When *Pull* Comes to *Shove*: Communality and Identity in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Heremakono*

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The ocean expands and contracts, with grace and ferocity, between here and there. It is where the communal reality of life being-with crosses from the intimacy of local communalism into that of an irrevocable fragmentation of global divides by way of colonisation, slavery, migration, capitalist exploits. In *Heremakono*, or *Waiting for Happiness*,[1] director Abderrahmane Sissako lays down on screen an oceanic path into the other side of global presence that permeates the arid landscape of Nouadhibou, a coastal city of Mauritania. At this juncture is a would-be migrant Mickaël (Mickaël Onoimweniku) embarking on a journey to Europe. Standing in front of an oversized painting of the Eiffel Tower, Mickaël and friends pose before a camera for the last time with a unified sense of belongingness and merriment. The ocean then carries him away, propelling his movement towards Spain, his friend Makan (Makanfing Dabo) speculates weeks later; no, Tangiers, another insists. But the reality interrupts. His body is eventually spat back by the waves that transported him. What Sissako teases out in his poetic rendition of Mickaël's movement in the world is a trajectory of personal yearning — exploitation, hardship and failure are but the propellers of those who persist to survive and aspire for new possibilities. Latent in Mickaël's drowned body, is a revelation of communal plurality of constant pulling and pushing.

The oceanic vision, as it is realised in *Heremakono*, is indeed a consciousness of co-existentiality, an awareness of communal presence that does not necessarily entail relationships of dependence. The conception of co-existentialism, as it is iterated, does not aim for any communion project, nor does it share a communal essence. Jean-Luc Nancy describes this condition as *being-with*, a reworking of Martin Heidegger's idea. The *with*, for Nancy, is a neutral indicator of a mode of "being-together without assemblage." It is neutral insofar as the condition itself does not ascribe communal intimacy or total disengagement, only "the sharing and sharing out of a space, at most a

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[1] *Heremakono (Waiting for Happiness)*, dir. Abderrahmane Sissako (London: Artificial Eye, 2002).

contact."[2] And the space, in this essay, is linked to the world system across the local/global divide. Although the framework itself underscores a mode of living together in irreconcilable or even indifferent heterogeneity, it does not imply impartiality to communal influences, as we shall see in the following pages. This framing of co-existentiality in the film suggests a marking that gestures towards a singular but sutured reality, recalling what Paul Gilroy characterises as 'the black Atlantic'. It is within Gilroy's framework this essay traces and locates in Sissako's poetic rendition an insistence on communality—the fact of living together separately as a non-communion project—that precedes the construction of identity. And within this circulation of relations, identity is formed at the persisting condition of co-existence. In this I propose a theoretical extension from the work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha among other postcolonial theorists.[3] In their analyses, identity is a polymorphic construct, highlighting its fluid movement and malleable instinct. However, such characterisation falls short of acknowledging the utter reliance of identity on the compulsion of communalism—the prioritisation of being-in-the-world-*with*. Or put it more succinctly, this essay theorises identity as a by-product of communality.

First it is necessary to situate the origin of the essay's hermeneutics, particularly concerning the interrelation between cinematographic images and the object-world they seek to represent. In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Frederic Jameson considers cultural artefacts as manifestations of socially symbolic acts with hidden, or unconscious, meanings that project both actual and unrealised ideological struggles within the political economy. Although my analysis takes cue from Jameson's materialist reading of filmic narrative as a reflexive projection of certain social conditions and order, I regard film as a cultural text that reveals a localised and often personalised understanding of being under the influence of globalisation.

In this essay, the process of globalisation is taken to mean an uneven, and often disorganised, exchange of resources or cultures within a world system, not of centre-periphery structure, but of global flowing of disjunctive

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[2] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Confronted Community', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2003), p. 32.
[3] See Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 2002); and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

order.[4] The process itself indicates a capitalist agenda, as observed by Stuart Hall, that operates through difference – preserving or transforming difference – rather than undermining it.[5] Thus globalisation no longer simply implies homogenisation that disrupts local cultures but also localisation in which meanings and uses are often altered to fit individual and personalised situations. As such, the analysis begins with a focus on the narrative structure that ties the filmmaker's own biography and politics together with the filmic diegesis, and ends with a consideration of its encoded implication on individual's identity in the wake of global/communal compulsion.

Tracing the Space and the Politics of In-Betweenness

At the edge of the Sahara that gives way to the Atlantic, the world impinges. *Heremakono* begins with the very notion of in-betweenness among edges of communities—the local *within* and the world *without*—by transposing the visual to an isolated compound situated between the desert and the ocean. Amidst the howling wind and the heaving ocean, a lone man tries to tune his radio to the outside world with no success. Makan, whose name is later revealed, then wraps the radio carefully in a plastic bag and buries it in the sand. After the opening credit, he returns to the compound with an old electrician Maata (Maata Ould Mohamed Abeid) and his pre-teen apprentice Khatra (Khatra Ould Abdel Kader), trying in vain to locate the buried radio which is now lost. Maata suggests that the pair should have tea together, leaving the earnest young boy alone digging in sand. Khatra eventually gives up. Instead, he gazes upward at a tumbleweed ascending into the sky.

The film then cuts to a long shot of a stationary taxi parked under the blazing sun with its bonnet open. Next to it is the film's protagonist, Abdallah (Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mohamed), a laconic seventeen-year-old who dresses in a bright yellow Western shirt. The driver and other passengers seek shelter in the shade of a stone brick wall. Moments later, the journey resumes; the car snakes through the desert, taking all its passengers and a roof rack full of luggage, crossing into the Mauritanian border. Through the production note of the film, we learn that the protagonist is visiting his mother before emigrating to Europe. Amidst Abdallah's voyage are episodic sequences and images of lives mingled in Nouadhibou. Characters emerge and move past as Sissako's cinematography gazes. The subsequent film traces Abdallah's sense

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[4] See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 32–33; and Ulf Hannerz, 'The World in Creolisation', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 57, no. 4 (1987), p. 555.
[5] Stuart Hall, 'Culture, Community, Nation', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1993), p. 353.

of alienation in a continent of disparate peoples where he holds no local tongue and prefers Western attire.

Through the estranged journey of the young Abdallah, the filmic diegesis crosses over to the filmmaker's own biography which asks the question: how does an individual relate to his or her immediate community? The filmmaker acknowledges that he often weaves in elements of his own life into his films.[6] It is particularly apparent that the path of Abdallah mirrors the one Sissako took at a younger age—from Mali to Mauritania to Russia—and along with it the same alienated sense of being uprooted from one community to another. Born in Kiffa, Mauritania, a year after the country gained its independence from France in 1960, Sissako was brought up in his father's home country, Mali. The lineage of Sissako's revolutionary worldviews began with his militant thoughts of overthrowing the oppressive school system in Mali as a teenager. His sense of Africa crystallised as he drew inspirations from the pro-revolutionary writings of W. E. B. Dubois, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara whose ideas are closely associated with and inspired by the Négritude movement against the French colonial power. At the same time, the global anti-apartheid movement and the rising anti-dictatorship sentiment in Mali further propelled Sissako's ideals into actions. He began organizing student strikes in his late teens. "It was a dangerous time. Friends of mine were in prison. One was dead."[7] These external frictions with his surrounding environment would later inform him both as an individual and as a filmmaker.

The year of 1980 marked a major transition in Sissako's life. In that year, he moved to Nouakchott, Mauritania to be with his mother. The filmmaker recounted in an interview, "I had lost my bearings, lost my childhood friends. I couldn't communicate, as I did not speak Hassaniya, the local language, only Bambara, the language of Mali."[8] His comment provides a condensed description of individual's relationship with the community at large, a condition that is also built into Abdallah's narrative. In the film, Abdallah too is unable to communicate in local language Hassaniya. Khatra, the young electrician apprentice, exploits the situation by teaching him the wrong phrases, thereby exposing Abdallah to further humiliation and alienation as he

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[6] Ali Jaafar, 'African Cinema: Finding Our Own Voices', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2007), pp. 30–31.

[7] Dennis Lim, 'One Angry African Puts Big Money on Trial', *The New York Times* (2 February 2007), at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/movies/11denn.html. Accessed 23/12/09.

[8] Quoted in Applah, 'A Screenplay Is Not a Guarantee: Abderrahmane Sissako with Kwame Anthony Applah', in *Through African Eyes: Dialogues with the Directors*, eds Mahen Bonetti and Prerana Reddy (New York: African Film Festival Inc., 2003), p. 35.

attempts to demonstrate what he has learned in front of a group young women.

Abdallah's relationship with his immediate community comprises no transferable sense of communal intimacy; being, in this disjointed instance, is made aware of its own alienated presence in a togetherness that does not share an exchangeable identity. However a relational presence is formed nevertheless. Although such relational *with* can be aligned in mutual communion so long as there exists a definable and agreed upon identity such as one encoded in common linguistic terms or unified through shared lived experiences, as Sissako's comment alludes to, it describes a more fundamental premise between individual and community—even at the absence of communal intimacy, they reify a negative relationality through which exclusivity itself attests to the very presence of the former within the latter, which is to say one must be *physically* present within a communal group in order to be excluded. Hence the actual property of being-with bears no semblance to any essential essence or identity; rather, it exists only in the form of a relational awareness that is at the same time a material presence of one's being *with* another. This awareness of communal presence based on materiality, moreover, is itself a consciousness of co-existentiality. As the embarrassed Abdallah hurries out of the room at the gentle teasing by the young women, the same consciousness of co-existential presence imposes on him an identity of non-belonging. Therefore, what Sissako has demonstrated by weaving his own biography into the filmic narrative is an insistence on communality—or a mode of living together separately in an irreconcilable difference, indifferent to the identity ascribed to or adopted by each individual.

If such is the basic truth of being-in-the-world-*with*, what then is its political implication, especially in a work of art? "I share this fate with many people who will always remain anonymous. I've lived in different continents and consider myself both rich and poor as a result."[9] The statement encapsulates Sissako's politics that responses to the question: how does one struggle against the indifferent presence of co-existentiality? Embedded in his statement is a familiar struggle that bears similar footprints as Frantz Fanon's antagonism in his essay 'The Negros and Recognition': "I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions."[10] Fanon's master-slave dialectic of 'negating activity' conceals a rupture that intercepts the imposed identity *of* in order to realign the manifold reciprocal *with*. And at the extremity of life negating activity, the

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[9] Quoted in Armes, *African Filmmaking*, p. 192.
[10] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 218.

process of objectification ceases, thereby re-establishing one's humanity in relation to the dominant others. For the filmmaker, anonymity too must be restored to the position of sharing with. In *Heremakono*, Sissako imbues the film with a similar demand in its fragmentary structure that moves languidly from one character's relational presence to another's. Amidst the whirlwind and the encroaching world, there exist the poetics of everyday life and the persistence of humanity to live in humdrum rhythm. This sharing of fate *with* is what allows the poetics of *Heremakono* to entrench its politics.

Even though the film is not lacking in its critiques on the encroachment of Western Other, such as the cheery noise of French quiz show which the filmmaker characterises as "the intrusion of a false civilisation in a place of authentic living,"[11] Sissako does not share his predecessors' insistence on the purity of African voice or aesthetic particularity unique to the African experience. The filmmaker elucidates: "I believe that if one wants to denounce something it is preferable not to hit people with it, not to beat them up. One reaches people through a narrative form that is poetic or by creating an atmosphere… I sought to create an atmosphere in order to denounce what seemed important to me."[12] Sissako's strategy allows him to contextualise political issues arise with the process of globalisation within the domain of the quotidian; the fixing of the light fitting in relation to the country's ailing infrastructure; the photography session among friends prior to a migrant's demise resulted from his non-legal means of crossing into Europe; the intrusion of transnational commodities manifests in a child's remark on a light bulb that does not light up: 'It must be from Taiwan.'

However, Sissako's atmospheric denouncement does not translate directly the troubles of individuals or the community through representations, which is to say he offers no direct correlation between the imagery and his political points. The focus here is not on the incessant suffering but on the relationality of characters who form a greater subset within a communal presence. The agency of Sissako's characters, hence, consists of precarious manoeuvring within the network of relations, contextualised in the everyday living. This everydayness of movement constitutes what Sissako characterises as the atmosphere. It underscores neither the perpetuity of Western imperialism that demands the African Other to resume the role as next to free labour or as passive consumer of its products, nor the docility of subjugated otherness in search for an agency. Rather, it binds together the movement of individuals within the domain of co-existentialism. It is precisely through this atmosphere of movement Sissako denounces both the exploits and institutional failures that

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[11] Quoted in Armes, *African Filmmaking*, p. 198.
[12] Quoted in Applah, 'A Screenplay', p. 39.

impede the crossing of being from the state of anonymity—the death of a migrant with no legal means to travel—into a world of Fanon's reciprocal recognitions—the photographic presence of the same person Mickaël in the arms of his friends. Sissako's atmospheric denouncement, therefore, is a political struggle of the poetics that links together the self-within to the communality-without.

From the Exiled Inland to the Black Atlantic

The analysis thus far examines the situatedness of *Heremakono* that draws on the filmmaker's own experiences and political activism. These deeply personalized elements make real the underlying consciousness of co-existentiality of being not as a detachable individual, but as a subject in a constant relational *with*. What then is the implication of such situated knowledge on one's relational presence in a global reality at large? Or, to be more precise, how does one's identity transpire in the constant outward pulling towards the global? The entwinement between the space of Nouadhibou and Abdallah's predicaments offer a few clues.

Sissako's political-poetic rendition of the desert-ocean terrain surmises an 'exiled inland' that pushes the familiarity of the local outwardly to the estrangement of the global. *Heremakono* traces the protagonist's journey through the continent beginning from his initial crossing into an enclosed community and ending with his eventual departure where he is last seen entrapped in a sand dune unable to move forward. It is a space of alienation hung between the constraint of the local community and the seduction of the West. Through a small window suspended closely to the ground, he observes in silence the passing footsteps of others, their routines and habits; on a television screen, he watches two Frenchmen challenge each other in a cheery game show. Even at the absolute point of stasis and isolation, the world never ceases to shift around Abdallah. As Zygmunt Bauman laments, "immobility is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change."[13] In the case of Abdallah's grappling to find his bearings, the exiled inland creates a sense of indeterminacy where one's consciousness of the West eclipses the certainty of local dwelling. Sissako describes the condition as the 'interior exile' of the self. The filmmaker explains: "We make true exile within ourselves even before we depart."[14]

The formation of the here-there indeterminacy at the exiled inland, however, extends beyond the effects of personal crisis. It is also a condition

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[13] Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 4.
[14] Quoted in Armes, *African Filmmaking*, p. 198.

symptomatic of what Paul Gilroy characterises as 'the black Atlantic'. A singular and complex unit of analysis for black modernity, Gilroy defines the black Atlantic as "the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation." He further qualifies that it originated in, but is not exclusive to, "black dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering."[15] For Gilroy, the black Atlantic is a project of unmasking the complexity of black diaspora embedded within the critical discourse of modernity in Western societies. At the end of the first chapter in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, he refers to the theoretical positioning of his thesis as a point of convergence with other social theories, particularly Marxism. He further underpins the epistemological differences between the two crises by designating their respective relations with the materialist conception of Marxism and the histo-cultural approach to critical thinking that does not stray far from the memory of slavery: "[W]here lived crisis and systemic crisis come together, Marxism allocates priority to the latter while the memory of slave insists on the priority of the former."[16] In Gilroy's conception, therefore, the lived crisis can be conceived as the incursion of socially inscribed symbolism and meanings through historical terms, whereas the systemic crisis as the limitation of institutionally imposed materialist structure by way of political economy.

The coalescence of the two crises presupposes a communal network that extends beyond any specific parameter demarcated by either materialist project or social constructivist perspective, which is to say that the black experience in Gilroy's formulation is a communal experience of both material inadequacy and histo-cultural legacy. It exceeds the symbolic hierarchy between the oppressors and the oppressed delineated within the power structure. Instead, it demands a relational consideration between the two as well as manoeuvring within them. The result is a wholesale rejection to what Gilroy considers as the modern black political culture's tendency to overemphasise racial "roots and rootedness." Gilroy sees in this emphasis an agenda to reclaim racial sovereignty that refuses to acknowledge "identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes."[17] Such reflection relocates Gilroy's black Atlantic world and, one may argue, Sissako's exiled inland into a "webbed network, between the local and the global."[18]

Gilroy further evokes the imagery of slave ships as an epitome to

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[15] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, pp. 3–4.
[16] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 40.
[17] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 19.
[18] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 29.

illustrate the connectivity anchored within the network of transcultural and international experiences: "[Slave ships] were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected." Then: "Accordingly, they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade."[19] In so reasoning, Gilroy broadens the condition of the black Atlantic—the convergence of lived crisis and systemic crisis—beyond the topographical binary of local versus global. It also functions as a catalytic element that pushes and pulls the flowing of the self-contained units of communality from the local to the global and vice versa. Similarly, images of commercial ships are intercut throughout *Heremakono*, representing the transient nature that flows in between the Saharan inland and the Atlantic network—the presence of *there* at the edge of the exiled inland.[20] The difference in Sissako's rendition, however, is in its historical lineage. In the film, imprints of the country's colonial past dominate the filmic emphasis, which call for a brief highlight of its historical coming into being.

In Immaunuel Wallerstein's world-system formulation, after the absorption of West African territories as part of what Wallerstein distinguishes as the periphery to the capitalist world-economy in the nineteenth century, capitalist entrepreneurs relied on colonial governments to 'create tastes' within the regions in order to increase local reliance on colonial commodities.[21] This latter scenario opened up new possibilities of cultural and economic exchanges, furthering the shifting of consciousness *within* the colonised territories in the continent itself. However, even though Mauritania was a French colony, it was largely unaffected by the French colonial policy which was primarily motivated by its commercial interest in gum trade. Nevertheless, Mauritania was strategically and politically important to France in its efforts to deter intrusive forces of other colonial powers in what was considered as the French domain. The country remained economically and politically reliant to the colonial power until it gained its independence in 1960.[22]

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[19] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, pp. 16–17.

[20] In fact the word *heremakono* itself indicates the very transient state of dwelling. Translated as 'waiting for happiness' in its literally sense in Mali, *heremakono* also refers to the temporary housing units in Nouadhibou. See 'Notes from the Director', *Artificial Eye*, at http://www.artificial-eye.com/film.php?dvd=ART269DVD&dir=abderrahmane_sissako. Accessed 20/01/10.

[21] Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), pp. 38–39.

[22] See Alfred G. Gerteiny, *Mauritania* (London: The Pall Mall Press, 1967); and Rachel Warner, 'Historical Setting', *Mauritania: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, The Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, at http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/mrtoc.html. Accessed 10/02/10.

The prevalent effects of French colonisation can be observed vividly in the visual and linguistic contexts of the film. The everyday life in Nouadhibou is imbued with imagery of France: the game show Abdallah watches on TV; the faded imagery of the Eiffel Tower found among Mickaël's possessions after his death. The French language too is inextricably woven into the local language: French is the only means to communicate between the locals and Abdallah; a local prostitute's melancholic soliloquy of her trip to Paris after the death of her daughter only to be rejected by her lover. All these instances point to an encroachment of past memory upon local consciousness. Then there is one incident in which Khatra sings what could be a nationalist song punctuated with French vocabularies, only to be sternly reproached by Maata. The difficulty in determining the exact significance of the song and Maata's reaction from an outsider's point of view exemplifies the ambiguity resulted from Sissako's tendency to fuse various issues together. Such convergence, despite its complexity and ambiguity, nevertheless reflects an overlapping of consciousness fastened together by past experiences stemmed from a common colonial history. Through these experiences, the cultural residues of French colonialism contribute to a sense of lived crisis in which the locals are constantly placed under haunting presence of their colonial past.

Enmeshed in these cultural entanglements is a systemic crisis attributable to the geopolitical economy of the new global reality. In addition to the obvious humanitarian issue of migration as exemplified in Mickaël's narrative, Sissako offers several glimpses into the crisis: images of Nouadhibou's ship graveyard are shown to signify the country's ailing infrastructure ushered in by a government that seeks to profit from the international market but fails to manage the fishery industry's infrastructural needs;[23] Khatra's casual association between the failing light bulb and Taiwan made product signals the technological reach of global exchange in a country that has yet to meet the benchmark of safety (a condition that is also reflected in Khatra's fear of electrocution and cinematographic glimpses of rooftops full of exposed and entangled wires); the overcrowded condition of the train system, the country's only form of mass transit, that is not meant to carry

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[23] The phenomenon can be traced back to the nationalisation of the fishery sector in 1980s. The country was not fully prepared to handle the changing demands of the industrial fishing. The result was a steady increase of outdated vessels abandoned by companies that went bankrupt or downgraded ships following insurance frauds or misuses of government loans. See Berny Sebe, 'Consigned to a Watery Grave', *Geographical*, vol. 79, no. 4 (2007), pp. 40–43.

passengers but iron ore to ships await at the harbor of Nouadhibou.[24] These images suggest an inadequacy of the country's infrastructure as it interacts with global communities via technological and commercial engagements, thereby gesturing towards a systemic crisis that materialises in the lives of its dwellers.

Being, Non-Philosophical

The interlacing of lived and systemic crises within a local community against the global forces brings forth another aspect of Gilroy's theorisation. In his conception, the convergence enables him to underscore the actual relational operative of communality rather then the centrality of historicism in the form of racial experiences. What Gilroy offers is a fundamental re-conception of relational identity where being is coagulated within the systemic rule of geopolitical constraints and the lived experience of historical memory across its local/global divide. Again, Gilroy uses the metaphor of ships to explain this transition:

> Ships also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation. As it were, getting on board promises a means to reconceptualise the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory. It provides a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders that both *found* and *temper* a self-conscious sense of western civilisation.[25]

The founding and tempering of self-consciousness, in Gilroy's argument, come after the constitutive relationships—the communality of life being-with in the black Atlantic world—which is to say that there exists a co-existential relationship, propelling the pulling and pushing of one's consciousness. Implicit in Gilroy's argument is a privileging of communal experiences in the construction of one's identity.

Sissako's imagery exerts similar prioritisation. For instance, in contradistinction to the character treatment of Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky whose work Sissako has often cited as his influence, a Sissako's character is never a philosophical subject enlivened as an absolute, therefore detached, being of pure humanist abstraction (which is essentially an abstraction of *thought* for it transcends the everyday materiality and relationships). In the opening sequence of Tarkvosky's *Andrei Rublev*, the cinematography follows the vantage point of a balloonist, glancing downward

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[24] Sharon LaFraniere, 'Tough Commute on a Train Not Meant for People', *The New York Times* (9 July 2007), at
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/09/world/africa/09mauritania.html. Accessed, 20/02/10.
[25] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 17. My emphases.

at humanity, signifying to Johnson and Petrie a yearning to challenge repressive powers,[26] and to Jameson a longing to flee human cruelty.[27] Each of these views singles out the theme of transcendence, mirroring what Tarkvosky asserts as the philosophical duty of an artistic creation to "[serve] another, higher and communal idea." For Tarkovsky, the role of an "artist is always a servant and is perpetually trying to pay for the gift that has been given to him as if by miracle."[28] However serving is not equating; the paying for a bestowed and miraculous gift is an extraction of the self from the suffering en masse. Hence, the protagonist in *Andrei Rublev*, a Russian icon painter and Orthodox monk, presides over the position of a philosophical overseer whose relationships with others exist only in the humanist form of *caring for*. This ontological construct of a character outlines an emphasis on the philosophical transformation of individual based on a humanist belief. Consequently, the film is a poetic meditation on lost faith and its later reclamation. Tarkovsky focuses on the inner turmoil of his eponymous character, assigning him the role of a great artist as well as a witness of human cruelty and debauchery. The character observes, cares for others, and struggles against his own wretched soul. In Tarkovsky's rendition, Andrei Rublev becomes a philosophical subject, an abstraction of humanist thought distilled from the filmmaker's looking at the state of humanity, its cruelty as well as its poetic existence.

In the opening sequence of *Heremakono*, the cinematography too takes a flight of the ethereal. In Sissako's execution, it glances upward at a floating tumbleweed, opening up a yearning that bursts into the air. Its point of view, however, remains grounded, firmly attached to the land that weighs down its gazing. From then onward, the framing of the camera is kept in a languorous pace and never again panned upward; there is no transcendence in the land of fringes. To be a Sissako's character is to be confined within the communal flow of being-with. Relationships are often left unexplained; characters are often seen observing, but are never detached from the observed—a necessary condition that allows the founding and tempering of others upon one's consciousness. In fact, the film came into being through a series of improvisations contributed by the non-professional actors the filmmaker met in Nouadhibou. It is life as it happens when one encountering jump cuts to the next. If these events are to be taken as the sum of the filmmaker's total

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[26] Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 87.

[27] Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and British Film Institute, 1995), p. 89.

[28] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 38.

consciousness, one could argue that it is Sissako's consciousness that is founded and tempered by each of these instances. Sissako himself also alludes to what Gilroy proposes as the constitutive relationships. When explaining how the role of Khatra had evolved during the filming, the filmmaker remarks that the boy simply "imposed himself on the film because he wanted to act, so I was there to follow him. All the time I found him in front of the camera, because he wanted to be filmed as much as possible."[29]

The narrative of the film, however, deduces no palpable conclusion, only a series of resignations and stoicism that gives in to the fluid flowing among the relationships of many. For instance, after the discovery of his friend's drowned body, Makan refuses to acknowledge his friendship with Mickaël to the inquiring police. When asked if that was the first time the sea washed up a body, Makan simply replies that he found a tire before. Perhaps the lost radio in the beginning of the film portends this second loss, Sissako does not elaborate on the transformation of Makan's philosophical being upon his witnessing of Mickaël's demise, nor does the cinematography linger on the character's inner turmoil or melancholic gestures. The emotion remains stoic and ambiguous. The lack of dramatic effects seems to suggest that there is no affordance in emotional indulgence. For the police too, it is yet another body to be processed.[30] Instead, we see Makan having tea with friends and eventually travelling else where in the same taxi that Abdallah took to reach the town. Is Makan's refusal to acknowledge his friendship with Mickaël a defensive reaction to avoid possible troubles with the law? Or does his refusal signal a deeper sense of rejection by the West which simply spits back any body it does not accept? Again, Sissako offers no explanation. The filmmaker, instead, hints to the fact that individuality may never overcome social or material determinants. The only way to out manoeuvre them is to be constantly on the move, assuming a different sense of the self, refusing any opportunity to be tied down in their abysmal drowning.

And the Whirlwind Yields

When asked about his definition of happiness, Sissako replies, "I think that happiness is in anticipation. In the conduct of a day. In the little everyday details. And that's why there is this atmosphere of serenity in the film."[31]

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[29] Armes, *African Filmmaking*, p. 198.

[30] In April of 2006 alone, there were 1,500 deaths in Nouadhibou where up to 15,000 would-be migrants camped out waiting for passage to cross over into Europe via Canary Islands. Meg Bortin, 'Senegal a New Point of Departure', *The New York Times* (26 May 2006), at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/26/world/africa/26iht-senegal.html. Accessed 07/12/09.

[31] Quoted in Armes, *African Filmmaking*, p. 199.

Through his atmospheric denouncement of a whirlwind that threatens to engulf those entrapped below, Sissako carves out a space of quotidian where one awaits moments of happiness with gentle resignation and unbridled recourse to survive. What he has demonstrated in *Heremakono* is a way to exceed looking within the enclosure of self-transcendence and the totality of social and material determinism. His political poetics speaks out firmly the placement and orientation of humanity that, to borrow from Gilroy, "have overflowed from the containers that the modern nation state provides for them."[32] The result is a revelation of co-existentiality that precedes the *I think* in the conscious formation of *I am*. One's identity in the world, therefore, is constructed in its capacity to relate. There is no ascension to the philosophical space of transcendence. To see in this relational identity a mode of resistance by way of everyday conducts is not to deny the determining factors of both lived and systemic crises. Rather, it opens up a possible venue to contest the impending strangulation of contending forces, and to live within it with one's own pacing and ideal for happiness. To be *is* to be with. To understand it, to know the construction of its identity and morphology within the flow of relations in the mundane are perhaps the keys to happiness; that one must wait.

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[32] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 40.