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*African Metropolis: Six Stories from African Cities*

(review)

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the subject, among them Newton Aduaka's *Ezra* (2007), Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire's *Johnny Chien Méchant* (*Johnny Mad Dog*, 2008, adapted from the 2002 novel by Emmanuel Dongala), and Cary Joji Fukunaga's *Beasts of No Nation* (2015, adapted from the 2005 novel by Uzodinma Iweala). Traoré, who was an assistant director for Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* (2014) and a production director for Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Un Homme qui crie* (*A Screaming Man*, 2010) and *Grigris* (2013), employs a screenplay by the French writers Luis Marquès and Christophe Lemoine. In the classroom, Traoré's film would work nicely when paired with other films, or with literary works such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* (*Allah Is Not Obligated*, 2000), Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007), or Chris Abani's *Song For Night* (2007), to name a few.

No single narrative can be expected to capture the experiences of child soldiers. While *L'œil du cycloné's* "time bomb" conclusion eclipses more complex depictions of childhood soldiering, the film is nevertheless a fine example of the murkiness of representation itself.

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***African Metropolis: Six Stories from African Cities.*** 2013. 92 minutes. In Arabic, English, French, Kiswahili, Nouchi, Pidgin English, and Yoruba, with English subtitles. Goethe Institute South Africa. \$42.50.

Several of the largest cities in the world today are found in Africa, as it becomes an increasingly urban continent. This fact, and growing interest in urbanism in the global South, makes *African Metropolis*, a collection of shorts by emerging filmmakers from six cities, especially timely. African cities are sometimes cast as harbingers of a global urban future, as archives of a colonial past, or as a sign of the times, so to speak. Similarly, the relationship that draws together these films from Abidjan, Cairo, Dakar, Johannesburg, Lagos, and Nairobi is not simply the city, but how compellingly each imagines time in an African metropolis.

The collection begins with Jim Chuchu's *Homecoming*, an unorthodox take on unrequited love that blurs reality and fantasy. The narrative focuses on Max, a small, unassuming homebody with an outsized admiration for Alina, who lives in the neighboring apartment block. Through nonlinear narration, we leap from Max's romantic frustration to four fantasies of a future Nairobi where he and Alina grow deeply in love while fleeing a menacing faceless figure. Of all the films in the collection, *Homecoming* most directly plays with genre as it refashions speculative and futurist conventions. The future the film creates for Nairobi includes alien invaders, space

travelers, and suggestions of a space colony, but it also permits Max to fulfill his desires and reinvent himself through fantasy.

Ahmed Ghoneimy's *The Cave*, set in Cairo, centers on Adham, an aspiring musician who reconnects with his old friend, Amr, only to discover that with time comes distance. Amr has moved on from the passion of their youth—music and nightlife—to become an established family man, part of the city's upwardly mobile population. The film's cinematography ranges from the notable following shots that navigate the viewer through Cairo's warren of back alleys to extreme long takes that punctuate the narrative's first and last shots. The vignette of Cairo that emerges is one of social fragmentation, highlighting the differences between those with a comfortable future and those who struggle only to find dead ends.

In *The Line-Up*, ten men from the streets of Lagos subject themselves to a ritualized selection in a dark warehouse, where a wealthy woman and her henchman inspect the naked men. One is selected and then disappears. The others are sent home with bulging envelopes of cash, money that the protagonist, Bala, desperately needs to pay for his young sister's surgery. In the morally charged conceit (and overwrought acting) we can detect the fingerprints of the veteran Nollywood director Victor Okhai and the noted screenwriter Kemi Adesoye. But the short also attests to Nollywood's dominance as a film culture with its own codes and conventions that continue to govern how stories of Lagos are told.

By contrast, Marie Ka's *The Other Woman*, set in Dakar, could be understood as a rewriting of received stories about gender, sexuality, and the forms of women's freedom. The story details the secret attraction between Madeleine (Awa Sene Sarr of *Faat Kiné* [2001]) and her husband's younger second wife, Amayelle. The director's notes describe this as a story about Madeleine's self-discovery through an intimacy beyond conventional norms. Colorful, subtle, and tender in bringing its characters to life, the film breaks with the way sex and intimacy in Africa are typically represented. It functions as an updated version of previous stories of women's self-discovery and women's roles within multi-spouse households.

The last two films in this collection revisit the past. Philippe Lacote's *To Repel Ghosts* pays homage to the memory of the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat and his 1986 visit to Abidjan. The film portrays Basquiat's visit as a journey of artistic, cultural, and spiritual return to Africa, with the narrative turning on the artist's struggle with self-doubt, addiction, and longing for connection with the people of Abidjan. The film does not promise an accurate accounting of history, but rather provides an endearing exercise of imagination that claims an iconic American artist of Puerto Rican and Haitian descent as one of Abidjan's own. In this regard, the short is the only one of the collection to address the historical connections between African cities and the African diaspora.

Finally, Vincent Moloi's *Berea* offers the unexpected story of Aaron Zukerman, an aging Jewish pensioner who lives on in the Johannesburg neighborhood of Berea even after his friends, family, and acquaintances

have left. Zukerman, the only white character in the film, barricades himself away from interaction with the outside world, save a weekly visit from a prostitute named Ilse. The narrative takes off when, one week, Ilse does not arrive but sends in her place a young black woman who, we soon discover, faces her own dilemma involving her child. The camera follows Zukerman into the streets of Berea—offering notable shots of the spaces of Johannesburg—as he seeks to help the young woman, a quest that ends with an unexpected result. Written by Makgano Mamabolo and Lodi Matsetela, the story captures the complex entanglement of the city’s racial communities. The protagonist, who lives in a Berea that is already long gone, must discover a link to the here and now, which entails taking the risk of forging connections with strangers unlike himself.

The production of *African Metropolis* was supported by the Goethe Institute South with financial backing from Guaranteed Trust Bank and the Hubert Bals Fund, with the expressed intention of providing opportunities and recognition to emerging African filmmakers. These institutions, therefore, are themselves encouraging the turn in African cinema toward urban stories. Two of the filmmakers promoted in this collection have gone on to produce films on their respective cities. Philippe Lacote’s *Run* (2014) became the first Ivorian film selected to premiere at Cannes Film Festival, while Jim Chuchu’s short *Tuko Macho* will screen at this year’s Toronto Film Festival. If compilation releases like this continue to provide a springboard for new filmmakers, then *African Metropolis* perhaps offers a taste of what is to come.

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## DOCUMENTARIES

**Sérgio Graciano, director. *Njinga: Rainha de Angola (Njinga: Queen of Angola)*.** 2013. 109 minutes. Portuguese and Kimbundu. Semba Comunicação. No price reported.

The Angolan historical epic film *Njinga: Queen of Angola* is the country’s most expensive production, as reported by the Portuguese daily *Diário de Notícias*. It memorializes one of Africa’s greatest women and the nation’s most important hero, who is also championed by the global African diaspora.

*Njinga* emerges at a time of renewed interest in the seventeenth-century historical figure and her symbolic meaning today as reflected by academic conferences and publications, including the critically acclaimed novel *A rainha Ginga* (2014) by José Eduardo Agualusa and the volume of essays, *A rainha Nzjinga Mbandi: história, memória e mito* (2012). While a statue of Njinga has figured prominently since 2002 on one of Luanda’s main