

## The 20th New York African Film Festival

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**The 20th New York African Film Festival (NYAFF)** runs April 3-9 at [Film Society of Lincoln Center](#).

*Toi qui plies toi que pleures  
Toi qui meurs un jour comme ça sans savoir pourquoi  
Toi qui luttas qui veilles pour le repose de l'Autre  
Toi qui regardes plus avec le rire dans les yeux  
Toi mon frère au visage de peur et d'angoisse  
Relève-toi et crie: NON!*

You who submits, you who cries  
You who dies one day without knowing why  
You who struggles, who keeps vigil over the Other's calm  
You who no longer looks with laughter in your eyes  
You my brother with the face of fear and anguish  
Stand up and shout: NO!

*"Défi à la force" / "Defiance against force" (1956)*

*"Défi à la force"* is one of several celebrated poems by the French West African poet David Diop (1927-1960), who used the power of the word to protest against European colonization and assimilation, and advocate change for the better, more glorious good of Africa. Fifty-seven years later and Diop's words feel as alive and action-charged as ever, as if ingrained in the psyche of today's cinematic storytellers. In celebration of **the 20th New York African Film Festival (NYAFF)**, running April 3-9, The Film Society of Lincoln Center (FSLC) and African Film Festival, Inc. (AFF) present "Looking Back, Looking Forward: 20 years of the New York African

Film Festival” with an engaging set of 14 features and seven shorts from Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Haiti. What follows is a summary of a subset of the films to be screened.

## Documentary

In times of increasing globalization, climate change, and larger waves of inevitable immigration, the documentary genre, and all its narrative forms, has become the popular choice to voice today’s most distressing problems. Two narrative foci dominate the scene: that which addresses a city or country’s major issue(s) and the effects it has on various communities, and that which zooms in on a particular individual and the impact their decisions have on their lives.



“Land Rush” (Hugo Berkeley and Osvalde Lewat, 2012)

“**Land Rush**” (2012, Mali/U.S.A) by Hugo Berkeley and Osvalde Lewat, screening April 4 and 6, is an investigative documentary that lays out the clashing issues behind the pre-development phase of a host of foreign investors intent on implementing their Western-European agricultural business model on Malian soil. Remaining indifferent, but fair, to both sides, Berkeley and Lewat present both faces of the argument by interweaving recorded real-time protests and bureaucratic discussions with interviews of relevant individuals from the farming, business, and governmental sectors. Argument 1: 75 percent of Malians currently work as farmers and use traditional farming techniques on lands that have been passed down through generations. These lands, which are the sole source of income for many families, are symbols of pride that have high spiritual value for their owners and progeny. Argument 2: As one of Africa’s poorest nations, and given the uproar over the 2008 global hunger crisis, rich land-hungry nations have begun to intervene by leasing Malian soil, with government approval, to foreign investors to bring agricultural companies to build large farming businesses. The company in question is the Markala Sugar Company (Société Sucrière de Markala (SOSUMAR)), a Louisiana State-based U.S. American consulting firm headed by the American sugar developer Mima Nedelcovych and financed by 17 members including the African Development Bank, The South Korean Export Import Bank, and the Saudi-based Islamic Corporation. Their intent is to industrialize and improve Mali’s economy by creating a massive sugar cane plantation full of modern irrigation technologies thousands of hectares wide on land that forms part of many existing villages. As the people battle the government for the

golden soil, money is lost, and poverty takes its toll, decades-old snakes slither to the forefront: Is this modern-day imperialism? If change is to occur in order to overcome the increasing fatal strike of poverty, what alternatives should a country's government consider? One Malian supporter of the farming community makes clear: "On peut pas avoir un pays stable si la major partie de la population est marginalisé." ("We can't have a stable country if most of the people are ignored.")



"Fuelling Poverty" (Ishaya Bako, 2012)

**"Fuelling Poverty"** (2012, Nigeria), screening April 6, by Ishaya Bako, is a 28-minute short that examines the recent corrupt management of fuel subsidy in Nigeria and its crushing effects on the people. Interviewing goods and produce traders as they struggle to barely make ends meet, and presenting the numerical facts (and inconsistencies) of who paid what and how much supposedly went to subsidy with animated slides, the film reveals the harsh realities of unpunished governmental fraud and insolence. Before long, a ten-day protest ensues when President Jonathan announces on January 1, 2012 a 115% increase on fuel prices from N65 to N141. In defiance of danger, Nigerians run and sing their national anthem as police and soldiers throw teargas at them. If change is to occur, the People must revolt and be heard.



"Jeans and Martò" (Claudia Palazzi and Clio Sozzani, 2011)

Switching gears and zooming in on the individual, three features examine the lives of three individuals from various sectors of society and the issues that influence their perspectives. "**Jeans and Martò**" (2011, Ethiopia/Italy), screening April 5 and 8, by Claudia Palazzi and Clio Sozzani, follows 23-year-old Ethiopian pastoralist Roba Bulga Jilo as he leaves his village and Karrayu clan to the city in the hope of obtaining an urban education. As he successfully works his way up the educational ladder from high school to college graduate, Roba finds himself in search of a new identity aiming to reconcile the village traditions he left behind with the modern ways he has chosen to follow. In a very simple yet poignant scene, we watch as Roba walks from the bustling city back to his bucolic village and swiftly removes his jeans and puts on his martò, or his community's traditional clothing, before heading home. As Roba balances an eye-opening conference trip to Italy with the unexpected death of his older brother in an ethnic conflict back at home, the juxtaposition of his dual realities becomes more and more complex. We are reminded that for some, a better and brighter future means the constant struggle between the old and the new.



"Burn It up Djassa" (Lonesome Solo, 2012)

Although not a documentary by traditional definitions, Lonesome Solo's "**Burn It up Djassa**" ("Le djassa a pris feu") (2012, Ivory Coast), screening April 6, is an interesting vérité-style story that may very well pass as non-fiction for its use of nouchi, or Abidjan youth argot, and downright grittiness. In the slums of the Wassakara neighborhood of Abidjan, a storyteller recounts the events leading up to the fateful demise of Tony, the film's protagonist. Scenes of Tony's actions are played out and we are introduced to a set of characters who become intrinsically linked to the story's climactic finale. Before you can even start pointing fingers at the one at fault, gambling, desperation, secrets, and lies take over the lives of Tony, his sister Ange—who works as an assistant hairdresser by day and a prostitute by night, and his older policeman brother Mike, in one bullet shot that will leave you gasping for air.



"Dolce vita africana" (Cosima Spender, 2008)

In a more literally bulb-flashing, glamorous nod to Africa's creative elite, "**Dolce vita africana**" (2008, Mali), screening April 4 and 9, by Cosima Spender, fashions a wonderfully rhythmic narrative around internationally renowned Malian photographer Malick Sidibe. In a film that is more about the social milieu that inspired his work than his actual photographic technique in the darkroom, the camera follows Sidibe and his old-time friends from his tiny studio in and around Bamako, Mali, as they fondly remember the modest and carefree times from the late '50s until the early '70s when they were fresh with enthusiasm about their country's freedom from colonialism. As they recount their nights at their favorite dance clubs—the still existing Moscow, Tahiti, and Tropicana—and look through scores of photographs, Sidibe's iconic black and white images swish on the screen, the dancers almost alive with the infectious pulsating beats of the accompanying soundtrack. "La photo c'est la jeunesse" ("Photography is youth"), Sidibe remarks with nostalgia. This film is a tangible historical memory of Mali's older generations when their beautiful gleaming muscular bodies splashed unrestrained in the clean waters of now-polluted Sotuba Beach.

### **Drama**

Comedic, poetic, reflective. The narrative features that take center stage in highlighting the daily struggles of ordinary citizens are as infectious as their documentary counterparts.



"TGV" (Moussa Touré, 1997)

A classic-in-the-making, "**TGV**," by Moussa Touré (1997, France/Senegal/Germany), closing the festival with its screening on April 9, is a fun ride on Rambo and his assistant Dembo's rickety express bus through the treacherous terrain from Dakar, Senegal, to Conakry, Guinea. Although simpler and more realistic than Luis Buñuel's 1953 surrealist meat-filled trolley car ride in "Illusion Travels by Streetcar," "TGV" introduces us to a myriad of characters, along with the newly dismissed minister and his wife, who surprisingly get along pretty well until they agree to pick up two white French academics doing fieldwork research along the way. Racial and cultural differences spring up as they near the Guinean border where the Bassari have instigated a violent revolt.



"Nairobi Half Life" (David Tosh Gitonga, 2012)

Engaging for its high-speed, constantly moving narrative and slow but taught development of its main character, Mwas (played by Joseph Wairimu to fabulous effect), David Tosh Gitonga's "**Nairobi Half Life**" (2012, Kenya), screening April 4 and 7, is a searing look at gang culture in Nairobi, Kenya. Naive to the jungle that Kenya is, Mwas heads to the city from his native village with hopes of making it big as an actor. Upon his arrival, Mwas is robbed, mistakenly arrested, and sent to an excrement-filled prison. To survive, and with nowhere to live while he auditions for a part in a play at the city's theater hall, he befriends a smalltime crook and enters the raw criminal underworld of petty thefts, effortless killings, and police bribery. As Mwas quickly turns into a savvy haggler with his acting skills and fuels emotional gravitas into his part at the local theater, Gitonga weaves a wonderfully poetic visual story of reality and fiction and their inevitable influences on each other.





"Life on Earth" (Abderrahmane Sissako, 1998)

Slower-paced and lushly reflective dramas reminiscent of Tarkovsky and Antonioni from Mauritanian award-winning film director and producer Abderrahmane Sissako, are the 37-minute short "**October**" (1992, Mauritania) and "**Life on Earth**" ("La vie sur terre") (1998, Mali/Mauritania), both screening April 6 and 8. Shot in 35mm black and white film, "October" is a carefully constructed meditation with minimal dialogue on the emotional toll the woman suffers from having an affair. Shot in 35mm color film, "Life on Earth" is a quiet, sunset-drenched meditation on one man's return from France to his father's village in Sokolo, Mali. As his bicycles through the rural land, he meets a young girl named Nana...



"Stones in the Sun" (Patricia Benoit, 2012)

Different from the films presented in the series only because of its geographic location, "**Stones in the Sun**" (2012, Haiti), screening April 5 and 7, by Patricia Benoit, transports us to New York City in the '80s and offers us a glance into the immigrant's experience. As the lives of three Haitian refugees intersect, the usual themes of past and present shine through the warm-toned, mostly silent shots that permeate the film: flashbacks of torturous days in Haiti, blatant racial discrimination from fellow neighbors and workers, dreams of returning home, linguistic barriers between the protagonist bi-racial couple, and bilingual English-French interactions among refugees and their U.S.-born children. Unfortunately, the emotional struggles characterized in the film are painful to watch only by virtue of their vivacious reality in our present lives. The characters fail to breathe honest life into them.

## Fables



"A History of Independence" (Daouda Coulibaly, 2009)

Short and sweet stories with a stinging moral are always a treat. Shot in black and white and inspired by a parable from the Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ, "**A History of Independence**" ("Il était une fois l'indépendance") (2009, Senegal/Mali), screening with "Dolce Vita Africana" April 4 and 9, by Daouda Coulibaly, is an 18-minute short that narrates the punishment of the man and woman who desire to own and be, respectively, the woman of unequalled beauty. A puppet is used to represent the angel from God who appears at a newlyweds' cave-home to grant the husband three wishes for his unparalleled devotion to God. As the husband's wife transforms into a gorgeous woman, she runs off into the city to "share" her beauty with others. In a sudden moment of realization, which occurs off-screen, the woman realizes she has become a monster and the husband uses his last wish to transform her back into her former self. The narrator wisely says with biting criticism, "We have all made mistakes. Independence has not brought us everything we expected. But as the proverb goes: If you can stand the smoke you will enjoy the heat of the fire."

Equally simple but impactful, Selalem Woldemariam Ezare's 14-minute short "**Lezare**" (2010, Ethiopia), screening with "Jeans and Martò" April 5 and 8, is an ingenious story shot in vibrant saturated colors. Based on a fable by Ethiopian writer Bewketu Seyoum, the film uses dazzling camera movements to follow a homeless child on his daily trek through his village in search of money to buy a piece of bread. Eventually obtaining a single coin, he joyfully joins the villagers in their communal tree-planting event. But he buries his coin along with the roots of his tree. In a swirl of running and panting to the bakery and back to the field empty-handed, the boy uproots every tree in search of his coin. While a host of moral lessons can be drawn from this film, the one that struck me as most important, applicable to all of the films in this festival, and following in Diop's steps, is: If change for the better will occur, all must stand courageously to eliminate poverty because poverty only fuels desperation, which only fuels destruction.