

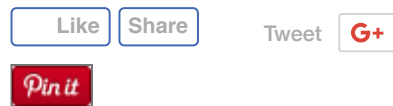


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Film Review: Timbuktu

A nuanced, humanistic portrait of a town besieged by jihadists, its images of violence suffused with almost surreal dreaminess.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Jan 28, 2015



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The new film from Abderrahmane Sissako (*Bamako*) could hardly be timelier. A small town in northern Mali is taken over by religious fundamentalists, who impose their laws on the peaceable, devout villagers, commit atrocities, and shred the fabric of the community. The story centers on Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed), a shepherd, who lives tranquilly in the desert outside of town with his wife Satima (Toulou Kiki) and adored daughter Toya (Layla Walet Mohamed). Disaster strikes when the orphaned boy who tends their cattle gets into an altercation with a local fisherman.

Kidane's prized cow—named "GPS"—is killed, provoking Kidane to respond with a violent, possibly accidental act.

This drama of a loving family besieged is intertwined with scenes from the jihadist takeover of the adjacent town. The arresting opening sequence tracks the arriving gunmen as they speed across the desert in a jeep, shooting at a fleeing gazelle. The chase culminates in the destruction of exquisite statues and other cultural artifacts—a prelude to wreaking havoc on humans.

Powerless against the regime of terror, the townspeople are forbidden to make music, laugh, smoke; even soccer is banned. Of course the women have it especially hard; a fishmonger is ordered, absurdly, to wear gloves and socks in the blistering heat. One figure, the village madwoman (Ketty Noël), parades around in gaudy getups, laughs raucously, and converses with her pet rooster, seemingly immune to the laws of the invaders, almost as if she were a spirit of defiance, rather than an actual person. Throughout, a kangaroo court issues barbaric sentences in scenes inflected with

absurdity, since the foreign occupiers speak a different language than the locals, and everything must be repeated in French, English or dialect.

The atrocities meted out by sharia law—a rebellious woman lashed; a couple stoned to death—are difficult to watch. The filmmaker takes pains, however, not to lay all the wickedness on the jihadists. One leader is almost comical in his inability to abide by his own rules, sneaking a smoke while out in his jeep, and lusting for Satima, who refuses to cover her head. And Kidane's rashness sets him up for a fall, even without the harsh laws of the invaders. This even-handed point of view, the notion that we all have sins to account for, keeps the film from delivering an on-the-nose indictment, yet blurs its emotional thrust.

Amidst the mayhem, Sissako's fine DP Sofian El Fani teases out the great beauty of this desert land, its vast undulating slopes and feathery trees. In one indelible shot he captures Sidane and his family reposing in their tent beneath a perfect desert moon; the tableau resembles *The Sleeping Gypsy* by Henri Rousseau. A wide shot of Kidane stumbling through the lake after his fatal act resonates, ironically, with serene beauty, and the clothes of the soccer players in their forbidden game are rendered in saturated, jewel-like colors. Overall, *Timbuktu* suffuses topical politics with a removed, dreamy affect—a mélange some viewers may find off-putting.

Click [here](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3409392/?ref_=nv_sr_1) (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3409392/?ref_=nv_sr_1) for cast and crew information.

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