

## Musical Resistance in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu*

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### Abstract

When Abderrahmane Sissako's film *Timbuktu* was released in 2014, it attracted a great deal of controversy – as well as an Oscar nomination. Was lauded as an exceptionally artistic, poetic film which brought the world's attention to the plight of Timbuktu under jihadi rule, but the way in which Sissako chose to humanise jihadists, and the elliptical way in which he constructs the film – missing many of the finer details of the political and military situation – was criticised by some, and it was almost withdrawn from competition at FESPACO, the world's largest African film festival. This article argues that much is missed in such readings of the film, and proposes that an intermedial approach to analysing the film offers a new understanding of it. By exploring the intermedial and intercultural borders and connections in *Timbuktu*, it will be shown how Sissako combines diverse influences, including Italian Westerns and the Wassoulou music of southern Mali, to create a film that does not merely represent resistance, but is itself an act of resistance against extremism, in Mali. Intermedial borders between film, music and social media are of particular significance in this regard. With a focus on the diegetic and extra-diegetic performances of Malian singer Fatoumata Diawara, the article demonstrates how such intermediality can engage the spectator's "symbolic participation" (Manthia Diawara, 2015) and contributes to a movement of artistic resistance against extremism in Mali.

Keywords: African cinema, FESPACO, Timbuktu, Intermediality, Abderrahmane Sissako

### Introduction

The films of Abderrahmane Sissako have long defied easy classification, with Manthia Diawara describing his style as less narrative cinema and more 'poetic cinema' (2015, p. 78). The weaving together of sublime images in highly sensory scenes, which may relate only tentatively to one another, and the frequent lack of any clear linear narrative, are techniques he has refined over several films, and they culminate in his latest work, *Timbuktu* (2015). Yet his films are not merely poetic and artistic, but also highly political. Sissako courted controversy with his previous film, *Bamako* (2006), which imagined the IMF on trial in a Malian courtyard, but *Timbuktu* proved even more polemic. On its release, it achieved worldwide renown as much for the controversies surrounding it as for its artistic merit. In its portrayal of the jihadist group, Ansar Dine<sup>1</sup>, which took control of northern Mali in 2012, the film dares to humanise the jihadi militants at the same time as it condemns the regime and builds a picture of resistance against it. In France and Burkina Faso, two countries which, in 2015, had very recently experienced jihadi terrorism, *Timbuktu* set nerves jangling. It was briefly banned in parts of Paris, and, at FESPACO the world's largest pan-African film festival, held biennially in Ouagadougou, where it should have been a serious contender for the top prize, it was almost

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<sup>1</sup> Ansar Dine is an extremist group with purported links to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, comprising foreign jihadi groups from the north and local Tuareg separatist groups, including the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).

withdrawn altogether and eventually shown with enhanced security measures in place.<sup>2</sup> *Timbuktu*, however, has achieved the greatest global success of any African film in recent memory, being shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2014, and was even distributed on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video on its release in 2015, a rarity for FESPACO films.<sup>3</sup>

It is a fragmentary, constantly shifting film, set in a single yet intensely transnational space permeated by global influences. Originally conceived as a documentary, *Timbuktu* became this work of poetic fiction because, Sissako explains in an interview, making a documentary was simply too risky (interview with Danny Leigh, 2015). Incursions and terrorism by extremist groups remain rife in the region, and made filming, mere months after Ansar Dine had lost control, very difficult: Sissako ended up shooting in Mauritania, rather than Mali as originally intended. Yet it is no less urgent or political for this: as I will demonstrate in this article, in the way the film navigates intermedial borders, it promotes highly engaged spectatorship.

Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev point out that “media borders come into existence most prominently when confronted with [...] or encompassed within other media” (2014, p. xxii). It is with this understanding of intermediality that I will analyse *Timbuktu*, arguing that it is through its intermedial borders and connections that its power as an act of resistance – not merely a representation of resistance – becomes apparent. This is particularly evident in the connection between film and music, one which, as I will show, harnesses the power of social media to go beyond the filmic borders to find new intercultural and international points of contact.

Indeed, Sissako’s reflections on the inherent intermediality of film, present in *Timbuktu*, offer an interesting line of enquiry. At several points, digital filmmaking by the jihadists is shown: a young recruit is cajoled into making a video aimed at persuading other impressionable young men to join the jihad. Later, in a key scene that I will analyse more closely, another militant films the whipping of a young woman. Both these films, however, are subverted: in the first, the young man’s downturned gaze and lack of conviction as he describes, wistfully, how he gave up rap music to pursue the jihad, questions the power and control of the regime (and offers a wry nod to the ‘post-truth’ era of social media). In the second, as I will explore, the filming of a punishment becomes a testimony of suffering and an act of resistance.

I will firstly discuss how *Timbuktu* draws upon different intermedial and transnational influences, particularly the Italian Westerns of Sergio Leone, reworked and given local specificity, and the Wassoulou music of southwest Mali. I will argue that such intermedial connections contribute to the vitality and urgency of the film’s political message and to its poetic artistry. I will then offer a closer analysis of particular scenes in which the Malian singer Fatoumata Diawara performs pain and resistance through music. Finally, in tracing intermedial connections between film and music video, I will demonstrate how Diawara’s diegetic performance takes on new, extra-diegetic significance and contributes directly to the movement of musical resistance which developed in response to the crisis in Mali.

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<sup>2</sup> Fespaco 2015 was marred by the uprising against President Blaise Campaoré, who resigned and fled the country in October 2014. Given the rise in jihadism across the region and the period of instability in the country, Fespaco officials were worried about inciting terror by showing the film.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to FESPACO rather than African films because popular Nollywood films, as well as being streamed nationally and internationally on a variety of dedicated platforms, also get regular distribution (on a much smaller scale) on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

## Once Upon a Time in Timbuktu

Sissako has long been inspired by the Western genre, employing Western tropes in a playful, subversive way. In his previous film, *Bamako*, Sissako included a film-within-a-film, entitled *Death in Timbuktu*, and starring Danny Glover. It was presented as a Western that a group of children watch on TV one evening. It is a very obvious, isolated inscription which has been understood as 'a pointed comment on the dominance of Western culture and ideology' (Dennis Lim, 2007). The Ghanaian leader and intellectual, Kwame Nkrumah, once said "One only has to listen to the cheers of an African audience as Hollywood's heroes slaughter red Indians [...] to understand the effectiveness of this weapon" (1965, p. 246), which is what this scene appears to show. Yet the Westerns which Sissako references are Italian, or Spaghetti Westerns, which have long had a much-loved place within popular culture and imagination across Africa, and not simply as foreign products to be unthinkingly consumed, but as a genre already imbued with a degree of subversiveness, that has been reappropriated in different ways. Christopher Frayling has demonstrated that rather than being simple adoptions of the Hollywood genre, many Italian Westerns "share a loose allegiance with Fanonism [...] underpinned by a coherent social and political analysis" (1981: 238). In *Bamako*, the inclusion of a Western could also be read in this way: not merely as a demonstration of the way in which minds can be colonised, but also as a tool of resistance against a regime.

In *Timbuktu*, the influence of Italian Westerns permeates the entire film in a more subtle, but more profound, way. As Sissako commented:

*Timbuktu* partage un espace commun avec le western. Une ville dans le désert... L'idée de justice et de justiciers aussi. Un espace où combattent le bien et le mal [...] je voulais faire un remake de Il était une fois dans l'Ouest. En le plaçant en Afrique. (Sissako, in an interview with Sylvestre Picard, 2017).

Timbuktu shares a common space with the Western. A town in the desert... the idea of justice and administrators of justice as well. A space where there is a fight between good and bad [...] I wanted to do a remake of Once Upon a Time in the West. Placing it in Africa. [my translation].

To be sure, this is no simple remake. Western tropes are reappropriated, localised and incorporated into this urgent, would-be-documentary film, enhancing Sissako's poetics and giving the representation of a very specific crisis an almost timeless quality. The colour palette throughout the film is composed of sandy, earthy tones, which adds to this effect. There are certain features which recall something of Sergio Leone's visual aesthetics, particularly in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which is notable for its far slower pace compared to the Dollars trilogy. Like that film, slowness in *Timbuktu* is not necessarily due to the length of the take. In fact, the shots are often short, lasting no more than a couple of seconds in duration. Also as in Leone's film, in the combination of wide shots of the vast landscapes with intense close-ups of characters' faces, the narrative is not hurried. Indeed, in *Timbuktu*, it barely asserts itself at all. Generous time is given to the spectator to take in the small details, so that a picture of the city, its surroundings, and its inhabitants is gradually, almost organically, built, engendering the sense of community and the fractures within it. Many of the characters appear for only one or two scenes throughout the film, but each one contributes profoundly

to the complex picture that is gradually constructed. A good percentage of the film is devoted to exploring the extraordinary mundanity of the situation: the bored recruit who is tasked with publicising new punitive laws, via loudspeaker, eventually condensing the litany of interdictions into the tired statement: “it is forbidden to do any old thing”; a senior foreign jihadist being taught how to drive in the desert by his mild-mannered, young aide; Kidane and Satima talking over tea. However, it is thanks to this gentle touch in the filmmaking and the exploration of the many facets of everyday life under extremist rule that the representation of oppression, violence and resistance, which is part and parcel of that mundanity, has a deeper affective power.

The trope of the shootout too has echoes throughout *Timbuktu*. The film opens with an antelope racing across the desert landscape. There is almost silence, just the faintest sound of hooves on sand, until a sudden, heart-stopping gunshot. In pursuit of the antelope is a truck-load of gun-toting militants, who end up letting the antelope go free, but liberally shoot down a set of statuettes, which are rare symbolic of the culture and history of Timbuktu, and which are mostly naked, evidently female, bodies (Figure 1). This one brief scene encapsulates the rule of terror unleashed upon this ancient, cultured city, and the violence enacted especially upon the women under the new regime. This sets the scene for the particular type of frontier justice imposed by the Ansar Dine, which is carried out with swiftness and brutality, but nonetheless with certain formalities and structure.

**Figure 1:** *Timbuktu*, dir. Abderrahmane Sissako (00:01:50). Statues being shot at by jihadists



The shootout is reworked most potently in a scene upon which the dramatic tension of the film hangs: when Kidane, the cow-herder, goes to confront Amadou, the fisherman, who has killed one of his prized cattle. There is an argument and a tussle ensues in which the pistol is fired, seemingly by accident. Their bodies fall away from each other and into the water. It is not clear at first who fired the shot, or who has been shot. With a jolt, Kidane jumps up, checks himself for injuries, and in panic, starts wading through the lake to the shore. At this point, Sissako cuts from a medium shot to an extreme wide shot, which encompasses the entire lake (Figure 2). The men appear as two tiny dots in the vast landscape. The camera is entirely still; the only thing moving is Kidane. The spectator, rather than the camera, tracks his movement across

the lake. Only when he is almost at the other side is there slight, sudden movement from Amadou, who tries to get up but immediately falls back down. The spectator is left to linger over the enormity of what has just happened and the encroaching dread of what rough justice will be meted out to Kidane. Of course, this is a long way from the traditional Western shootout: it feels more like a violent tragedy, borne of complex and fragile political alliances, disputes, and the existential threat of diminishing resources. However, should the sense of the Western be lost here, Amine Bouhafaf's music returns when Kidane is halfway across the lake. It is a haunting, deeply affective piece, reminiscent of Ennio Morricone's theme to *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

**Figure 2:** 00:45:44. Kidane, left, wading through the lake. Amadou is just visible on the right.



Tragedy unfolds in this desert town, as it does in Leone's film. Here, however, there is no one villain, no personal vendetta. Things are much more ambivalent. Kidane and his wife Satima for example, are Tuareg, but opposed to the jihadi incursion. Alioune Sow (2016), in his reading of the film, makes the suggestion that Kidane may well have been involved in the separatist movement (hence why this otherwise gentle, guitar-playing cow herder, and devoted father to a young daughter, has a pistol stashed away) but now finds himself at odds with the regime. His fight with Amadou, then, might be about more than the loss of a cow: a bubbling over of ethnic tensions and a fight over scarce resources, amplified and weaponised by the newly-arrived, foreign jihadists.

The reworking of Western aesthetics, introducing poetic ambivalence and sensory awe in place of spectacular violence, creates a multi-layered film which can be understood on different levels. For some critics, the lack of clear narrative structure and the many ellipses of the film are seen as an abstraction from reality: 'presenting human characters who are abstracted them from their context (no mention of the Tuareg rebellion and so on)', making it a more 'universal' story of human struggles (William Brown, 2015). In many ways, this film benefits greatly from not being a documentary. Indeed, where the Western aesthetics come to the fore, *Timbuktu* is not just about Timbuktu, but speaks to the existential crises wrought across the world by terrorism. Phyllis Taoua, for example, sees it as a 'a successful and nuanced argument against extremism with broad appeal' (2016, p. 271).

It is true that the complex political situation in Northern Mali is only alluded to, and Sissako has been criticised for erasing the historical context of Tuareg separatism, particularly the alliance between Tuareg separatists and Islamists who formed Ansar Dine, and for the way in which he humanises the jihadists (see, for example, Sabine Cessou, 2014). However, as Sissako has pointed out, this humanisation is important because “to portray a jihadist as simply a bad guy, who does not in any way resemble me [...] that’s not completely true [...] He’s also a fragile being. And fragility is an element that can make anybody tip over into horror” (interview with John Anderson, 2015). Humanising the jihadists, showing their fragility, is one way of undermining the regime’s power and finding a thread of hope, but it does not diminish the representation of the regime’s brutality; rather, it can work to emphasize it.

This is amply demonstrated in one captivating sequence: a young couple is stoned to death for the sin of being in a relationship out of wedlock, while, at the house of a Haitian madwoman, a jihadist performs a balletic dance to imagined music (Figures 3 and 4). The juxtaposition of these scenes is startling: the dance captures his humanity, his fragility, but also his implication in the violence being carried out: the music he dances to is accompanied by the slightly out-of-rhythm percussion of the stones being hurled at the heads of the young couple. Sissako has said that this scene of the stoning was based on a newspaper report of a real stoning that took place in Aguelhok, the site of several violent atrocities as Ansar Dine battled for control, and was the catalyst for the entire film (quoted in Siegfried Forster, 2016). The scene is unflinching in its violence, but it neither glorifies nor gorifies the event for voyeuristic pleasure, as is the case in many Westerns. Instead, it is remarkable in its restraint. It simply bears witness to a despicable act and asks the spectator to bear witness too, implicating, in the middle, the jihadists who themselves indulge in all kinds of forbidden acts. It is a bitter irony, beautifully realised.

**Figure 3:** 01:07:58. The dance.



**Figure 4:** 01:09:56. While the music from the dance sequence continues, there is a cut to the aftermath of the stoning.



Sissako does not give a blow-by-blow account of the various political factions and battles which led to the takeover of Timbuktu by Ansar Dine – those critics looking for that are in search of an entirely different film, one yet to be made. Rather, Sissako plunges his audience directly into the besieged city, sometime after jihadi rule has been established, and in his realisation of this *Once Upon a Time...* in Timbuktu, he encourages an emotional, sensory reaction to the human stories which emerge – exactly like Sissako's own reaction to the newspaper report of the stoning: a single, deeply affecting human story among the chaos of Ansar Dine's war.

Manthia Diawara, in a discussion of Sissako's cinematic poetics and politics, argues that with *Timbuktu*,

Sissako is less concerned with proposing a counterdiscourse to the iniquities and libercide brought on Timbuktu by the jihadists than he is with drawing new imaginaries with enough poetic power to enlist the spectator's symbolic participation in taking Timbuktu back (Diawara, 2015, p. 77).

I propose that by engaging more closely with the film's intermediality, the ways in which *Timbuktu* achieves such spectatorial engagement can be better understood. Indeed, by tracing intermedial borders, within and beyond the film itself, *Timbuktu* can be understood as a very real, prominent act of resistance in its own right, standing against extremism in the region and the threat to Timbuktu's culture, history and people.

### **Singing for Timbuktu**

Music as a tool of resistance is central to the film. Under the sharia law imposed by Ansar Dine, music was banned across the region. This ban was no less devastating than the widely-reported torching of invaluable manuscripts in Timbuktu's libraries (Charlie English, 2017; Kim Sengupta, 2015; Yochi Dreazen, 2013, *inter alia*). Though less spectacularly dramatic, it represents a similar suppression and erasure of history. Given

the important social roles played by griots and Wassoulou singers in Mali as protectors of history and essential voices of social commentary respectively, the forbidding of music was not just a puritanical ban on entertainment and frivolity, but an insidious silencing of the population which seeped into private as well as public spaces. It led to an exodus of musicians from the country, who, along with Malian artists already living abroad, began to make music about the crisis, from a position of exile.

Wassoulou is notable for being performed by women, in contrast to the strongly male-dominated world of the griot (Heather Maxwell, 2003, Lucy Durán, 1995). Within mainstream Malian culture, it managed to become the most popular musical genre, gaining huge radio airplay, as noted by Maxwell (2003) and rapidly adapted to technological revolutions in music from the late 1970s onward. Through stars such as Coumba Sidibé and Oumou Sangaré, it has also been exported worldwide. Wassoulou performers explicitly differentiate themselves from griots, calling themselves *konow*, which translates as 'birds'. Durán highlights a key point of distinction: "The *konow* are musicians by choice [...] allowing them to comment on social issues in "freer" musical and textual ways than those of the *jeliw*" (1995, p. 102).<sup>4</sup> Instead of praise songs and family genealogies, Wassoulou performers focus on the everyday issues, events and injustices which form the basis of women's lived experiences in the Wasulu region.<sup>5</sup> The lack of constraint of lineage and expectation that exerts itself on griot practice has, according to Maxwell (2003), contributed to the huge popularity of Wassoulou. It is a genre of music familiar with resistance: at least since Oumou Sangaré's emergence in the 1980s, social practices such as polygamy and arranged marriage have been criticised in Wassoulou songs. It represents an exceptional form of freedom of speech within the conservative, patriarchal Mandé society in which it developed. But never has Wassoulou been more threatened and urgent than during Ansar Dine's rule. From 2012, when the regime took over, there was an output of work by Malian musicians in exile protesting against the regime and the ban on music. Fatoumata Diawara, a Malian singer who identifies with the Wassoulou tradition through family connections, is one of the most internationally-renowned artists who contributed to this movement.<sup>6</sup>

Diawara not only appears in the film as a character, but also wrote and performed the title song, *Timbuktu Fasso*. Sissako has long found inspiration in Wassoulou, using Oumou Sangaré's music as the soundtrack to one of his earlier films, *Heremakono* (Waiting for Happiness, 2002). However, as Victoria Pasely (2016) points out, *Timbuktu* is the first film that Sissako has made which has an original score, by the renowned Franco-Algerian composer Amine Bouhafra, rather than relying on pre-existing music. It would seem that the decision to have an original score and original title song composed for the film was not just an artistic decision, but also a political one. The film, then, does not merely portray the musical resistance which sprang up in defiance of the regime, but actively contributes to it, drawing upon the star power of Fatoumata Diawara, and utilising the inherent intermedial qualities of digital film technologies to engage politically and artistically across borders and media.

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<sup>4</sup> An alternative word for *griots*.

<sup>5</sup> The variant spellings *Wassoulou*, *Wasulu*, and others, are used to denominate both the region and the musical style. Following Durán (1995), I use these two spellings to differentiate between the musical genre (for which the former spelling is more common) and the geographical region, which encompasses an area of southwest Mali, northern Guinea, and northern Côte d'Ivoire.

<sup>6</sup> Some Malian musicians, including Fatoumata Diawara, were already living abroad before the crisis, but still considered themselves to be in a position of exile, since they were unable to return to their homeland to perform and to make music, as they had done previously.



Westerns and Wassoulou intertwine in *Timbuktu*. As noted above, the influence of Morricone's compositions for Leone's westerns can be heard in the soundtrack. There is the richly orchestrated piece for the lake scene, with echoes of Morricone's theme to *Once Upon a Time in the West*, but, dominant in the soundtrack, there are also examples of the far more restrained, distinctive sound that Morricone pioneered earlier in his career. His first collaboration with Leone (*A Fistful of Dollars*, 1964) had a tight budget, as Frayling (2005) points out, so Morricone had to be creative with the music: he simply did not have access to the full orchestra which typifies earlier, US Westerns. This, along with his desire to do something entirely different from those previous Westerns, led to the use of voice, whistling, whip-cracks and single instruments, particularly the guitar and Jew's harp, to create the compositions so celebrated today. Bouhafa, on the other hand, had the services of the City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra at his disposal, but, throughout the film, he utilises the full richness of the orchestra sparingly, opting more often for a more restrained sound, in which strong, urgent rhythm and one or two instruments come to the fore. In the instrumental version of *Timbuktu Fasso*, Bouhafa's choice of instruments (the *ngoni*, *kora* and flute are instruments particularly associated with Wassoulou) creates a strongly Malian sound.<sup>7</sup> There are inflections of Morricone's sound here, lending a Western aesthetic to the soundtrack as well as to the images, but the difference and localisation created with the choice of instruments and the tone of the melodies brings Wassoulou qualities to the fore.

The fullest realisation of *Timbuktu Fasso* is in a diegetic performance which occurs about two-thirds of the way through the film. Taken out of context, it seems like a relaxed, happy scene. In a simple but cheerful room, made homely with colourful rugs, cushions and blankets, a group of five friends lounge around. Their bodies are in close proximity, limbs languidly extending towards one another, all with an air of easy, youthful companionability. One strums the *ngoni*; another uses his body as percussion, tapping his leg then his chest in an easy rhythm. A third, a young woman, played by Fatoumata Diawara, launches into a husky melody, smiling as she sings.

The scene comes as part of a fractured sequence, which is interspersed with Kidane's story as he is arrested and imprisoned, and with shots of armed militants patrolling the rooftops, on the lookout for any forbidden activity. Thus the editing here brings a sense of foreboding to the happy, youthful scene in the room. More than that, this contextualisation marks it out as a bold act of resistance: the group are all too well aware that they are in breach of the ban on music, as is the spectator. The relaxed union of their bodies – young women and men casually occupying shared space – is not an act without consequence: at another point in the film a young girl is taken away by a pair of militants simply for talking to a boy on the phone. The music-making may be taking place within a private space, but its function, and its ramifications, are very much public. It soon becomes clear that the music can be heard on the rooftops, and the militants start fanning out, looking for its source.

The performance is stopped midway through, when a heavily-armed militant bursts through the front door and, with lightning-speed, the *ngoni* player, still carrying the incriminating instrument, takes off out of a side door. A chase across the rooftops ensues, but, typically, Sissako abruptly cuts back to Kidane's narrative before its resolution. The outcome is soon evident, however. Fatoumata's character, now dressed in the

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<sup>7</sup> The *kora* is a 21-stringed lute-harp instrument, most strongly associated with griot culture in West Africa. The *ngoni* is another stringed instrument, smaller than the *kora*. The *kamale ngoni*, or youth-harp (so named for its small size and high pitch) is particularly associated with Wassoulou.

obligatory head-to-toe black, including gloves, is sentenced to 40 lashes for making music, and 40 more for being in mixed company. Note that it is the woman and not the men punished for this crime: like so many moments in the film, this highlights the extreme gender discrimination and violence which forms a key part of the regime's frontier justice.

The whipping takes place in a very public arena: a dusty square surrounded by militants and casual observers. The woman is kneeling in the middle of the square, being whipped. At first she merely whimpers, trying to keep control of her bodily reactions, hands clasped tightly in her lap. The pain is clear in her tear-streaked face, in her rocking back and forth: bodily expressions of pain which resonate corporeally with the spectator. This creates affect in the way that Vivian Sobchack theorises it: "based on the lived sense and feeling of the human body [...] as a material subject that [...] has the capacity to bleed and suffer and hurt for others because it can sense its own possibilities for suffering and pain" (2004, p. 178). This scene emphatically creates the sense of those possibilities of suffering and pain, and, as a result, makes it difficult to watch. But then, into the petrified silence which surrounds her, broken only by the sickening crack of whip against skin, she lets out a high-pitched cry that is not only a visceral expression of pain, but also of defiance. As she releases the cry, her body, from its hunched, submissive position, begins to rise, her head lifting, and her cry merges into song (shown in Figure 5 below). The whipping continues, rhythmically, impassively, and with the aggressor mostly out of shot, the focus is completely on her bodily performance of pain and resistance. She sings raggedly, through sharp intakes of breath, but she sings nonetheless, using the rhythm of the whip.

**Figure 5:** 01:02:52. Cry merges into song.



According to Gülsüm Baydar, "urban spaces are not passive containers of their inhabitants, but complex mechanisms that orient, organize and control gendered and sexualized bodies, which in turn may subvert such regulations" (2015, p. 12). That is precisely what can be found in this scene: an attempt by the regime to control gendered and sexualized bodies – forcing the woman to dress head-to-toe in black, making an example of her by the very public, brutal punishment. The way in which the bodies of the militants and

onlookers form the borders of the space demonstrates the way in which there is an attempt to demarcate, define and control space in order to control the bodies within it. One of the jihadists is shown filming the scene; presumably (as is shown elsewhere in the film) to share on social media, making an example of an infidel and demonstrating the success of the jihad, potentially as both a warning and as a recruitment advert. However, this scene also powerfully demonstrates the ability and strength of Fatoumata's character to resist. Thanks to her performance, her refusal to submit to the punishment or accept wrongdoing, she subverts the Jihadist narrative. Instead, the filming of her punishment becomes a testimony of suffering and a record of an act of resistance. It is one of many such acts in the film which, as Sow notes, "are led by the youth, and the mothers and daughters whose actions counter, and emphasize the inanity of, the destructive venture of the jihadists" (2016, p. 285). There is a strong link with Wassoulou here. Through this bodily and musical performance of resistance, there is no attempt to judge or to pass on wisdom, as griots do, simply to bear witness to and to communicate a communal suffering, demonstrating how women are particularly impacted by the regime. The direct, bodily connection this creates with the spectator is one way of promoting reflection and critical thought about the very real events which took place in Timbuktu.

### **Between Film and Music Video**

The idea of engaged spectatorship becomes more potent if we trace other intermedial borders within the film, beyond the diegetic image, music and body, but also in the offshoots of media and performance which the film created. As discussed above, the most evident inscription of Wassoulou in the film comes with the presence of Fatoumata Diawara and the title song *Timbuktu Fasso*. However, for any non-Bambara-speaking spectator, the lyrics cannot be understood in the film. It is left ambiguous as to whether the militants who storm the session are locals or foreigners, and, thus, whether or not they understand the song. For the spectator, caught up in the film, it is of no real consequence, since the significance and affect of the performance, and the punishment that ensues, is emphatically communicated. It is perhaps after the film has ended, when, as Manthia Diawara (2015) highlights, the images linger in the mind, that the borders of the film's different media come into play.

The film itself forms part of a network of *Timbuktu*-related media that is accessible to spectators. We are all familiar with the common practice of the release of film soundtracks as separate entities, as well as the music videos produced for theme songs, which often mix shots from the film with shots of the artist in the recording studio or on the film set. These songs, and the music videos, are works of art in their own right, connected to, but distinct from, the film for which they were composed, and often take on a life of their own. This is very much the case with *Timbuktu Fasso*.

It seems that the song is the key way that the film achieves engaged spectatorship, in which spectators are driven to reflect upon the film, critically consider its subject matter, and continue their own research into it. This engagement is realised due to the frustration created by the half-finished performance of the film. This promotes a desire to hear it to the end, to reach a sense of closure that the film itself deliberately does not provide. Whether this provokes a desire to hear the song in full for musical satisfaction, or whether it leads the spectator on a quest for its meaning, engagement with *Timbuktu Fasso* goes beyond the filmic boundaries.

Results from YouTube provide strong evidence of this: out of the results for the search 'Timbuktu song', Fatoumata Diawara's official music video (Universal Music France, 2015) is the first hit.<sup>8</sup> Diawara's video has gained more than a 2.5 million views between 2015 and 2019. Within the description provided, there is an official English translation of the lyrics (though, interestingly, no French one). In the comments sections of the video, YouTube users themselves have translated the lyrics, often at the request of others, into both English and French. While the official Universal Music France translation has quite considerable differences compared with user-generated translations, the latter of which are more literal translations, there is consensus over the key messages of the song: homeland (ko yo ne fasso ye – this is my homeland), suffering (ko denmisennu be kasi la ala – The children are in tears/the children are crying) and the will to fight and resist oppression (Maliba n ko don do be se – The Great Mali, we will be victorious/ Timbuktu will remain). The fact that the video is so popular, and that there is so much participatory activity surrounding the video – the requests from some viewers for translations of the song, and the willingness of others to provide them while pointing out inaccuracies in the official translation – demonstrates engagement with the content beyond pure enjoyment of the spectacle, as well as the ethical importance to viewers of fully getting across the message of the song. This demonstrates the efficacy of Timbuktu's "poetic power to enlist the spectator's symbolic participation" (Manthia Diawara 2015). Thus, *Timbuktu Fasso* becomes a very clear act of resistance in its own right and ensures that the attempt to silence Malian voices cannot succeed.

The music video not only allows us to hear the song in its entirety, but unlike the acoustic version in the film, here the performance is the fully-orchestrated version, featuring the Prague Philharmonic. The orchestra's inclusion in the music video is visual as well as aural, and in this aspect, further borders and points of contact and exchange become evident. It demonstrates the way in which a song whose lyrics are highly localised is interpreted and expressed by other bodies in other spaces. It heightens awareness of the full richness of a composition which has identifiably Malian elements, necessary for giving voice to this Malian crisis and resistance, but which emerged out of complex intercultural and intermedial connections, both in its inspiration and in its performance.

Furthermore, dialogue between film and music video is evident in the way that the music video restructures and incorporates the visual filmic material. The excerpts from the film are edited here in a way which reflect Sissako's fragmentary style, but they come in a different order, and are interspersed with shots of Fatoumata singing in the studio and shots of the orchestra. In the music video, the shots are ordered in such a way that those which show moments of high tension, such as Fatoumata's character being whipped, and the stoning of the unmarried couple, are grouped together at the climax of the song, giving a different intensity and rhythm to the images. It is a musical organization of filmic material which exemplifies the "chameleon" and "ambiguous" nature of music video (Gina Arnold and David Cookney et al. 2017), and which incorporates key motifs from the film among shots of the musical production of the song. Carol Vernallis (2013) argues that by breaking down media into small units and reworking them in this way allows for exchange between different forms of media and erases some of the differences between them. *Timbutku* and *Timbuktu Fasso*, the film and music video respectively, thus engage in processes of intermedial exchange and connection which blurs their boundaries. Arnold and Cookney et al. (2017) point to the repeating, circular motion that typifies many music videos; *Timbuktu Fasso* takes this a step further in its circular connection with the film.

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<sup>8</sup> Correct at the time of writing.

The opening scene of the film, in which the statues are shot down is found here, but at the very end of the music video. This not only creates aesthetic pleasure, but also works as a call to action. In referring back to the start of the film where the destruction of Malian culture by the jihadists is portrayed, it emphasises the urgency of fighting for Timbuktu. Furthermore, by including the shots of the most brutal acts of the regime, as represented in the film, but simultaneously asserting, in the lyrics of the song, the strength of the Malian people to resist and reclaim their homeland, *Timbuktu Fasso* is an emphatic work of resistance. In its intercultural links, and in the power of its translated lyrics, shared across borders, it encourages solidarity with the people of northern Mali and against extremism.

The criticisms of Timbuktu as too elliptical, too artistic, not critical enough of the jihadists or of terrorism in general – these only hold up if the film's intermediality is ignored. It is a poetic, artistic work, but straightforward readings of the film as such, and nothing more, miss its potential as a contribution to a movement of resistance which responds directly and defiantly to extremism in Mali. In the deployment of aesthetic influences taken from Italian Westerns, combined with those of Wassoulou music, Timbuktu is a film which subverts and undermines extremism on multiple levels. Ultimately, by tracing intermedial borders in a digital age, such as in the use of digital filmmaking and social media dissemination by the jihadists, *Timbuktu* makes use of those same connections, through its acts of musical resistance, to reach beyond its local borders and inspire real resistance and solidarity against extremism, wherever it may be found. *Timbuktu*, via the borders and routes of its different media, and through the inscription of different styles and genres, is thus able to speak to different audiences and make a local crisis – born as it is of complex international tensions and interventions – a global issue.

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