

Pierre Yameogo. 1998. *Silmandé (Tourbillon)*. French, Arabic and Mooré with English subtitles. Afix Productions and Les Films de l'Espoir. 85 minutes.

In 1998 after Pierre Yameogo released in Burkina Faso the film *Silmandé (Tourbillon)*, meaning "whirlwind" in both Mooré and French, it was exported to the Ivory Coast where the Lebanese community accused Yameogo of slander and registered complaints to have the film banned. In effect, the Lebanese-owned movie theaters, which house half of the country's first-run screens, were successful in staging a boycott of the film, claiming that Yameogo's film only would project stereotypes and stir up anxieties about the influential Lebanese business community. The production of the film is itself part of a political narrative of anxiety. Although Burkina Faso has nationalized its movie theaters, financed national and African productions and, since 1969, hosted the most internationally prestigious African film festival, the foreign monopoly on film distribution still plays a role in stemming local cultural production. In Africa, Burkina Faso stands as an exception in its national advocacy of local and interstate film production and distribution. Nevertheless, external control of African cinema, whether by virtue of European and American film distribution, or, in the case of Yameogo, due to the censure of his film in neighboring countries, has created an axiogenic relationship to the "business" of cultural production.

Yameogo has claimed that political intervention almost prevented him from completing the film, since he spent four years trying to gain permission to begin filming in Burkina Faso, and would have failed without the advocacy of the Head of State, Blaise Compaoré. Critics have

suggested that the government's anticipation of opposition by West Africa's influential Lebanese communities posed the major obstacle to taking the film to the production stage. This narrative of nationalized film production and distribution in Burkina Faso (and in its broader implications in Africa) operates as an interpolative tool in analyzing *Silmandé's* focus on the significance of economic and sociocultural development and practices to the field of nationalist politics.

Silmandé is set in an unnamed African nation, in a city whose aerial view with two minarets poking through an urban thoroughfare opens the scene to the accompaniment of anxious percussive beats and the muezzin's garbled call to prayer filtered from afar. The opening shot signals the multiple cultural identities that inhabit Yameogo's construction of the nation, simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the national boundaries within which social fragmentation and political corruption take place. The vultures that circle overhead in the opening scene gesture proleptically toward the corruption and depredation that the film portrays taking place on an unidentified field of African politics, while subtly making reference to the unofficial national bird of Burkina Faso. Yameogo's storytelling in its resistance to specifying topographic space is structurally bound to the literary technique of establishing ambiguous territory (albeit in a specified region) on which to critique corrupt government practice that is used by Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz. On one level, for Yameogo and Mahfouz, resistance to fixing the narratives in a geographical location that would facilitate the readership's identification with a particular place, a nation, in the storytellers' overlapping worlds of Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Arab world, functions as a means to

blur the boundaries of nation-states (in both Africa and the Arab world) created as a result of European colonization. On another level, the loss of topographic specificity, in its dialogism with nation-building discourse, is instrumental in demonstrating Yameogo's "leveling" of national categories in his depiction of the symbiotic relationship between an influential Lebanese businessman and African government officials in the plunder and extraction of the region's resources.

Yameogo's expansive shots not only take in the architecture that reflects Islamic influence, but the various French street and shop signs that imprint themselves into scene after scene as the material effects of a colonial era, French-language acquisition inscribed onto the African landscape. The storyline is crisscrossed with the routes and boundaries of the diasporic Lebanese, the expatriate French and the Burkinabé elite and their coffers of smuggled gold overseas. Streams of languages ricochet across the storyline — French, Arabic, and Mooré — so that a response to a line uttered in Arabic is shot back in French, deflected by Yameogo's unwillingness to create a filmic space in which symbols and languages reinforce the harmonious and unified imagery of the nation.

Silmandé engages modern national politics through a portrayal of a provincial system of tradition and patronage favoring Lebanese entrepreneurship that has its roots in West Africa's colonial and neocolonial periods. The film organizes its themes of national identity around the government's implementation of a financial restructuring program designed to give "nationals" control over the country's economy. The Jabert brothers, Amoudé and Yacine, are members of the Lebanese elite that have traditionally controlled the country's rice market. The rice contract bid

that is first promised to a local market trader, Mouni, is then thwarted and reclaimed by Yacine, with the initial support of his younger brother Amoudé. Amoudé has custody of the child he had with his ex-lover, Fati, who is Mouni's niece.

Familial relationships fraught with alienation further animate the conflicts between Mouni and Yacine over the rice contract. Yameogo structures the practice of economic and development control and the legitimacy it confers as a means of mediating a vision of national identity. Yameogo depicts the association between corruption and national identity with his development of the symbiotic relationship between the Lebanese businessman, Yacine, and African government officials who attempt to smuggle troves of gold, precious stones and currency out of Africa in diplomatic bags. At the same time that Yameogo attempts to construct a "leveling" of national categories according to which corruption is not bound with national identity, his representation of class struggle becomes inevitably determined by national identity. *Silmandé* reveals its characters mining the historical trope of privileged Lebanese diaspora in Africa and succeeding in conflating class identity with national identity.

At the same time that Yameogo engages in mining this trope, he calls attention to this conflation of Lebanese national identity with class by introducing a naming process adopted by the characters in which business, disposition, vice and character replace given names as a means of identification. Lalé, who functions as a "native informant" of sorts to the Jaberts, repeatedly expresses his disaffection with his role by uttering the phrase, "Who cares?" which becomes his community's way of identifying him. The local trader takes on the name of his shop, so that he is referred

to as *Mouni-Spare-Parts*. The corrupt Minister of Finance is identified as "Monsieur 10 Percent" for his appropriation of generated profit and his demands for kickbacks. Signified by her materialistic myopia "Madame Money" as the First Lady is featured as a headless figure that tosses and turns in a bed littered with gold bars only to wake up uttering her hatred of the poor. Rather than business, disposition, vice or character, national identity becomes the means of naming the Jaberts. For Mouni and the other local traders perpetually motionless in the waiting rooms of the privileged site of government offices that Yacine enters with ease, spitting out the term "the Lebanese" exclusively signifies a persistently deferred project of economic control posed by foreigners in the film.

Even though *Silmandé* functions as a nationalist text attributing the origins of an economic crisis to "outsiders," the interpolative film of the Lebanese Civil War that the Jaberts watch troubles not only Yameogo's portrayal of common descent, cultural unity and economic sovereignty as subject to violability by the Lebanese, but it creates a transnational ideological space between the two regions on which the films focus. The Lebanese Civil War footage intrudes upon Mother Jabert's nostalgic yearning for Lebanon as a site of coherence and security, and reveals the modern Lebanon from which she has escaped. Images of a war fought over the construction of a nation — masked men with guns patrolling checkpoints, columns of refugees with their belongings on their backs, bombed buildings and gutted streets — operate dialogically with Yameogo's examination of modern African politics. Although the African nation that Yameogo portrays is far more stable than Lebanon during its civil war, the films share the stories of displaced insiders around which the construction of a

nation is being fought and framed. Yameogo positions both the exiled Lebanese who are viewed as a threat to the economy and the African community whose leaders plunder and export the nation's resources as displaced insiders. Whereas the Lebanese Civil War footage reveals the failure of national politics to deliver its people to liberation, *Silmandé*, albeit in a less turbulent setting, reveals the failure of national politics to rescue Yameogo's unnamed African nation from economic devastation.

Ironically, the feud between the two communities, represented by Yacine and Mouni, never finds expression in dialogue as they suspiciously face each other several times throughout the film in a number of government offices without saying a word. Rather, Fati and Amoude's relationship becomes the focal point through which the polarized groups voice their anxieties over identity, community and social boundaries, and the preservation of monolithic communities and cohesive cultural spaces. Fati is castigated by her uncle repeatedly for her past relationship with Amoude and her attempt to gain back custody of her son on a visit to a Women's Rights Center is thwarted when the social worker discovers that the father is Lebanese.

Yameogo problematizes the dynamics of nation-building through a portrayal of failed families and disrupted lineage. Insofar as he portrays a dynamic of exclusion in imagining a nation, particularly as figured through Fati, the problematic familial relationships presented in the film provide a parallel construction to the struggles of inventing a community. While Fati's collusion with the enemy becomes an object of derision for both her uncle and the surrounding community, Amoude is admonished by his mother to abandon his preoccupation with Fati and think of potential Lebanese daughters-in-law. Yacine berates Amoude for his

attempts to return to Fati and a relationship that Yacine perceives to have been a temporary sexual liaison. Throughout several scenes Yameogo reveals Amoudé's disillusionment with his family's isolation from the rest of the community and a lack of rootedness manifest in a persistent desire to take flight (resonant in the opening and closing scene's circular flight of vultures) and return "home" (Lebanon): The Jaberts as a whole family are viewed only in seclusion in an apartment elevated above the rest of the city. Mother Jabert declares her refusal to leave the apartment unless it is to leave Africa and return to Lebanon, and so she is positioned as if ready to take flight from the balcony above as she shouts orders and pleas to her sons down on the street. Mother Jabert's alienation from Lebanon is marked by use of formal, stilted Arabic rather than the Lebanese colloquial, and her refusal to learn French or Mooré creates a confounding linguistic rupture in the scenes between her and Amoudé in that a response to a line uttered in Arab is shot back in French.

Yameogo works further to problematize the concept of "natural" identification inherent to the ideas of common descent in the process of nation building by reinforcing the theme of disrupted lineage. Yameogo situates the Lebanese Civil War footage that the Jabert family watches in the living room without credits or explanation, marking his resistance to attribute it to a source of production. Yameogo sets up a scene in which Lalé attempts to sell a rearview mirror without showing the car or the owner of the car from which he had stolen it. Lalé rescues a book from the dusty street, but its author remains unknown throughout the film until the final shot that reveals Lalé is reading from a Declaration of Rights. Yameogo visually troubles the concept of lineage by compelling the viewer to wonder to what or to whom

these displaced objects belong. Furthermore, not only is Fati separated from her child, but Mother Jabert rebukes Yacine for being a poor substitute for his father and for his inability to continue the traditions maintained by the absent patriarch.

Filiation in the divided and deluded Jabert family collapses as a means of identification for Amoudé and reveals itself for Fati to be a source of alienation for having destabilized perceived notions of the integrity of the family, community and nation, not only in her involvement with Amoudé, but for having bore a child with him. Through Amoudé and Fati, *Silmandé* reveals crises of family alienation and self-delusion that seem to indicate new alliances. However, even though Yameogo demonstrates the failures of natural filiation and common descent, *Silmandé* offers no alternative visions of affiliation.

Yameogo propels a crisis of failed families and disrupted lineage to the surface of the narrative. Familial and intimate relationships become a part of a public preoccupation within the film. The crisis insists upon the collapse of the private and public sphere in analyzing failed nation-building in Yameogo's ambiguous African state. Between the call of national politics to deliver its people to liberation and from economic devastation and the neglected vehicle of social and cultural politics to do so, *Silmandé's* characters remain locked within a cyclical narrative. With the exception of Amoudé's reunification of his son, Ali, with Fati, the narrative offers no further resolutions. In the closing scenes the Jabert family continues to be divided. The Burkinabé elite, with the help of Yacine, are poised to transfer their coffers of smuggled gold overseas. Mouni remains motionless in one of the many government offices between which he is shuttled. The narrative is marked by an opening

scene that mirrors the closing scene of a flight of vultures, a circular flight that restricts their movement, so that they are depicted as traveling, but essentially going nowhere.

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LITERATURE REVIEW