a defining characteristic of the filmmaking for this perceived new country: to bear witness to the new age of independence and to assist the new government in its ambition to forge a new nation.

Interestingly, the Somali people's sensibility to cinema was at that time very developed: in the same year (1963), for example, Giorgio Moser's film *Violenza segreta*/*Secret Violence* was the first movie filmed in Somalia with an Italian production team. The Somali government asked to change the screenplay, in which the writer Enrico Emanuelli, from whose novel *Settimana nera* the film was inspired, also participated, because some scenes presented colonialism in a positive light. When a member of the Ministry of the Information discovered that Giorgio Moser filmed the scenes that had been changed and deleted in the screenplay, the cinematographic crew was arrested, and the film was finally filmed in Kenya (Deplano 2016). The reception of the film was complicated in Italy too. Italian newspapers, in particular those linked to the Catholic parties, contested the accentuated eroticism of Regina and criticized the morbidity of the director (Guglielmino 1963). Newspapers like *Il Giorno* [The Day], linked to the moderate right parties, insisted upon the racist analysis of the relationships between white men and African women (Bianchi 1963). Also alleged anticolonialist magazines, such as *L'Unità* [The Unity], the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party, considered the film as a general representation of the Western exploitation in Africa, not necessarily linked to the AFIS experience (Bianchi 1963).

The Era of Independence and Dictatorship: 1961–1991

The shift from independence to Siad Barre's dictatorship in 1969 is fundamental to understanding the role of cinema in the history of this new nation. Somali cinema became a tool of propaganda; through the movies, the government seized the possibility of showing a specific image of the country and influencing Somali society.

The prior links of Siad Barre's Party with the Italian Socialist Party were very important in this period, in order to access materials, funds, and the possibility to develop cinematographic projects. The production, distribution, and importation of films in the country were nationalized by the Supreme Revolutionary Council. Privately owned cinemas were subsequently replaced with government-controlled film houses, and about five hundred films were projected annually in seventeen cinemas.

The Somali Film Agency (SFA) was established in 1975 as an adjunct to the federal Ministry of Information and National Guidance, growing out of the ministry's visual aids department. The SFA's duties included overseeing the importation, distribution, and censorship of movies in the country. It later also oversaw the production of both long and short films. Most of the imported films were brought in from Egypt, Italy, the Soviet Union, India, and East Germany.

Between 1979 and 1983, the Somali filmmaker Ali Said Hassan served as a representative of the SFA in Rome. The SFA also annually organized the Mogadishu pan-African and Arab Film Symposium in Mogadishu. The film festival brought together an array of prominent filmmakers and film experts from across the globe, including other parts of northeast Africa and the Arab world, as well as Asia and Europe.

The movies produced under Siad Barre's regime are implicated in the creation of certain codes of conduct, relations, and identities. Somali films proposed new social relations not tied to affected shows of faith, which merely abet moral ambiguities and perpetuate blindness to the realities of poverty and need, and posed important challenges to building a just and equitable society.

Within the context of Somalia's burgeoning national culture in the 1960s and 1970s, Somali filmmakers sought to produce films to serve as modern cinematic parallels to traditional Somali cultural forms and to narrate Somalia's anticolonialist history in the aftermath of Italian Fascist colonial rule. Somali film's formative concern with national modernity and epic historicity necessarily placed it in dialogue with Italian Fascist cinema. Through the analysis of Somali narrative film and Italian Fascist cinematic genres, this chapter will go on to show that Somalia's nationalist cinema emerged through an evolution of the ideological tenets and cinematic terms of its former colonizing culture. By parsing Somali cinema's negotiation of history and modernity after Fascism, this chapter provides a comprehensive history of early Somali cinema, expanding discourses on African nationalism and postcoloniality.

In order to highlight these continuities, I will analyze in particular three films, to show in what way this idea of "building new Somalia" influenced directors and scriptwriters: *Dan Iyo Xarrago*/*Reality and Myth* by Idriss Hassan Dirie (1973); and two films by Abdulkadir Ahmed Said: *The Somali Dervish* (codirected with Said Salah Ahmed, 1983), about the nomadic population in Somalia, and *Aleel*/*La Conchiglia*/*Sea Shell* (1992, at the beginning of civil war), a coproduction between Italy and Somalia.

The film *Dan Iyo Xarrago*/*Reality and Myth* (1973) by Idriss Hassan Dirie is a small but vital contribution to the extant history of diversity in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. Because the director lived some years in Rome, the film was processed in the Technicolor studios in Rome, near Cinecittà. This movie, a mockumentary about the life of the nomadic populations in some regions of Somalia (Ogaden and Somaliland), is strongly linked to the tradition of Italian documentary in the 1950s and neorealist films. This film avoids any easy cooptation by the nationalist project of the time and resists the familiar opposition between town and villages. In reality, there are three models of culture analyzed here—Italian, Somali, and nomadic—all of which are presented and contrasted through the lens of masculine values and behavior. Nomadic culture in Somalia was very important also for the first novel of Nuruddin Farah, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970). Farah and Dirie understood quickly that, for a new free and large Somalia, the country needed to include and foster cultural and religious diversities. History, however, would prove otherwise. Farah writes of a society in which nomadic values seem to be strongly enshrined as central to the national self-image, unlike neighboring Kenya or Ethiopia, where they are the values of a marginal minority, politically marginalized but beloved by photographers and tourists. In this novel we can find the same elements of Hassan Dirie's movie: the sense of waiting, the diversity of nomadic people compared to the colonizers but also different from the new Somalia, the sense of exclusion of these populations, the difficulty for the new free country to operate on an inclusive political identity.

We learn that the unity of the country is yet far. There is a political unity, but not a cultural unity. Even if the film was financed by national political powers, Hassan Dirie showed through neorealist aesthetics some of the contradictions of his Somalia. The importance of the director is remarkable especially because, thanks to this work, he begins to forge a "Somali style," which will be very much in evidence in later years, especially in the eighties. This style is a constant mix between some parts of fiction and more classical and sometimes very long musical inserts (in *Dan Iyo Xarrago* the longer takes are around sixteen minutes while the average is four), showing the cultural and aesthetic ties with Indian productions, which, as was indicated earlier, were much appreciated in the Somali cinemas of the time. In addition to the mix between fiction and music, we should underline the hybridizations between scenes featured with professional actors and archive images (such as scenes filmed in the Somali Parliament or interviews with important political figures of the time, including Siad Barre). We could say that nomadism for the director is not just a thematic but also an aesthetic choice: through the

hybridization of languages (music and images) and of aesthetic genres (fiction and documentary), Hassan Dirie succeeds in creating a complex and contradictory narrative mechanism, which becomes a sort of mirror to Somalia. The use of archival images is also a response to the necessities of the time: Somalia at the time lacked modern film studios (there was only one in Mogadishu, built by Fascism in the 1930s), and the need to shoot the film outdoors was almost an obligation. Usually the director prefers a fixed camera, often with long or midfield shots, where the characters are seen to move and interact. Given the conditions of the time, this was indeed perhaps the best way to enhance the profile of the Somali landscape (the true protagonist of the work) as well as the actors. Only during the musical inserts does the camera move: here, there are horizontal or vertical panning shots, which aim to highlight the emotions of the listeners during the performances of the musicians or to create, also through assembly, a sensual mix between music and landscape. Music is therefore diegetic, but like the landscape, it becomes an element independent of the narrative, a sort of additional presence.

The situation of nomadic people is very important for Somali identity, and the difficult relationships between cities and villages became a prominent problem during the civil war. The film *The Somali Dervish* (1983) codirected by Abdulkadir Ahmed Said and Said Salah Ahmed is centered on the story of a nomadic man, Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, and it shows the ancient history of this archetypal national hero in a nationalistic way. The Dervish state, here, becomes a symbol of a free Somalia, with the protagonist's memory signifying the foundations for building a contemporary nation under Siad Barre.

The Dervish state was an early twentieth-century Somali Sunni Islamic state that was established by Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, a religious leader who gathered Somali soldiers from across the Horn of Africa and united them into a loyal army known as the Dervishes. In August 1898, the Dervish army occupied Burao, an important center of British Somaliland, giving Muhammad Abdullah Hassan control over the city's water access. Hassan also succeeded in making peace between the local clans and initiated a large assembly where the population was urged to join the war against the British.

The Dervish forces successfully repulsed the British Empire in four military expeditions and forced it to retreat to the coastal region. As a result of its fame in the Middle East and Europe, the Dervish State was recognized as an ally by the Ottoman Empire and the German Empire. It also succeeded in resisting the Scramble for Africa and remained the only independent Muslim power on the

continent throughout World War I. After a quarter of a century of holding the British at bay, the Dervishes were finally defeated in 1920.

As well as in the Somali context, there are cultural representations of the history of Somali Dervishes in Italian, Indian, and American popular culture. For example, in the popular Italian comic book series *Corto Maltese* by Hugo Pratt, the protagonist travels to the Horn of Africa during the Dervishes' battle against the British and witnesses the former storm a British fort (Pratt 2000). During these travels, he develops a long-term friendship with a Dervish warrior named Cush, who subsequently features in several other of Corto's adventures around the world. Hugo Pratt indicates more broadly at such moments his ideas about Italian colonialism: he considers the experience of Italian colonization in Horn of Africa as different from other forms of colonization, painting it as more humane. The recent critical debate around the "Italiani brava gente" ("Italians good people") reflects this idea by exploring how Italian colonialism is often represented as different from the other forms of colonialism. The myth of "Italiani brava gente" became powerful precisely because it inculcated a set of values and behaviors linked to Italian imperialist culture (Del Boca 2005).

I have chosen two films from the same director because Abdulkadir Ahmed Said is one of the most interesting directors in Somalia and his career, divided between Italy and Somalia, shows very well the ambiguity of the relationship between the former colonial power and the new independent state. Said was born in 1953 in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. In 1970, he began working for the SFA as a photographer assigned to international relations and as a consultant for productions with other countries. Between 1984 and 1986, he served as director of programming on Somali Television and wrote and directed several training programs. Said also worked as assistant director on numerous film productions, including *The Parching Winds of Somalia* (1984); *Riviera Somalia* (1984), and *Un uomo di razza/A Man of Race* (1987). While he worked on many films in the course of his career, Said is probably best known for his short film *Geedkanolosha*/*The Tree of Life* (1988), which won the Prize of the City of Torino in the Best Film—International Short Film Competition category at the Turin International Festival of Young Cinema in 1988, and for *Aleel*/*La Conchiglia*/*Sea Shell* (1992). In particular *Geedkanolosha*, having won nine awards at international festivals, has offered the director the possibility of international fame outside of Somalia. Filmed in 1987, without any spoken dialogue, the film shows the problems of desertification in a small village in Somalia. This film is very important for the evolution of the style and the themes of the director: in addition

to the interest in the relationship between man and nature, Said develops his style in this film, typically accented by contrasts between light and shadow and long shots in which the human being just looks like a small element in a nature greater than him. We also find the use of nonprofessional actors and, in general, the use of a hybrid genre between documentary, experimental cinema, and fiction where music and noises of nature play a predominant role. These are elements that we will find in *Aleel* (1992) but are not yet present in his film on the Dervish (1983), a more classic and official film, although, as we shall see, it was already possible to find some innovative elements in his style at this point.

In fact, in 1983, the four-hour-forty-minute Indian-coproduced epic film titled *The Somali Dervish* went into production. Bollywood films were very popular in Somalia: Indian cinema had entered the Somali market more than fifty years earlier when Lebanese businessmen decided to try importing Bollywood films—instead of the far more expensive American movies—for distribution in the country (Gabriel 1982). Furthermore, in the 1970s and early 1980s, popular musicals known as *riwaayado* were the main driving force behind the Somali movie industry. The Somali public thus was accustomed to long shows with musical inserts. This music represents a perfect blend of pastoral past heritage and traditions from India. The percussion instruments used in the film come from the peasant context, while the use of the two voices (a male and a female) in alternation is a legacy of Indian music. Usually music was accompanied by popular dances, in which dancers had glamorous costumes, particularly suitable for exotic film sets. Inserts of songs and dances from *riwaayado* were already present in the film *Dan Iyo Xarrago*, previously analyzed, but it is from the eighties that this artistic form is affirmed as folk art par excellence.

Given the ever-tighter controls of the regime on print, film, and newspapers, live performances such as theatrical performances, readings of poems, or concerts remained among the few relatively free spaces in the country. For this reason, this music soon became a symbol of resistance to the regime and in a sense embodied the opposition to the exasperated nationalism of those years. The origin of *riwaayado*, probably born in Xamar Weyn, a multiethnic district of Mogadishu, clearly showed a hybridization of which the government of Siad Barre did not approve. The use of this music in the film *The Somali Dervish* and the use of large sections of it in live performances meant for Said and Ahmed (the film's directors) two things: on the one hand, they legitimized a popular form of art at the time; on the other, they operated a surreptitious criticism of the regime. We must bear in mind that the film

was an official production, in which the government had been financially involved. However, thanks to the continuing appeal of *riwaayado*, Abdulkadir Ahmed Said and Said Salah Ahmed had succeeded in making a patriotic and anticolonial film, while at the same time offering indirect insights into the contemporary political situation of their nation.

With a budget of $1.8 million, *The Somali Dervish* included an actual descendant of its historic protagonist Mohammed Abdullah Hassan as its star and featured hundreds of actors and extras. It was one of the most successful films in Somalia, and it was a coproduction between Italy, Somalia, and India. It was made in seven languages, namely Somali, Arabic, Italian, English, and three regional Somali dialects. The film follows Hassan's life from his roots as a humble mullah to a revolutionary, anticolonial leader who fought off the British Empire for more than two decades. From the aesthetic point of view, the most original element is the use of colonial sources. At the beginning of the film, some photographs dating back to Italian colonization are presented, accompanied by music *riwaayado*. These are extremely familiar iconographic representations: poorly dressed Somali women, children naked or dressed in European fashion, warriors with spears and sticks, Italian commanders with Somali helpers alongside wild beasts killed or tamed. The use of these images at the beginning of the film has a twofold value: on the one hand, it updates the history of dervishes, showing the common elements between their riots and the current independence; on the other, it develops a total autonomy over the old colonial power, from the point of view of language and aesthetic form. Said and Ahmed serve to deconstruct colonial Italian representations leading to the forging of a new and autonomous national film discourse. The reappropriation of old colonial photographs also symbolizes the recovery of spaces, raw materials, and places that have now returned to the Somali population. Colonial archives, the extreme symbol of Italian power, also because depositors of a wisdom theoretically unavailable to Somalis, are now open and available to the people, and cinema becomes the privileged way of reapplying and rewriting another story.

Finally, we can affirm that the Dervishes' political experience in Somalia became a symbol of freedom and independence to other African peoples, being perceived at regular intervals from anticolonialist, nationalist, and Islamic perspectives (Gray 1985). When *The Somali Dervish* was produced, the Siad Barre regime was at its most powerful: the links with socialist states and parts of the Italian Socialist Party were very close, and the dictator was internationally considered one of the most interesting symbols of a new modern, democratic, and free Africa in these spheres

of influence. Thanks to the use of music *riwaayado* challenging the project of the regime and the reuse of colonial photographs, Said and Ahmed are at the same time official directors who laud Siad Barre and independent Somalia, and critical artists, capable of understanding the contradictions and errors of Somali socialism since the 1980s. The fact that the criticism in the film is indirect and implicit must not be surprising as a policy to repress the critical voices of the regime was at the time already in place. Abdulkadir Ahmed Said and Said Salah Ahmed choose a different path: an internal disagreement with the regime, less obvious but perhaps more effective, and certainly able to speak directly to the Somali people.

The second film Said directed, *Aleel*/*La Conchiglia*/*Sea Shell* (1992), is totally different from *The Somali Dervish*. It was produced at the end of the Siad Barre regime, during civil war, so the hopes showed in his previous movies are no longer in place. The plot is simple: a female artist is painting a seascape on a deserted beach when she discovers a beautiful conch. Curious, she puts it to her ear and listens to the echoes and sounds of the ocean waves. However, she also hears the voice of a little girl, Sophie, who recounts her short and troubled life in her small town, which once stood on a lush shore but has since been destroyed by an ecological catastrophe. One night, a boat discharged illegal toxic waste that poisoned the fish and local fishermen, eventually contaminating all the vegetation on the coast and the region's inhabitants. Sophie's story is recounted twelve months after the ecological disaster first hit that strip of land, forever ruining the habitat and claiming many lives, including that of the child herself. The film's last sequence nevertheless leaves a glimmer of hope: a group of children are playing near the sea, and a little girl breaks away from the pack to invite the female protagonist to join their game. In this film, Said artistically casts humans as the primary agents responsible for the destruction and depletion of the environment and its resources. The film predicted the devastating effects that illegal toxic waste dumping by foreign vessels would have on local marine life and the fishermen who depended on it.

The beginning of the film is also very important; in headlines, we read a sentence that could be interpreted as a metaphor for the whole movie: "This film is dedicated to all the victims of humanity's lack of conscience: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bohpal, Chernobyl. . . ." The final ellipse indicates a path not yet completed, in which, of course, Somalia, as evidenced by the development of the plot, has a predominant role. From a number of perspectives, the sea is the real protagonist of the film: the director alternates between long shots and close-ups to show the incredible potential of the sea, with its reflections, its colors, and its sounds. Even

in the following pictures shot in the village, light contrasts represent the main aesthetic figure; moreover, for almost the whole film, there is scarce dialogue, as if the images of nature and the bodies of men and women within the natural context are sufficient language.

Inside the film there is also a clear linguistic change, which is associated with landscape changes and the evolution of history. If chromatic contrasts are always evident, we can notice in the plot progression a radical change in the use of film lenses. Throughout the first part, as mentioned, there is the alternation of shots to highlight the strength and beauty of nature; in the second part, however, the use of the wide angle (especially from the bottom up) is much more constant, showing a deformed and disturbing reality. The reflection is of the disturbing changes that pollution is leading to in the village, which seems deformed and unrecognizable even for its own inhabitants. The film worked for the entire population of Gwendershe, the small seaside village of the Somali coast at the center of the shooting, an element that further emphasizes Said's attention to the relationship between man and nature. A similar thing happened to the villagers: due to the use of the new Mogadishu slaughterhouse, located on the coast (given to Somalis by the Italian government), sharks are attracted in more number, causing serious damage to the fishing of neighboring villages, which was carried out on small boats. The inability of the dictatorial government and ancient colonial power to manage the territory created serious damage to the local populations. The use of nonprofessional actors personally linked to the story of the film and the shooting of nightly images around the fire make Said's style very similar to that of French documentarian Jean Rouch.

Said was in fact in Italy, raising money for the production of this award-winning film, when he heard of the anti–Siad Barre demonstration on July 6, 1990: a soccer match was taking place in the main stadium in Mogadishu, which descended into a riot, and the presidential bodyguard fired on the crowd, killing at least sixty-five people. *Aleel* became a kind of manifesto about the situation in Somalia with the film being shown at some important European film festivals (Torino Film Festival, 1992; San Sebastian Film Festival, 1993; Lisboa Film Festival, 1993); in 2014 it was finally shown in Somalia, during the second Somali Peace Festival in Mogadishu.

We can observe in this movie three fundamental elements of Somali culture: the problematic of gender, very important during the Somali civil war, as Nuruddin Farah (2000) said; the distance between capital and small villages; and the ecological problem, very significant in representing Italian influence in Somalia. Also of interest here is the film *Ilaria Alpi: il più crudele dei giorni*/*Ilaria Alpi: The Cruelest*

Day (Ferdinando Vicentini Orgnani, 2003). Ilaria Alpi was an Italian journalist killed in Somalia (Mogadishu) in 1994 together with her camera operator Miran Hrovatin. In 2009 Francesco Fonti, a former 'Ndrangheta (Calabria Mafia) member, claimed that Ilaria Alpi and her cameraman were murdered because they had seen toxic waste, shipped by the 'Ndrangheta, arrive in Bosaso. The film shows clearly the reasons of the murder of the young journalist: at this time, she was following a case of illegal weapons and toxic waste traffic in which she believed the Italian Army and other institutions were involved.

Aleel can thus be read as a kind of prophetic film where Said foresees the end of social peace in his country. Also, the cooperation between Italy and Somalia in the film's coproduction is a kind of symbolic end to their relationship as the role of Italy in the Somali civil war was very ambiguous. The Italian government helped Siad Barre until at least 1992, and sold weapons to different clans during the war. Also the divisions of Somali society into clans is one of the consequences of Italian colonialism, resulting from Italy's decision to divide Somalia into different parts from 1886 (Morone 2011). The role of Italy as the head chief of the UN operation "Restore Hope" was just the last mistake in this story.

Somali Cinema in Diaspora: "Somaliwood"

During the 1990s, Somali cinema production decreased significantly because of the civil war. During and after the civil war, a generation of directors, actors, and storytellers emigrated from Somalia. In the 1990s and 2000s, a new wave of more entertainment-oriented movies emerged from the Somali diaspora. Referred to as "Somaliwood," this new cinematic movement energized the Somali film scene, introducing innovative storylines, production techniques, and advertising strategies. The latter include cross-media marketing, with tie-in film soundtracks featuring prominent Somali music artists (Bick 2011). It is argued that Somalia needed to reconstruct its life starting from a past that has been irreparably destroyed. The process of filmmaking is one way to reconstruct this identity, and through the process of (screen)writing, producers might be seen as erecting a new country, more open to the multiple identities of our present.

Popular movies from Somaliwood include, among others, the Somali language slasher thriller *Xaaskayga Araweelo*/*My Wife Araweelo* (Abdisalam Aato, 2006), the action comedy *Rajo*/*Hope* (Abdisalam Aato, 2003), and *Warmooge* (Abdisalam

Aato, 2006), the first Somali animated film based on a popular character who is the title character of the film. The young directors Abdisalam Aato of Olol Films and Abdi Malik Isak are at the forefront of this quiet revolution. In 2010, the Somali director Mo Ali also released *Shank*, his first feature film, a British production set in a futuristic London, the first science fiction film by a Somali director.

Somaliwood is a diasporic production with many centers, generally closely linked to the local evolution of Somali diaspora communities. Thus, there are a number of production centers in the United States (especially in Seattle, in Ohio, and in Minnesota, where Somalis are numerous), Canada (especially in Toronto), Great Britain (London), and Australia (Melbourne). The transnationality of this cinematic phenomenon obviously has repercussions on the contents and the aesthetics of produced and distributed films because they are works that have (at least) two different audiences: first of all, they are addressed to the local Somali community, therefore dealing with problems and languages immediately understandable to its members; second, they turn to the global Somali diaspora, therefore presenting more general issues such as emigration, integration difficulties, second- and third-generation problems, and the construction of a national community abroad. I will analyze some of the films produced in the most representative centers (Ohio and London) to highlight some common aspects from the point of view of language, production, and distribution.

First of all, a general comment is needed: most of these works are designed for online consumption, on social media such as Facebook or dedicated YouTube channels. This choice has obvious aesthetic repercussions: in almost all cases, these films do not exceed twenty-five minutes. Here too, there are economic considerations at work as well, due to the need to format the product according to the chosen medium.

One of the most important places for the production of Somali movies is Minnesota, and the director Aato is one of the most prominent representatives of diasporic Somali films. Abdisalam Aato was born in Somalia, and when civil war broke out in 1991, Aato and his family were among the hundreds of thousands of Somalis who fled Mogadishu. After spending four years in various refugee camps in Kenya, Aato and his siblings obtained U.S. visas and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1996. Here, the twenty-year-old worked in a warehouse, volunteering for the local community access TV and radio station in his free time. Although he had never used a computer or video camera before arriving in the United States, Aato quickly picked up the new skills. He bought his own home video camera, learned

how to edit the film at the TV station, and began to contemplate opening his own film company.

Aato and his brother moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 2001 and founded a film company whose name reflected their experience as refugees ("Olol" is said to be the sound that lonely camels make when separated from their partners and children). Significantly, they chose to write their scripts in the Somali language, an even more radical move considering the fact that even in Somalia films are not screened in Somali. Their first feature film, *Rajo*/*Hope*, was shot in the summer of 2003. Aato wrote, directed, and produced the film, employing friends as actors and technicians, using Somali musicians to create a soundtrack, and financing the entire project through the generous donations of friends and family: "We do a lot of begging to finance our films," Aato says. He settled in Columbus in 2001 and has spent the last years making the city famous in Somali circles as one of the epicenters of diaspora Somali cinema. Music and movies have been banned in Somalia by the Islamic militia since the mid-2000s, but Aato says cheap Internet access is rampant in the country, which is how he is reaching people with his work.

In the film *Rajo* we can see the total absence of characters from other communities; there are only Somalis, and the themes are related to the problems of the community in Ohio. The film speaks about the problems of integration for a group of Somali boys, but these problems are solely analyzed from the internal point of view of Somali society. The main problem for these film protagonists is not just integration within the United States, but also the ability to find a role within the community. The ancient division between clans that led to the civil war is not mentioned, but there are other differences that undermine the unity of the community: the opposing views between the first and the second generations, the more or less occidentalized ways of life, the respect or disrespect of cultural, religious, and even culinary traditions, and the social and economic difficulties that these children can bring to the path of illegality. So it is in its own way a film about the ghetto, where behavioral codes, problems, and resolutions are all within the ghetto itself.

It is from a formal point of view that *Rajo* is particularly interesting, especially as far as the relationship with music is concerned. As with the film *Xaaskayga Araweelo*, a more classic thriller on the same themes, Aato uses a soundtrack entirely composed of Somali music produced in the diaspora, giving a precise idea of the subject matter and ignoring traditional Somali music as if to emphasize its artistic vitality. The director knows contemporary Somali music very well, so much so that in

2011 he directed the documentary *Somali Music* on Somali rappers such as Mo-Man and Malitia Malibob (Seattle) and MoG. (Toronto), and on the musical production house Redtowers, based in Toronto, entirely dedicated to Somali American hip-hop. Aato was himself director of some of the video clips of these musicians, and his cinematic style is deeply inspired by this experience. In *Rajo*, for example, we find long shots in slow motion where protagonists move to the rhythm of Somali music, using all the elements of hip-hop videos: guns, expensive clothes, luxury cars, girls dancing alongside men handling money. These musical parts are alternated, thanks to very fast editing, to scenes where poverty and the problems of the community are highlighted. These social complaint scenes show a close link with television images. The film was formed thanks to Aato's documentary work for the online Somali TV (a specific YouTube channel) based in Minnesota, a channel addressed to local citizens of Somali origin that alternates documentaries and interviews on Somalia and its history with surveys on Minnesota's Somali conditions.

In a recent interview Aato said: "I wanted something that has the politics, has the music, has the short films and documentaries."[3] He created with his friends and colleagues another Somalia, settled in Columbus after the civil war. In fact, in his movies (as well as in the music videos he directed), there are always Somali symbols like the national flag with the five-pointed star, the symbol of independence but also of the dictatorship of Siad Barre and of the subsequent civil war. This is an imagined and idealized Somalia that because of his age, the director has known very little, but that he rebuilds through relationships experienced while living in the diaspora.

Moving to Europe, London is certainly one of the most important centers for film production in the Somali diaspora. One of the most interesting films is *Cusbo* (2012), from the director Abhakim Br. The film is a comedy almost entirely filmed in interior spaces, in which the characters' dialogues and the rhythm given by the script are very important. If *Rajo* is inspired by the role of Somali hip-hop, giving a summarized account of the great tradition of Somali music and film from India with alternation between fiction and music, *Cusbo* refers to the Somali theater tradition, which was very important in the seventies and eighties and, together with music and oral poetry, a true center of resistance to the regime of Siad Barre. Somali theater was characterized by the one-man show, where the actor at the center of the scene usually dealt in irony with the most burning issues of politics and current affairs. Likewise, *Cusbo*'s protagonists, thanks to long well-constructed dialogues, face the audience and speak of migration, integration, violence, the civil war, and terrorism. Often the director emphasizes this theatrical aspect by filming

the actors behind a wall, which creates a sort of fourth theatrical wall interrupting the effect of film reality and shifting attention to the content of the speeches. Of course, in a film like this, language plays a key role: in Somalia the play of words and neologisms is used to ironic effect. In *Cusbo* the irony is also heightened when the actors misuse Western mannerisms and subvert the meaning of English sayings. The movie is filmed in a sort of "Somalenglish," a Somali language in which English words and expressions, often coming from youth slang, are continually used until they change the very essence of the original language.

Abhakim Br is a comedian himself (he created the *Somali Reality TV Show* on the YouTube channel Sama TV), and along with another Somali actor, Riwayad Kosol, resident of San Diego, California, he tries to reproduce the Somali oral tradition through updated media formats and distribution strategies. Their main goal is to analyze Somali integration in Western countries and show the exaggerated and grotesque sides of Somali communities in the diaspora. They do so always with a bitter irony, which shows the social and cultural difficulties of a diaspora-dissipated community.

Somaliwood has some points in common with the better-known Nollywood phenomenon and with Ethiopian diasporic cinema. As in the case of Ethiopian diasporic cinema, for example, Somali filmmakers explore the inherent contradictions of exile, contextualizing the numerous connections between myth, history, personal identity, and nation (Petty 1997; Jedlowski 2015). Moreover, recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge that the "emergence of Nollywood is emblematic of serious structural transformations in Nigeria, and indicates new standards both within the form of cinema and in the social structure" (Adesokan 2009, 600). Through his analysis of what he terms "democratic films," Adesokan affirms that the disjuncture between Francophone African cinema and Nollywood should not lead us to dismiss any sort of political engagement on the part of the latter (Hoffmann 2009, 231). Also in Somaliwood political engagement is very important. These directors show us not only new movies and new ideas of cinema, but also new ideas of nationality and of an imagined nation, conceived as a series of affective relationships. To be Somali (sometimes without even knowing the country) today is also a way to reflect on diversity and is a way to create a more inclusive idea of identity.

Somaliwood films are a vehicle to bridge generation gaps among the community and they are a way to educate the larger society on Somali culture. Somaliwood actually has been able, in the same way as Nollywood, to reassess the nation's cultural assets and to integrate them into global economic networks, thus providing

new sources of revenue, employment, and growth. Thanks to Somaliwood the image of Somali people in the United States has also changed, since Somalis were previously considered just as refugees, but now they are directors, musicians, actors, producers, and cultural managers. Somaliwood is situated at a crossroad between African, American, and African diaspora cinema and is justly claiming a significant place as a dynamic, influential, and highly mobile form of African diaspora creative expression. But the most important innovation of this cultural phenomenon, linked to the history of Somalia (ranging across accounts of Italian colonization, dervish wars, Italian protectorate, independence era, dictatorship, civil war, and the current problematic situation), is the tentative attempt to build a new idea of nation—a nation linked through a larger diaspora community, in an inclusive and not exclusive way. This idea is close to the idea of Homi Bhabha on nation: "America leads to Africa, the nations of Europe and Asia meet in Australia; the margins of the nation displace the center; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis" (1990, 6).

A nation, as Somaliwood seems to tell us, is a symbolic force created by interwoven narratives. Clearly Somaliwood has proven itself capable of embracing diverse Somali narratives. As long as Western portrayals of Somalia and representations of civil war dominate imaginations, Somali diaspora cinema takes on a special role in telling its own stories. Somaliwood filmmakers never put themselves in the position of having to contend with agencies and organizations in the formerly colonizing nations, corrupt and ineffective political leaders, and neocolonial market forces controlled by the First World. Somaliwood has been able, as Nollywood but in a different way, to create a diasporic production and new modalities of creation and reception of movies.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to survey the rich history of Somali cinema, from the end of Italian colonization (1949) to the present. The examples presented here analyze the works of several directors to demonstrate the variety of styles and modalities of production of this cinema. The earliest forms of public film display in the country were Italian newsreels of key events during the colonial period. Growing out of the Somali people's rich storytelling tradition, the first few feature-length Somali films and cinematic festivals emerged in the early 1960s, immediately after independence.

Following the creation of the SFA regulatory body in 1975, the local film scene began to expand rapidly. In the 1970s and early 1980s, popular musicals known as *riwaayado* were the main driving force behind the Somali movie industry. Epic and period films as well as international coproductions followed suit, facilitated by the proliferation of video technology and national television networks. In the 1990s and 2000s, after the civil war, a new wave of more entertainment-oriented movies emerged. Referred to as Somaliwood, this upstart, youth-based cinematic movement has energized the Somali film industry and, in the process, introduced innovative storylines, marketing strategies, and production techniques to Somali audiences. Crucially, the films of Somaliwood are key ways in which a Somali national identity is emerging and being reconstructed from within the diaspora.

NOTES

1. The quotation is from De Gasperi's speech at the Italian Parliament on February 8, 1950 (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 1983).
2. In reality we have just two articles about cinema in ten years, but they are very interesting and longer than other articles in the newspaper.
3. Sarah Smith, "Somaliwood: Columbus Has Become a Haven for Somali Filmmaking," *Hiiraan online*, April 19, 2007, https://www.hiiraan.com/news2/2007/may/somaliwood_columbus_has_become_a_haven_for_somali_filmmaking.aspx.

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Debebe Eshetu

Interviewed by Aboneh Ashagrie

Addis Ababa, May 1, 2016

Aboneh Ashagrie: The name Debebe Eshetu is closely linked with Ethiopian film. Could you please explain your life experiences that led to your journey in film?

Debebe Eshetu: I was born in 1943 in Addis Ababa and attended elementary and secondary school at the Teferi Mekonnen School from 1948 to 1957. I then spent two years in the Ethiopian Air Force from 1958 to 1960 before I enrolled in the Debre Birhan Teacher Training School in 1960. After attending a tutorial in theater arts at the Creative Arts Center, Haile Selassie I University in 1963, I got the chance to study theater and film at Eötvös Loránd University's School of Arts in Budapest, Hungary, in 1965. On my return to Ethiopia I worked as a freelance journalist with Ethiopian Radio and Television Services and then participated in the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria as a member of the Ethiopian delegation in 1969. Not long after this I was involved in my first film experience.

AA: Which film was it?

DE: *The Sailor from Gibraltar*, produced by United Artists Film. The story was about

a sailor from Gibraltar who had a romantic attachment with a French lady and the adventures they had together.

AA: How did your casting in this film come about? Was it through an audition?

DE: Not through auditioning. I was approached by an Ethiopian professional photographer called Yohannis Haile, the brother of the then minister of information Dr. Minasse Haile. He had already been contracted to the film, and as they had wanted two English-speaking Ethiopian actors they informed myself and Wegayehu Nigatu, my professional twin and close friend with whom I attended both courses at the Creative Arts and in Budapest. Yohannis introduced us to the casting director, and then the British director Tony Richardson talked to us and assigned us two small roles as bartenders.

AA: What was your impression then?

DE: For both Wegayehu and I this was a God-given opportunity as the cast consisted of great world famous actors like Hugh Griffith, Jean Morreau, and being directed by the world-renowned director Tony Richardson. For us, though the role was small, the fact that we were lined up with this world famous cast and crew was a big opportunity.

AA: Was there financial reward?

DE: We never discussed financial issues. But finally we were both granted money we never expected to get and were happy.

AA: How was your interaction with the production team?

DE: The director and the rest of the crew were full of admiration as they never expected us to react to the camera and the director's direction. This was an eye-opener for me in the ways of the international film industry. It paved the way for us to get involved in another international film a year after.

AA: Which international film?

DE: *Una stagione all'inferno*/*A Season in Hell* directed by Nelo Risi in 1970, and was shot in France and Ethiopia. The producer was the then owner of the Asmara brewed Melotti Beer, an Italian, in collaboration with French and Italian film production offices. An open tryout had been announced, but I was approached by the casting director. He informed me that he had heard of Wegayehu and me from the casting director of *The Sailor from Gibraltar* and wanted me to try out for the role of Emperor Menelik. I was given the roll of Emperor Menelik while Wegayehu tried for the part of *Ras* Mekonnen and got the role.

AA: This time women had taken roles as actresses.

DE: Yes. The famous radio and TV announcer Elleni Mekuria played the role of an Ethiopian lady. The leading lady role was planned to be cast in Ethiopia, but it was unfortunate that none of the experienced professional stage actresses spoke English, and Florinda Bolkan, a Black Brazilian actress was cast.

AA: That was a unique cinematic experience in Ethiopia, for involving women and for treating an issue related to the country's history.

DE: Yes. That was why, during the filming, all the necessary support was given to the film company. It was also believed that it would open an opportunity for other film companies to come and work in Ethiopia.

AA: So it was based on a true story?

DE: It was based on the true story of [Arthur] Rimbaud, a French poet who could not manage life by writing poetry in his country, France, and had to compensate with other businesses. Rimbaud came to Ethiopia as an ammunition merchant to sell arms to Emperor Menelik, and Emperor Menelik assigned *Ras* Mekonnen to do the deal. He made his office in Harar where *Ras* Mekonnen was the governor and tried to finalize the agreement, writing poetry in his spare time too.

AA: What was the next film you played in?

DE: *Gumma*; it was the first full-color film produced by an Ethiopian, Asrat Getahun, written and directed by Michel Papatakis, an Ethiopian by birth. The cameraman

was Tasso Papatakis, Michel's son who was a very successful cameraman from Paris. Michel did the narration and a playwright, Yilma Manaye, did the writing. Both Wegayehu and I, to a certain extent, helped Yilma in writing the script. Yilma did almost 90 percent of the writing as Michel dictated the story.

AA: Now the subject matter is totally Ethiopian?

DE: Yes. *Gumma* means "blood money" that is needed in order to wash away the bad feelings between families. *Gumma* is a customary law that is passed on to someone who has blood on his hands for killing another person. In the story of the film, a young man who had gone out hunting with his friend sees a moving object and shoots and kills his friend thinking he was an animal. The two families start a feud and decide on revenge. The elders of the village decide that the accused goes out of the village for two years and collects money for the family as a payment of debt and in order to wash the blood from his hands.

AA: Please tell me about your participation in *Shaft in Africa*.

DE: In 1974, I met the casting director of *Shaft in Africa*, and I was given the role of Wassa. It was filmed in Ethiopia, New York, France, and Spain. It was exciting for me to travel to three countries abroad and to be cast along with Richard Roundtree, Vonetta McGee, Sir Frank Finley. I had seen the first two installments of *Shaft*, and by God's will I got to be in the third one. The story is about human trafficking from Africa for cheap slave labor in Europe; an African agent, Shaft (played by Richard Roundtree), is employed to covertly follow the movement of the traffickers by becoming one of the trafficked Africans. Frank Finley plays the boss of the people traffickers who employ Africans and Europeans to do the job. Wassa, my role, is the opponent of the main character who is employed to kill Shaft. Wegayehu was given a minor role of playing a messenger. Other Ethiopian cast members included Zenebech Tadesse (Chira Keresh) as a prostitute and Almaz Dejene (then my girlfriend and now my wife) as the passenger on the bus with Shaft. The shooting in Ethiopia took place in Addis Ababa, Arba Minch, Asmara, and Mitsiwa; then it moved to Spain. The American embassy made an arrangement with the Ministry of Information for Richard Roundtree, Vonetta McGee, Hugh Griffith, the director, and the rest of the American crew to meet the emperor, which made news both in Ethiopia and the United States.

AA: It seems that the emperor was impressed by the production. Has he seen the film?

DE: Yes, he has, but he was not happy during the premier of the film. For the premier of the film, a picture of the emperor and Shaft was needed to be at the front page of the program, but there was a problem. The picture taken during the handshake showed Shaft much taller than the emperor; after it was shown to the minister of information for approval it was adjusted and was later approved. Also during the premier, the scene in which Zenebech appears topless was found to be immoral by the emperor and the aristocracy, which prompted them to walk out of the theater before the end of the screening.

AA: What came next after *Shaft in Africa*?

DE: After *Shaft in Africa* my communications were more difficult as the revolution erupted. As I was then a radio newscaster and program producer at the Ethiopian News Service, I read the declaration of the emperor being dethroned on the radio and also witnessed the declaration being read to the emperor of Ethiopia at the palace. I interviewed the emperor as he was deposed, and reported the news. After a while, theater professionals needed recognition by the Department of Civil Service and went on strike asking to be legally recognized as civil servants entitled to pensions and other benefits. This was a demand made by the employees of public theaters that had been an issue even during the emperor's time. Finally the National Theater employees took a firm stand on the issue and went out to demonstrate. The demonstration was very peaceful, but the police killed an actor from the Municipality Theater and many were arrested. I was freed after six months in prison, and once again I tried to rebuild broken communications with film producers; then came *Afrika*. It is an Italian film produced by Alberto Cavallone in 1973. Alberto Cavallone, also the film director, needed only one actor to play a private detective, investigating a crime committed in Addis among a group of Italians. The story is about a wanted criminal who makes his way to Ethiopia to hide from the law; the Italian family employ an Ethiopian detective to find the man. The detective takes the job and after a long search suddenly gets a call from the hotel where the man he was looking for seems to have taken a room the previous night and has been found dead. The agent continues his search for the killers and travels to Italy to continue his search and finds out that the murder was planned and executed by members

of the same family who had interest in the family business. This was also another film that brought with it an opportunity for me to get another role, this time in *Zelda*, also produced by Cavallone in 1974.

AA: By the same Italian director and producer?

DE: Yes. But this time it was not shot in Ethiopia. It was shot in Rome, Turin, and Milan. The story of the film is based on a rich Italian family. The only daughter of the family meets a black motorbike racer and falls in love with him. This was unacceptable for the family, and the mother tries to convince her daughter that the affair will be a disaster for the family. The daughter is unwilling to accept her parents' arguments and tries to make her mother understand. She tells both her mother and father that she has the right to choose whom to marry and she intends do just that. The family decides to approach the "Black Romeo" and try to convince him that he will be in grave danger if he continues to date their daughter to which he responds by saying that the only way he will stop his romance will be if their daughter tells him to do so. The issue becomes national news as the black motor racer was a famous public figure. One Italian newspaper carried the issue, and this made the family more furious and ever more determined to find a solution. The only way to do this was by having the black racer killed during one of his races, a plan that the girl discovers from a trusted family member. The daughter, knowing the secret plan of her family, tells her mother and father that she is moving out of the family house and will start living with her lover and tells them if they continue their plan to have her boyfriend killed, she will hold them responsible and take the issue to the courts. This creates a problem for the family and they start thinking otherwise. The final agreement is that the two are given a huge amount of money to go away and start their own business. The romantic young ones agree to this proposal, but unfortunately I never saw the film after it was released.

AA: Why?

DE: Because during the premier I was shooting another film in Ethiopia and could not attend.

AA: Which film?

DE: *The Grand Rebellion* by Cuban International Films in 1976. It is about the Ethio-Somali War and the assistance given to the Ethiopian Army by the Cuban military. Wegayehu and I got the roles of generals. I had the opportunity to play the role of the great Ethiopian hero General Tesfaye, and I had to do some simple military trainings. My being in the Ethiopian Air Force for some years stood me in good stead for things such as saluting, giving orders, wearing the uniforms, and some minor but important military discipline. The whole film was shot in and around Dire Dawa where the war had taken place. After that, for some time I only did Ethiopian feature video films such as *Siga Yata Menfes*/*Fleshless Spirit* and *Siwir Chilot*/*Hidden Court*, and was busy working on stage productions at home and traveling for workshops and trainings in Africa and other places.

AA: Was it in that time that you became a political activist?

DE: It was after the new government took over from the military government. During the Ethio-Eritrean War and after Ethiopia won the battle, a musical group was needed to go to Scandinavian countries and to the United States to thank the diaspora for supporting their country during the war. An old friend and head of the film and advertisement department of the EPRDF [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front] and also member of the central committee of the TPLF [Tigray People's Liberation Front] asked me to meet the people responsible for the project at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as he wanted me to organize and lead the group on the tour. I stated my conditions, and he promised that all would be accepted as he said they did not want to foster resentment and hatred and intended to bring unity among all Ethiopians, after which I agreed and took on the responsibility. Prior to this I had been busy fundraising through telethon programs for the different regional governments that was also a successful program that I was involved in. At one point I decided I had to join a political party that would give me shelter to do legal activities without any harassment from the ruling party, and joined the new Rainbow Opposition Party. I became head of PR for the party and later when the four parties merged and became UDJ (Unity for Democracy and Justice), I was a member of the Public Relation Committee and International Relation Office and had to take over the TV and radio campaign programs, which proved to be successful. After this, the election of 2005 brought all the problems as the UDJ won the election in Addis Ababa and many other places. The struggle in relation to the vote count persisted

against the ruling party, and as a result all the executive committee members of the UDJ were imprisoned; I was one of them. After two years in prison we were freed.

AA: When did you get back to work in the film industry?

DE: Almost after five years, with Ethiopian video feature films. I performed main roles in Biniyam Worku's *70/30* in 2011, and in Mesfin Habtamu's *Tiwlid*/*Generation* in 2012.

AA: May I presume you are done with politics since your release from jail and you are now focusing on film acting again?

DE: I am afraid not. I do both side by side. I had been on a mission for my political party when I was requested to perform in the production of *Red Leaves* in Israel. Bazi Gete, the author and director of *Red Leaves*, contacted me through my daughter Tsiday Debebe, who was at school in Los Angles and asked if I would be interested to play the lead. I asked for the synopsis of the story before I committed myself. I found that the story was about an Ethiopian Jewish family. Thematically, the film focuses on the generation gap, the changes in culture and tradition, and family-related problems. It was about being Ethiopian and at the same time Israeli. After reading the English script I then agreed to take the part. At the same time I was asked by my party to go to Canada to thank our diaspora supporters and to update them with the present situation of the party. While getting ready to travel, Bazi sent me an e-mail asking me to record a few parts of my acting from the script on camera and send it to him. I did that, my wife recorded it for me, and I sent it to Bazi. After all was done and an agreement signed, I went to Tel Aviv. The next day, I asked Elad [Peleg] (one of the producers) and Bazi to arrange meetings for me with Ethiopian Jews as I had to know their way of living, tradition, and also get to know them; and this was done. The rehearsal lasted one month with all the mornings spent in the Ethiopian Jewish clubs so I could meet with the community, which was very helpful. I played cards with them and had the opportunity to know what it meant for them to come to Israel, what was the difference from their previous life in Ethiopia, and how they were adapting to their new lives. We discussed what their children thought of Israel and Ethiopia, and I was given more than enough information. The filming started and went smoothly. I am proud that at the end, *Red Leaves* won the International Critiques Award, the best film award in Israel,

and I also received the Golden Leopard Award for the Best Leading Actor at the Vancouver International Film and TV Festival 2015.

AA: You have published six books, written two plays, performed in over forty stage plays, directed more than twenty-eight plays, worked as a theater manager, as president of the Union of African Performing Artists, as African coordinator of UNESCO's International Theatre Institute, and as a member of WECT editorial board for the Africa World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre, and presented papers at conferences. Is there any other award you won within these broader accomplishments?

DE: Yes. I was given an award for contributing to the development of Ethiopian film from the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Eyoha Cinema; the Gumma Award for Lifetime Achievement in Ethiopian Cinema; Zambian Malakite for contribution to African theater; Tayitu Entertainment Washington DC Award for Lifetime Achievement in Theatre Arts. The City Council of Atlanta, Georgia, even designated November 24 as Debebe Eshetu Day in recognition of my contribution to world theater.

AA: And finally, based on your vast experience, how do you observe the Ethiopian film industry today?

DE: In recent times the film industry in Ethiopia has shown progress in productions. From only a few productions per year it has grown to about ten to fifteen productions a week as estimated by some people involved in the business. The public attendance during screenings is a sign of appreciation and encouragement to Ethiopian filmmakers. But the work of the filmmakers does not always respond positively to that. Encouraging filmmakers to develop in terms of quality of production is more necessary than just looking at the quantity of films produced. No matter what the quality is, the public still attends the films as they are made in their language. They hold a hope that tomorrow better films will be produced, but I think there is a misunderstanding around the public's attendance of film screenings. I think that filmmakers believe that the public keep attending the shows because their productions are of a high standard; but they often seem deluded and too proud of the trailers and adverts of their film—overlooking the true quality of the overall production. The owners of the films forget that advertisers are doing their jobs by

marketing films with sensational statements written for the radio and TV by agents who have not even seen the films but advertise them very well. The agents say: "The most acclaimed high-quality picture and great artists combined present such and such a film. It opens in all the cinemas for the public etc." The main reason films are often premiered on the same day at many cinemas is because of doubts the film owners have. If it is not shown in this format, the news of the film's standard might reach the public in its true sense and might lose the audience.

Let me also hint at some of my observations on the filmmaking process here. Anyone who has the money can pursue any format or discipline he chooses. He can claim all roles; the role of the director, the producer, the leading actor role, casting director, and more in a given film because he has the money. After he takes the role of an actor, the rest of the parts are also cast on his preferences and personal links with individuals. A filmgoer who always, and still today, attends film screenings once said to me, "In the Ethiopian industry, once you see a romantic film, all romantic films are a repetition of that film and you don't have to bother to see the rest." I agree with this statement absolutely, and this also happens in most TV series that we see weekly. They are all based around the same issues: the business world and betrayal. This problem will continue to be practiced if the proper format for filmmakers and film is not outlined and defined properly. I think it is only in Ethiopia where anyone, without the filmmaker's broad approval, makes movies and screens them to the public. I think also it is only in Ethiopia where professional unions do not defend the rights of the trained or talented. I also think it is only in Ethiopia where a film is produced without a board of film production that controls quality and storyline. The board is the representative of the public to make sure that the public gets what it deserves when they go to the cinema and purchase a ticket. The other part that is missing is there is no role for the Actor's Union. The same goes for the Union of Cameramen, Directors, Producers, and they will all be governed by the federal board. If this is properly practiced, it won't take long for the Ethiopian film production to develop in quality and quantity at the same time.

The other issue to be discussed is the individuals responsible to allow films to be shown in their cinemas. It is believed that film screenings in Addis Ababa are determined by a person who has no professional knowledge and skill about film quality or content. The person is employed at the initial stage to manage a cinema, but then they are also given the authority to decide if a film is to be screened in their cinema or not. Their decision is final, and it is a yes or no answer. These

days, it has become customary to bribe these individuals to get films screened to the public. In general, a system has to be laid out as to how we can best defend and protect the profession, and in order to make this development a success my recommendation is to establish strong unions organized by no one but the people who are being ill-treated.

Behailu Wassie

Interviewed by Michael W. Thomas

Addis Ababa, March 8, 2016

Michael W. Thomas: Thank you for speaking with me today, Behailu. Can you please introduced yourself and tell me about how you joined the film industry?

Behailu Wassie: I never thought I would be a filmmaker. When I was in university I studied agriculture (crop science) because I was forced to do it, even though I was one of the top students. After I graduated I rented some land and started a farming business, but I didn't enjoy my studies or work in agriculture. I wasn't passionate about the field, and because it is a seasonal business, in the down season I managed to find time, and that's when I started writing. This was when I found my true passion. Farming gave me the time to contemplate myself more, and I started to read more as a habit. Then, in 2009, my friend offered me a post as a writer in a sport newspaper. So I started to write articles and it helped me to develop my writing and gave me space to express my thoughts about my country, but as it was a sport paper, I didn't have the freedom to write about these things in detail. Then I started to take short-term film training courses and I loved it so much because I was able to express myself and my thoughts in a clear way, and that is how I became a filmmaker.

MWT: And what was your first film?

BW: *Ya Lij*, 2010/2011. It was a very challenging process, but I found it easy to express myself through film. It was a big learning curve for me because I wrote and directed it and learned many things in the process of making it. It was such a big part in my career and made me who I am. Through the experience of making this film I realized how Ethiopian technology is very backwards compared to the rest of the world. The film also highlighted how people who are obsessed with technology can become isolated in Ethiopian society as there can be a clash with our traditional way of living. It is particularly these sort of ideas, which emerge from the ambivalences of our contemporary society and culture, that I like to express and share through film. I really like that I can use film to express myself or raise these issues, but it is up to the audience to judge and challenge their preconceived ideas, to look at things in different ways through film. My aim is to use film to open up discussions on these issues, it is not to make right or wrong judgments. I was lucky with this first film as it went down well with audiences and critics, which gave me a good platform to build my career. After that, I made my second film *Belideté Ken*, which was released in 2012, then came *Sené 30*, *Ayrak*, and *Utopia*. These three films became very successful in Ethiopia and helped me grow even more in this industry. Whenever I make films I gain economically, but they also contribute to who I am; I learn a lot and I grow as a person through making films. When I want to raise an issue I always take my time. Making a film is very expensive and challenging in this country as none of us have professional training, but we are achieving a lot and doing well; it has become a great love of mine.

MWT: Can you tell me more about your different financial and technical experiences with making films?

BW: I try to use the latest technology for each of my films. Because technology is improving so quickly, this means that we are also pushed to grow and learn quickly in terms of production, just to be able to keep up. But what is really important for me is not the technology or production quality but the idea at the heart of the story. Personally, I don't like fantasy films or films that don't relate to real life. What really matters to me are stories that engage with the issues of our society. For me, the thing that makes me happy is when people talk about the issues in my films and when my films strike a chord with society and people's conscience. I am

not so concerned with camera angles and technical issues as long as my themes are communicated successfully. For the production of a film, many people come together, and in order to get them all working together it is most important they all understand the story of the film and work together to achieve the aims of the story. I am most satisfied when my films are discussed in terms of the issues they raise instead of just for the technical or stylistic qualities. My philosophy is to make sure we look after our soul, and in this era of globalization where we listen to so many ideologies from different parts of the world, I think it is important that we stay connected to our society and our issues; in this regard fantasy and escapism is not a concern of mine either. When you make a film you don't have to copy from other cultures and countries. Other people make their own film depending on their culture so you can't just mimic them but you can adapt the good things to your own situation and culture. For me I really like reading books on Ethiopian history and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and so I've always been aware of our rich history and culture; these are our strong roots. Because we have strong roots in Ethiopia I am able to appreciate both our culture and foreign culture. This enables me to mix them together to satisfy both body and soul. Our films reach between 250,000 and 300,000 people in the cinemas and then over one million when the film is released on VCD, and even more online, and despite comedies selling well, it is important for me to use my films to relate to Ethiopian society, customs, history, and ideology in order to have a deeper, more meaningful and tangible value for how people act and think in relation to Ethiopia.

Art, and culture in general, is like the farming process: you take what is best for you, you have to work hard to cultivate it, and this is what the film process is like for me. You start with the seed that is the idea and the story. Then, like the tractor or the plough, we use the camera and other technology to develop the seed into the fruit. But we cannot just be satisfied with a beautiful fruit; the fruit has to taste good. I believe that we all have our separate tastes depending on the cuisine of our culture and as I have Ethiopian culture in common with my audiences, my films and the ideas they communicate share the flavors and tastes of our cuisine.

MWT: That is an interesting philosophy, and can we see this in your film *Ayrak* as it is a romantic comedy film, correct? Can you explain to me how the genre has become localized for you as, despite obviously relating to Hollywood styles, it speaks specifically to Ethiopian audiences?

BW: Yes, *Ayrak* tries to address the differences in people's ideologies. We have two characters: one loves tradition, is confident in himself, rooted in Ethiopian culture, and loves his country; the other attempts to be a modern woman but she does not belong in America, where she was educated, and struggles to fit back in Ethiopia. Instead of being grounded like him, she floats in between two cultures. I think it is about how, as coming from different societies and cultures, we understand and value our respective cultures and those foreign to us. As an Ethiopian I value things differently than someone from a different culture, and we also have different ways of expressing and understanding these values. Personally, I don't want to live in an isolated and nostalgic idea of Ethiopian exceptionalism, but I also don't want to abandon my Ethiopian identity for the sake of adopting Western customs. What we need to look for is a balance and continual negotiation of our identity as a culture and society, and this is what the film attempts to do by bringing together the modern, outward-looking, and rich female character with the male who lives in the countryside and is rooted in Ethiopian culture.

This film stayed in the cinemas for five months, which was a big success, and made a really big influence on how this issue was discussed in Ethiopia at the time. In fact even in Addis you can see this dislocation; for example, if you go to Bole it is very different from the rest of the city as people try to speak English and think Amharic or other Ethiopian languages are ugly, but it is these people who are cutting off their roots and become floaters who will soon forget about their culture and their society and so they will lose their way. Just as in the film, the male character does not care about his appearance but speaks from his heart and soul while the female changes her mind easily and is overly concerned with her appearance. A romantic comedy is like this in Ethiopia as we adapt it to speak to the soul of our culture and society, but we also use the comedy elements to feed the hunger for entertainment in the belly of our audiences, and in order to make a financial living for ourselves as filmmakers. Here we call romantic comedy *assikiñ yefiker film*, and because of the commercial pressures to recoup the cost of making a film, many filmmakers are able to take advantage of the popularity of certain genres. Equally, however, there are people who become constrained by the idea of genres. As well as *assikiñ yefiker film* being the most popular films in cinemas, they are also the largest in number that fail to be screened. This is also because many unqualified people attempt to make a film and think they can get easy financial rewards, but this is not the case as is evidenced by the statistics given by the Bureau of Culture and Tourism and the number of films that fail to get an exhibition license.

MWT: And then you also wrote *Sené 30*, which is quite different and also has a powerful message?

BW: Yes, it is completely different. In this film I was exploring the issue of humanity through naming the old blind male protagonist Sewenet ("humanity"). All other animals are defined by their nature and instincts, but humans have the capacity to change from day to day. For example, we are having an important conversation now and after this meeting we are bound to be influenced by each other, thus changing as humans. In the film, Sewenet becomes who he is through his experiences; we learn he has sacrificed his love and his vision, and through his sacrifices he has gained much wisdom. So, through his long life and hard experiences, the wisdom of Sewenet is authentic, and he is the right person to guide the young male character who is just beginning on his journey through life. This film was also successful with audiences, and since the industry is becoming more competitive with more releases it stayed in the cinemas for three months after its release in 2015. For *Ayrak* and *Sené 30* I sold the scripts to Fikreyesus Dinberu who directed both films. For *Ayrak* I was on set most of the time to help him with everything, but for *Sené 30* I had less input on set. I feel very lucky to have this talent and to be able to express myself in this way. Imagine, if I want to discuss these ideas with people directly I cannot find fifty people, but through film I can reach thousands and even millions of people. The only thing I pray is that people take positive messages and ideas from my films and do not misinterpret them.

MWT: So when you have a blank page in front of you how do you start a script? Do you think about the social themes that concern you, or do you see what themes are current in other films? Do you think about the components that would make a successful film, or are you only concerned with communicating important ideas?

BW: I always listen to my heart; I am always honest with myself. I do not pay attention to others but I understand the social, political, and religious/spiritual situation, and so ideas come from observations and I just try to develop them in a way that feels honest to myself. Always before I start, I develop the idea and the structure; sometimes I even start at the end and work my way back to the beginning. But once I have the idea I feel like the script is already half complete. After you get the core idea then you can have fun with it; you can be serious or use comedy and other genres. The structure of my films is simple so that the message is clear for

my audience. This is definitely influenced by the folk stories (*teret*) my father used to tell me. They introduce the characters and establish the story, then they create action and build suspense, and then we reach the resolution that always carries a moral teaching, and this is definitely how most successful films are structured here in Ethiopia. When I watch Hollywood films I am not surprised by their ideas, but what amazes me is that they make the film into a puzzle with many complex narrative strands. It shows how far they are going, and some youngsters aspire to make films like [Martin] Scorsese or [Quentin] Tarantino and I respect this, but mine are simple in structure and aim to communicate a clear message.

MWT: So what do you think of the influence of Hollywood or other foreign films on Ethiopian film?

BW: We can pick lots of films that are influenced by foreign films such as *Wesané*, which was a remake of a Bollywood film. But now people are becoming more patriotic and nationalistic. So more recently people are looking at Ethiopian society and looking at their audience here and creating these more simplistic narratives. As our industry is also still very young, I believe that as we grow and develop, people will experiment and create more complex narratives and aesthetically accomplished films that our audiences will also come to appreciate. But at the moment people want a film that they can relate to, so films reflect our way of living in Ethiopia and the aspirations and anxieties we have. But equally I believe that having a simple narrative allows the film to be understood by everyone, young and old.

MWT: And what about Nigerian films? They are very popular all over Africa and in the diaspora, but they don't seem to have an audience here. Is this true, and if so why do you think this is the case?

BW: There are two main reasons here. The first is because most Ethiopians do not speak English. I am expressing my ideas to you in Amharic because my language is the best way I can express myself. And second, people who speak Amharic can grasp the cultural and social messages of our films in more depth. Now, as our film industry is growing, people only want to watch Amharic films as the quality is similar to Nigeria but it speaks directly to them. A sign of the rise in talent and quality of our films can be seen in the recent offices DSTV and other pan-African

distribution companies are setting up here in order to start to show Ethiopian films to audiences outside of Ethiopia.

MWT: Speaking to audiences here in Addis, it seems that a major reason for going to the cinema and watching films is to learn about life and love. But others also talk about needing the entertainment of comedy. Can you help us understand this more?

BW: Many filmmakers do not have the time or effort to try and make another genre apart from *assikiñ yefiker film* as it is easy to make people laugh and to create empathy with characters who have to overcome obstacles to achieve their love. Entertainment is always necessary, but you can entertain people and connect with people by making tragedies too; this is why *Wisané* was such a popular film in 2007 because there was not a dry eye in the cinema after the film finished. Today in Ethiopia we see that the audience numbers have plateaued, or some even say they are falling, but there is a huge potential market just here in Addis of people who are just waiting for a particular genre to come out as they are bored and tired of only watching *assikiñ yefiker films*. Yes, entertainment is important as we need to nourish our body just as we need to give our soul satisfaction. That is what I believe. Comedy is very easy to tell; tragedy is different. I believe there are people out there looking and waiting to be addressed by different kinds of genres.

MWT: If you look at a film like *Rebunni* by Kidist Yilma, it seems that although being successful in cinemas it became really famous after it was released on VCD, and this is similar with the first *assikiñ yefiker film*, Henok Ayele's *Yewendoch Gudday*. Why is this?

BW: Lots of people don't believe in the potential of filmmakers here, so many people don't want to waste their time and instead wait until the film is released on VCD. *Rebunni* is a really good film, but I am sure most of the audience saw it at home. Because cinema owners have a lot of power over what films they show, they often want films that make the audience laugh in the first minutes, and so fail to open their doors to new genres and ideas. It is the case that we make most of our money from theatrical releases in cinemas, but our films reach more audiences after they are released, and this is when people contact me to tell me how much they appreciate the film. Even if you look at Ethiopia, we have a population of over one hundred million, but there are only a few cinemas in other towns and cities outside Addis

Ababa, so when films are released on VCD, although there are issues with pirating, that is when the films become well known. The other problem is that the cinema owners are only concerned with making their money now; they have no concern for making the industry grow in terms of art and diversity in the future. There is a gap in trust and communication between filmmakers and producers, cinema owners, and audiences because of this. This is why it seems that after films become very well known and popular through VCD more of that genre will begin to be screened in cinemas because there is less risk for the cinema owners.

It is also true that there is more competition and big rivalries between private cinemas that can lead to pettiness. This is also a reason why the government cinemas that play films on second run and for a cheaper price are consistently able to draw big audiences, because their films have already been successful in the private cinemas on their first run. I think this is where the government can help the situation more by supporting the filmmakers and helping to create a more legitimate and transparent operational structure for the film industry. They need to help protect the rights of us filmmakers and create space for a wider variation of film genres and themes to be explored. On top of this, as there is no proper structure to the industry, it can take more than two years for you to get the money you earned through cinema box office receipts as cinema owners take their time and there is no distributor to take on this work.

The film industry is like a marathon: many athletes start the race at the beginning but only a few extra talented make it to the finish line. The filmmakers who make a living out of cinema here are few, and many actually offset the difficulties of the film industry through making TV commercials, documentaries for NGOs, and other such products. There needs to be a coherent policy from the government to sort out the structural issues in our industry. People have to understand that fiction films are more than just entertainment; they create powerful narratives that touch your soul and influence peoples' behavior, and because of this simple fact I am optimistic for the future.

MWT: It is interesting to hear how influential cinema owners are here, and what about film producers?

BW: They monopolize everything because they have money, and they have no concern for the quality of the film or for making spaces to improve the quality of film production. Again they are just people with money who have little or no

experience in film; their main aim is to make money. We need people who are passionate about the production process of filmmaking, not just people who are interested in making money.

MWT: Do you see changes coming soon, and if so, in what ways?

BW: Yes definitely, I see more films being valued by our society such as with *Rebunni* and *Etege 2*. Both are unique and audiences like them, and I see more young filmmakers being inspired to make films about their experiences and about Ethiopian culture. You cannot only concern yourself with the satisfaction of your body. Just like my view of my country is not just the land or river, it is coming from your soul, your relationship with culture, society, and humanity. Film is like this, it has to have a soul for it to have deep value, but also it has to nourish the body through entertainment and often here this is done through comedy. In Ethiopia there is a lot of poverty, but I am not ashamed of our poverty. In Amharic *dehenet* ("poverty") has multiple meanings: one is poor, the other (*denet*) is salvation. So when you don't have money your soul is getting stronger. That is how I understand my country, our films, and our love; we struggle with material wealth but we have strong immaterial wealth in our culture and society. Another example is the word *temhert*, which means "education," but *mhert* means "mercy," and so these words are also inextricably linked to each other just as above. Love is linked with all of this, and it is all about listening to your soul. As love is the major narrative in our films, so too our films are like smoke and cannot be achieved without a fire. So I always try to balance my films to address love, identity, and feeling and be entertaining too.

MWT: And finally, when you describe these double meanings it reminds me of the Amharic technique of wax and gold—concealing a deeper meaning through these double entendres. Is this exclusively used when speaking and writing, or can this exist in cinema too?

BW: Yes, it can be used in cinema. If you have wax and gold in your film then the audience will get a simple message immediately, but more complex meanings will only be uncovered by those who contemplate the message further. The best films have the soul hidden in the entertainment; in that sense of course it is just as the wax hides the gold. The richness of Amharic also gives us lots of flexibility when making films as we can also use dialogue for hiding ideas and challenge the

audience to try and find deeper meanings and value by themselves. Despite this I am also influenced by Chinese and Indian films, and what really matters is to reach as many souls as we can and I believe films are the best method of achieving this. I hope we use films to tell our own narratives. If I watch a Hollywood film I can see that it is technically and cinematographically beautiful, but it does not speak to me. I want our films to speak to our people, to speak to their soul, which reflects our religion and our traditions. I think this is why our films are successful and will be successful in the future too as the country grows. And hopefully, like the Chinese and Indian films, our films and culture will also be able to speak to people from different parts of the world.

This interview was conducted in Amharic, and the interviewer would like to thank Lideya Tsegaye Teshome for helping to translate the more complex notions presented.

Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn

Interviewed by Alessandro Jedlowski

Addis Ababa, February 4, 2014

Alessandro Jedlowski: How did you begin your career as a filmmaker?

Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn: As most of my fellow filmmakers here in Ethiopia, I got involved in filmmaking because I loved to watch films. I didn't have any formal background in film. But luckily, when I was in high school, I had the chance to attend a training center that used to teach students how to operate cameras, video cameras. It was called *Universal Audiovisual Training Center*. And it's now long closed. So I took a course there while I was in high school because I had such great love for films. When we were kids, we didn't have many chances to watch films. My father bought a television I think around . . . twenty years ago. And that was the first time that we had a television in our home. Before that, our parents took us to our relatives' houses on weekends. And there we would have the chance to watch films.

AJ: It was the reason to select whom to visit. . . .

YSD: Exactly. So we would regularly visit them. So, that was just the pure intent of enjoying movies, watching them. And that was how I enjoyed myself, watching movies. Other than that, when we bought the TV, we didn't have a VCR. So having a

TV was not enough to watch movies. There was only one day a week, I think Saturday evening after 10 p.m., where there was a film show on Ethiopian television. They showed one feature film, and that was the only feature film that we could watch on TV. So it could be something like an old American production or maybe some European movies, which had been popular at that time.

AJ: Were they also screening Indian films?

YSD: Uhm, no, not many Indian films. Not at least when we had TVs, because at that time the only things that we were allowed to see were the *Talak films*, the "great movies." This was only when we had the TV in our home because films were shown very late at night, and we were not allowed to stay late in neighbors' houses or in relatives' houses. Anyway it all started like this. At that time, watching a film was more than just entertainment for me.

AJ: It was like a ritual.

YSD: Exactly. I lived in the films. So I was always curious to explore more about them. I was watching and wondering how people made the film, how they managed to create such an emotional connection with me, how they were able to provoke all those emotions. From that point on, I started developing a strong desire to learn more about films. And the only chance that I could get to better understand film was to go to school. So at that time I researched a lot and there was only one training center, the Universal Audiovisual Training Center, and they had this program to teach how to operate a VHS video camera. That was the only thing available at that time. I was very excited so I went to my mother and asked her: "I want to learn how to operate a camera." She said "OK." She paid for the school and I started going to class. By that time we already had a VCR in our home, so I was already enjoying VHS videos, renting them, maybe exchanging them with other neighbors. . . . That was an incredible time of my life! It was around the end of the 1990s. I remember that I used to rent seven or eight VHS films. And I would sit in front of the TV and watch them all, all the way through . . . seven films, within a day. My mother was like: "What's wrong with you?" But I actually enjoyed watching them. I never forgot the film titles, or the story. I also had this habit of writing down the type of movies I watched. I had a notebook. I used to take notes on the kind of films I watched, where I did it, and what they were about.

So when I started going to this school it gave me another dimension to play with, I started to experiment with the camera. Even if it was a VHS camera I had to learn about framing and how to handle a camera and so forth. I really wanted to try the things that I was seeing in the films, even if they were not in the course, because that was beyond the duties of the instructor at that time, and the class was only about "what happens if you touch this button" and "what happens if you touch this one." That's it. Other than that, no aesthetics about movies, nothing about advanced filmmaking. So I became a cameraman and I started filming events like weddings, graduation parties, etc. That's how I started making friends, other cameramen friends, other people who had cameras to rent, people to communicate with. And at some point people would, you know, call me and ask if I was available to do some filming for them. So, luckily the instructor who was teaching me in this first class I took, Thomas, decided to open his own training school, the Tom Videography and Photography Training Center, which has been operating, I think, since the early 2000s. By the time he started, we were very close, because I was a very good student and we always had something to talk about and we used to stay close even after the class was over.

I had the habit of collecting films or camera items like filters, for instance. Whenever somebody wanted to sell a filter I'd buy that, even if I didn't take any class about filters. Anything that was related to cameras or film, I would buy it. And I would take that to Tom, and we would discuss it; he might borrow it from me to give it a try with his students and so on and so forth. We became good friends in the process. When he opened the Tom Videography and Photography Training Center, I assisted him and I took a T.O.T., "training of trainers," course designed to train instructors for the school. So I took that and I became an assistant instructor and suddenly worked my way up to becoming a full-time instructor in Tom's school. At that time I used to read a lot and this was happening at the time in which Internet had started to pick up. So I started also using the Internet, surfing, and looking for information about people and films. There wasn't that much at the time, but it was some sort of a source of knowledge, which helped me a lot. And in order to go and prepare my class and teach I had to dig a lot, I had to read a lot, I had to talk to friends who had been making movies. That gave me the chance to understand films and people and to develop my own understanding of films.

The first film I made other than as a cameraman was with the students. Every year there was a graduation program and graduation party, where all the students' parents would be invited to attend the graduation ceremony. And I began making

these programs with the students from each section. The good students were selected to collaborate with me to make a short film every year. So that was the first time I did a short film that was called *The Mud Ring*. We did it in 2005, I think. It was about nine years ago. And that was my first short movie. The students I had selected worked as the cameraman, sound person, some of them played as actors, and others took care of the continuity and other stuff like that, and I was directing the film.

AJ: That was your first experience as director?

YSD: Exactly. And I continued making these short films for three years. The first year I made *The Mud Ring,* which is about fourteen minutes long, I think. And the following year I made *The Trophy*, another short film. People usually come to our training center looking for crew, asking the training center to even do a film for them. So a group of young martial art people came to ask us to make a movie all about action. Just like these karate Chinese movies or Hollywood films. I tried to explain to them that it is impossible to make this kind of action film here, but they really wanted to try the challenge. So I thought, "OK, why not?" And we decided to make this karate movie as the short film for that year. And then we collaborated with one of them and another friend to write the script, a short script that incorporated these action scenes and added a little bit of drama to it. I collaborated in writing the script and then we shot it and it became, I think, a half-hour-long action short film. It was very challenging and at that time, after making it, I decided that I would never try to make a feature action film because it was too hard. It is like mixing some elements that you have seen on professional films, you know, like kung fu movies, but without the technical and technological capacity to do it well. It was a good try, actually. I experimented with a lot of things and learned many tricks from that experience. Then after that I did another short film that was a romantic comedy short movie, which is entitled *The Love of Colours*. It was a nice romantic comedy. That's how I made my way to bigger film projects.

After a couple of years, the training institute owner and managing director, Thomas, decided to produce a feature film. We were, and still are, very close friends. We talk about movies a lot, and at that time Ethiopian feature films had just started coming out, being screened in cinemas. We understood that there was a huge market and huge excitement about this trend, so we started thinking, "Why don't we just use our skills and human resources to make our own movies?" He gave me the assignment to look for scripts. There was one script I liked already before Tom raised this idea,

and I told him: "OK, there's this script. Why don't we just start from there?" And he said: "Very well. Let's buy that." So, he bought the script rights from the writer without even reading it. And then he read it. Only then he told me: "What are we going to do with this? This is terrible. I can't see how this could be a good film." I had seen a potential in the script, which I wanted to transform and visualize into a whole new kind of story. I told him: "OK. Relax. This is not the film that we are going to make." I had a few sessions with the writer, asked him a number of questions to help him better develop the story, and he came back to me. We went on with this process for some time, and at one point he told me: "I've done as much as I can. From this point on, I think, it's time for you to step in and do whatever changes you'd like. I give up." So from that point on I took the main initiative of working on the script. I took about four weeks to work on it, and I produced a new version. At the same time we were also doing the preproduction, which means casting, locations, and everything. The whole filming and the whole preparation, starting from the development of the script, took a maximum of eight months. Everything.

I think it was one of the fastest productions I did and it was really successful in that sense, because we did the whole thing in a new style. . . . I wanted to experiment with lighting and setting and everything. In the film, which is called *Siryet*, you see a lot of interior settings, and the whole interior setting was done in a studio: bedroom, office, living room, and even some other settings were built in a big hall. So that was something new for Ethiopian cinema at that time. It was a great experience and we were very successful and organized. All the cast would know where to come; we didn't have time to waste looking for the interior settings, for locations or whatever. The only scenes that we had to shoot on location were those we filmed in a cinema—there was a cinema scene in the film and there was a restaurant scene—because those locations were very big and it would have been hard to rebuild them in the studio. Other than that, everything was set up for the film. So we filmed the whole film within forty-five days. We did everything very quickly, and when it came out, it became a hit. Still, after I did my second feature film, *Nishan,* people would compare it with my first one, and some would tell me: "The first one was better than this one."

Siryet was a suspense drama story. In fact the suspense part is much more graphic than the one in *Nishan*. Well, some people would not recommend it because of the violence in the film. Some people, after watching the film, asked me: "Are you as aggressive as the characters in that film? We thought you were a gentleman, subtle and very gentle, but you did such a violent film, what's wrong with you?"

AJ: And how did you respond?

YSD: Well . . . Obviously, I mean, it was just a reaction and my job as a filmmaker is to elicit emotions from the audience. For me, those questions meant that I really did a good job.

AJ: Can you tell me a bit more about the story the film talks about? I have the feeling that, beyond the surface, you tell the audience something very important about the legacy of the past, in particular about the memory of the violence that was committed during the Derg regime. . . .

YSD: Well, the main reason for choosing the script from the early stage was that it had a very powerful dramatic character, and I was very much inspired by the development of the story and the characters. And also I'm sure, not just us as Ethiopians but as Africans in general, we have this widespread culture of revenge, like "blood wants blood" or "eye for an eye." So, I wanted to say something about that because in the movie you see people who've suffered, who have unhealed wounds, and who want to take revenge on those who made them suffer. But my question was, what about the next generation? Like their sons and their daughters, what would they choose if they would find themselves in the situation of their parents? Would they go the way their parents chose to go or would there be a new way of handling these situations? That was the main theme behind the film, because even when the characters might have a real motive for seeking revenge, are there no other ways to act? I don't know. . . . The wrongdoings of the past generation could be washed away by the new thinking of the new generation: that was the main concept of the movie.

AJ: So the film is, somehow, about forgiveness. . . .

YSD: And the title itself is *Siryet*, "Redemption/Absolution."

AJ: Were you trying to talk about a specific period of Ethiopian history in the film?

YSD: You might get a sense of the period of the Derg regime, but I wanted the film to develop a larger argument, not to focus only on a limited time period. Maybe the setting that we chose makes it look like the period of the Derg regime, and the period after its defeat by the present government. And indeed that period of

confrontation and transition was one of the most aggressive and violent periods in the whole history of our country. But I would say that the whole thing I wanted to convey with the film was a more universal appeal to the new generation. Since it's not just about the government. The impulse of revenge was also in the community and in the whole country, often without any government bodies being involved in the process. Even if the story is based on that background, I didn't want to limit the film to this. So I didn't give any specific timeframe in the film, but you'd just feel like that, because they were all guys in uniforms, you'd relate it to that time.

AJ: And at the time the film was released, was the memory of that violence something that people would not talk about openly?

YSD: No! I mean, not really. Around that time many other films were coming out that discussed this issue, I mean, the Derg regime in particular. So it was not a taboo topic, not really.

Also, this film carved a new way for me to develop myself as filmmaker. It did not just make me recognized as a director or as an instructor; it gave me the chance to be introduced to other international filmmakers. At some point there was a meeting here about the future of the Ethiopian cinema, and for that meeting various international filmmakers were invited. Fortunately at that time my film was being screened in cinemas, so I met these filmmakers and I invited them to come and see my film. Gaston Kaboré was one of them, so he came to see my movie in a cinema and he liked it and he said: "OK. You should come and take the course that I coordinate in my country, in Ouagadougou [at the Imagine Institute]. So I got that chance of going to Ouagadougou, and took a training course for a couple of months on narrative storytelling. It was very intense and interesting and I learned a lot there. Because, as I told you, before then I had only taken a T.O.T., "training for trainers," course and then I developed my own skills by reading, watching movies, and so on. . . . Being in class formally, like this, was my first experience.

AJ: When was it?

YSD: It was in 2009. And *Siryet* came out in 2007. After that, I began researching more about these international trainings and networking opportunities to meet other international filmmakers. I took another screenwriting course in Nairobi. They had a very nice two-week, intense film program. I took a screenwriting course there.

I was also introduced to a new approach to screenwriting, which I really enjoyed and which I used when I wrote my script for *Nishan,* my second feature film. So in between *Siryet*, my first film, and *Nishan*, my second film, there's maybe a six- to seven-year gap. During that time a lot of people would come to me with scripts, to propose me to direct a new film, but for some reasons I didn't find elements that inspired me enough. So I had to say no to many scripts, and at some point I started thinking about writing my own story. So that's how I developed *Nishan,* and I wanted to take more classes on scriptwriting. I think that meeting with filmmakers from other parts of the world was a very good experience and gave me the strength to make more films, which would not only be loved by local audiences, but would also have an impact in the international market. I'm not sure if I achieved enough with my second feature film, *Nishan,* but I think I'm getting there.

AJ: So, you'd like to do a film that can appeal to both local and international audiences?

YSD: Yeah, I think that if you do something very nice, very interesting, very true, very right to your own culture, it would succeed everywhere. I'm not really talking about arty experimental films, but stories that you'd understand even if you have not much knowledge about cinema . . . the emotions would communicate to you. If a film does that, it would do the same to any person, whatever the language he speaks. . . .

AJ: And for *Nishan,* beyond writing the film, you also produced it, right? Was it the first time for you?

YSD: Well, actually on *Siryet*, my first film, I was also acting as a producer, although I didn't take the credits; I was preparing everything with Thomas, the producer. I was casting the actors, going to search for locations, bargaining for good prices, and everything. We would do everything together. So I was also gaining experience in the production process. In *Nishan,* Birtukan, the lead actress, who is also my wife, produced the film with me. We had another friend who put in the money for the project and we did the rest. We produced and managed everything through our company Kurat Pictures. Kurat means "pride."

AJ: Did you create the production company for this film?

YSD: Yes exactly. When I stopped giving lessons in the training center my main objective was to make *Nishan*. When I started being independent I realized that I had to have a company, so this is why I created Kurat Pictures. When I did that I knew I had to make this company produce not just this film, but also other projects, not just feature films but any sort of production. If you want to hire a cameraperson or if you want to have some video edited and everything, we would provide the facility, the human resource, and everything to make it happen. I was doing other projects along with preparing to make the film *Nishan*, such as working on short film productions, providing equipment for other companies, making video clips, documentaries, advertising. That's what keeps me running. For example, when I was making *Nishan*, I had to spend almost two years for the script and one year for the production and editing. So during this time I needed to make money elsewhere, so I would have to do short projects to support my daily life, provide for my house, my family.

AJ: And coming back to *Nishan*, where did the idea of the film come from?

YSD: Well, when I started thinking about it, I wanted to tell the story about sacrifice, and, I mean, a story about someone who is ready to sacrifice his well-being, his opportunities, his advantages to make other people's lives better. I had that idea scrolling in my head for many years, so I began writing a story about this character, a guy, a male character. But he was supposed to pay the sacrifice to a girl he suddenly starts to fall in love with. But the female character became stronger in the process, so I started to see her dominance emerging throughout the process, and I started focusing on her. . . . Whenever I do a film, I want to incorporate in it an idea so that the society, the audience can have something to think about, something that can help them to think in a different way. In the period in which I was writing the film, the youngsters, even in my family or in my surroundings, everybody wanted to escape from their reality; they wanted to leave the country in search for a better life. Everybody would say: "OK, I'm not going to stay here. I want to go abroad, work my way, become rich, and live there." Especially the young people, they don't really think about their future in this country. So I started incorporating this idea in the story as well. In the movie you see Nishan, the main character, a girl who has enough in her life, she has a house, she has a job, which pays enough to support her family and to have a comfortable life, but she always thinks this is not her place. She wants to go abroad to work and to make more money for her life. So that drives

her to look for an option to leave the country, and she ends up signing a document that will enable her to leave the country by paying a price.

So that idea began to be incorporated in the script. At the same time I also wanted to touch the historic magnitude of our country. I was wondering what the old generation of our fathers and grandfathers, who had done so much for the country, would think about this new generation whose only aspiration is to leave. How that old generation could be able to communicate with this young generation to push them to start thinking in a different way? So I created a patriot character, who had done a heroic act in the past [in the resistance against the Italian invasion], an act that his son is very proud of, and maybe the country is also very proud of. But he doesn't take that as a privilege. He doesn't want to transform his past into a trophy, which you just put in a box and stare at without being able to do anything else in your life. So he is the character that ends up teaching the young character, Nishan, to think about her choice for the future. All these elements popped up in the process of developing the script, and at the end the film came together like that.

AJ: If I remember well, the name *Nishan* means "medal of honor." . . .

YSD: Yeah. It's a common name, by the way. The character's name is Nishan and *nishan* is also the "medal of honor" that the patriot has in his home. In the film you'll see an Italian guy looking for a medal of honor that his grandfather had lost during the war with the Ethiopians, and that the patriot kept in his home together with a golden pistol he also recovered from the Italians during the battle. So there's this guy coming all the way from Italy, looking for this medal of honor, whereas there is this character, Nishan, who has the medal of honor, her name, but is ready to throw it away, to get another name, which will allow her to leave the country with fake documents. Through this contrast I wanted to give the film a symbolic meaning. By the end of the film, the Italian guy is arrested because he has tried to steal the medal from the patriot, while Nishan decides to keep her name and remain in Ethiopia. The value of the past is recognized, and this gives the main character the strength to remain in her country and invest in its future.

AJ: I remember you told me that this film was less successful than the previous one. Why do you think this was the case?

YSD: I think that the transformations in the industry had an impact on these results,

because when my first film *Siryet* was in cinemas, almost every kind of film genre was being accepted by audiences, while today, I think that the Ethiopian audience has been spoiled with only romantic comedies or comedy films. So the first choice for audiences would be to watch silly comedy movies. I mean at times they can also be very interesting, but I would say that most of them are not as rich in storytelling as a film should be.

However, all those who watched the film gave us very nice feedback and we were happy. Even if most of the audiences tend to prefer comedy movies, there are also many people who really want to see films with strong stories. But this is not enough to give you the commercial success that you would need to make your money back as a producer. However, we haven't gone bankrupt with this movie, we did recoup the costs, but we didn't make as much as we hoped in the first place. I think this situation is a challenge for all those filmmakers who want to make films that tell different, more complicated stories.

AJ: How do you think it would be possible to change this dynamic?

YSD: I think it's a choice, still. I mean, to keep on making movies you have to earn money. It's obvious, without money you can't make movies. So I have to bind these two elements. In my mind if I am going to produce something mixed, I would pick something that favors the market, in a way, without losing the artistic integrity. Because you can make comedies that are also rich in terms of quality, storytelling, content, and everything. Also there are investors who have money, who want to make movies, and these guys are not there because they want to make profits out of it. If they can make something they could be proud of, they don't actually mind if it doesn't make any money. So, I think there are a few people out there who would sacrifice their investments to create something very interesting, something that would give variety to the market.

We don't actually have to make only the movies that the market wants. As filmmakers we have to be free to make our own stories. At the same time we have to protect the treasure that we have here in Ethiopia, the fact that people still go to the cinema. I visited many countries and there is no such culture of local audiences going to cinemas to see locally produced movies. So it's something that you have to work hard to preserve. And I'm afraid that, if the quality of the movies and the quality of storytelling doesn't improve, at some point we might lose the audience. And I believe we have already lost many good audiences, the audience of proper

filmgoers that go to cinema in search for a good movie. These people don't go to cinema anymore unless they hear something very special about a new release.

If your intention is to make a movie just for the local market, you won't be able to grow; you won't be able to experience other cinemas, other cultures. And this, I believe, is very important for a filmmaker. You have a different way of thinking once you have visited some international festivals and once you meet filmmakers from other regions and cultures. So, this is also one thing that our filmmakers should really try hard to get, have some international experience.

Another thing is, we don't actually have enough support from the government. We have a few film training schools, but it's not very high standards of training. This makes it difficult to form world-class quality filmmakers. And also there is no law, no agency to protect filmmakers against piracy and other issues affecting the industry. There is no bank loan for movies; no bank would give you money to make movies. And no government support in terms of funding for filmmakers. There's no such thing, so I think government should come in and work very hard to support the industry.

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