

Story within a story: Vues d’Afrique in the time of COVID-19

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Le Festival international de cinéma Vues d’Afrique is North America’s largest and longest-running African film festival. Established in Montreal in 1984, it has been held annually ever since. Its 36th edition was set to open on 17 April and run until 26 April, when, just a few weeks before the opening, festival organisers had to quickly decide whether or not to postpone, cancel, or find an alternative exhibition solution.



Fig. 1: Screen grab from TV5unis.ca, courtesy of Vues d’Afrique.

Originally created to introduce African and Creole cinema and culture to Quebec and Canada, and to forge links with other African cinema festivals around the world such as the Pan-African Film Festival of Ougadougou and the Carthage Film Festival, the organisers have sought, over the years, to expand offerings for spectators beyond conventional categories of film production and exhibition to include exhibitions of African and African diasporic

art in galleries across Montreal through its annual Rallye-Expos contest. This fun competition involves obtaining a 'passport' from any of the exhibition venues, or the Vues d'Afrique headquarters, and having it stamped at each venue after viewing an exhibit. Those who have gained the requisite number of stamps can enter a draw for a prize, which is often very rich: a \$3,000 travel voucher, or tickets to Morocco, etc. Unfortunately, the contest is really geared to those living in or around Montreal, who can visit the exhibitions during the spring months. Throughout the year the festival hosts moonlight screenings of African films during the summer in Montreal's Parc Lafontaine and educational activities for youth during the school year. Its documentation centre serves as an excellent archival resource for scholars year-round.

An important aspect of the Vues d'Afrique mandate is to provide a meeting place and space of celebration and dialogue between diverse Québécois cultures, which increasingly constitute communities of African and Creole descent. In the past, most of the programming (including festival symposia) was mainly offered in French, but over the years organisers have increasingly made efforts to reach out to Montreal's Anglophone populations through programming such as 'Nollywoodweek Paris' (presented by Serge Noukoué, who directs the Nollywood Film Week in Paris) during the 2016 edition. In 2005 the Fabienne Colas Foundation created the Montreal Haitian Film Festival, whose first edition screened three films over three days. In 2010 the festival transitioned to Montreal International Black Film Festival, with a renewed goal to bring new Black films to Montreal audiences and promote independent Black filmmakers and Black voices and realities from around the globe while creating a space for debate. MIBFF now claims to be the largest Black film festival in Canada due to its bilingualism (French and English), a claim that Vues d'Afrique cannot make. Although both festivals open up spaces for dialogue, their organisers engage in what Lindiwe Dovey terms 'curatorial strategizing' to build audiences.[1] Anchoring its festival within the designation 'Africa', Vues d'Afrique promotes geographic identity construction, while the Montreal International Black Film Festival choice of the term 'Black' promotes racial identity and regional (Montreal) identity-building.[2]

In March 2020, as the Vues d'Afrique festival catalogue was set to go to press, organisers were forced to decide how to proceed with the 36th edition. While many festivals planned for April 2020 were forced to cancel this year's edition, Vues d'Afrique decided otherwise. At the virtual press conference held on 6 April, organisers announced that they would offer all programming online for free across Canada thanks to the festival's partnership with TV5

Quebec-Canada, a subsidiary of TV5 Monde. The films would be online for a period of 48 hours on the tv5unis.ca platform; after 48 hours there would be a new grid. All this was scheduled for ten days, the initial duration of the festival planned in theaters.

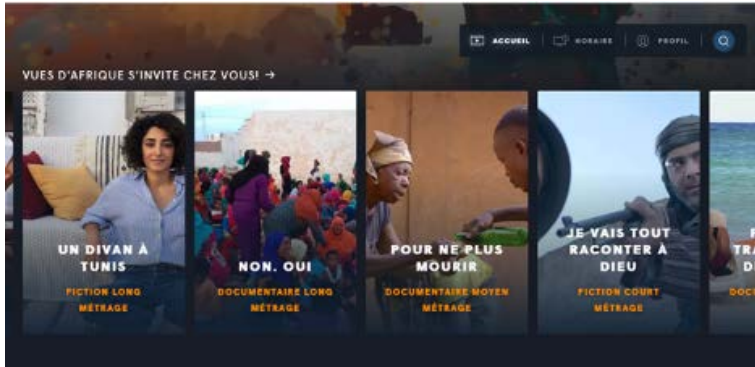


Fig. 2: Screen grab from TV5unis.ca, courtesy of Vues d'Afrique.

Despite the Herculean effort made to mount a festival edition as close to what was originally planned as possible, organisers were forced to make some compromises. For example, 1,600 films were submitted and 64 fiction films and documentaries were chosen, but only 37 could be screened in the online version (which explains why there are entries in the catalogue that were not presented online). According to festival president Gérard Le Chêne, the filmmakers were all willing to have their films screened online, but many distributors were less willing, worried that this would compromise future sales. According to Le Chêne, the eight films that were chosen for the virtual reality section, including the Rwandan, *Kigali's First Women Moto Taxi Drivers*, had to be dropped, as online viewing could not accommodate headsets and the physical space required for this type of immersive experience.[3]

Given the strong festival attendance numbers of 2019 where 10,000 box office tickets were sold and 5,000 viewers participated in online events, a major concern was how to keep this year's audiences engaged online throughout the festival's ten days. One option was to establish, for the first time, a Prix du Public, where festival-goers could vote for their favorite films. Another strategy was to offer master classes on the festival's Facebook page to connect local and African media professionals. These strategies worked, because the 2020 numbers were 72,000 (65,000 on the TV5 platform for the films and 7,000 on Vues d'Afrique's Facebook page for events).[4] I joined the master

class on 22 April featuring Congolese director and producer Tshoper Kabambi. It was fascinating to participate in this session that drew 52 participants during the live broadcast, but which has attracted 1,200 viewers on Vue d’Afrique Facebook page since the festival.[5] Kabambi himself was participating from Utah in the United States, where he had been promoting his latest film, *Heart of Africa*, when COVID-19 caused lockdowns and border closures. Although the session topic was about the challenges of creation and the independence of African cinema, there was much discussion about distribution and exhibition of African films and Kabambi’s dream of creating a local Congolese Netflix. It was interesting to see how Kabambi echoed Gérard Le Chêne’s assertion that, going forward, festivals will need to embrace a ‘mixed formula’ of on-site and online exhibition in order to succeed.[6] The magic of the cinema theater is undeniable, Kabambi argued, but we cannot neglect all the internet opportunities for exhibition, because every filmmaker always thinks of every type of audience

Indeed, audience reception and viewership is always an issue for festival organisers at the best of times, but in the context of COVID-19, spaces of exhibition and audience connections were created in other ways. The festival programming was available to all Canadians free of charge, but not accessible to festivalgoers, filmmakers, and industry professionals who normally flew in from the African continent and elsewhere. The push-pull of confinement and global flows allowed for audience connections to be forged in new, unthought-of ways, almost reminiscent of Hamid Naficy’s notion of ‘boundlessness and timelessness’.[7] For me, this festival experience created a form of ‘mise-en-abime’ whereby a story is inserted within a story, with each functioning in relation to the other. This is akin to what Nigel Reading describes as the ‘fusion format’ of exhibition and display of art works, whereby multiple connections of similarities and distinctions function, as in a conversation promoting trans-regionalism and transnationalism.[8] I shared the festival links with colleagues and friends across Canada and created a small ‘discussion group’ bubble of friends as we ‘travelled’ through the offerings, making sure not to miss key titles that were only available in their 48 hour time slots. Curation of order in which titles were made available required careful planning, since although we were all confined to our homes, we were juggling work and family responsibilities. I managed to see every film screened in the festival – something I have never achieved during all the years I have attended the festival in person.

The bubble of friends – a regular festival visitor, two incidental visitors, and a first-timer – located across Canada, shared their stories of their viewing experience within the larger festival experience. I had originally planned to meet up with my Waterloo, Ontario-based friend Marie-Paule Macdonald in Montreal. We often meet at the festival, screen films, and then walk around Montreal discussing the films, current Montreal art exhibits, and Montreal architecture all at the same time, underscoring Reading's notion of 'fusion format'. Marie-Paule admitted that she probably watched more than what she would see at a 'regular' festival edition. She was impressed with many of the short films, such as *Famara* by Yoro Mbaye, (France), presenting the precarious days of a bicycle courier in Paris; a film about artists and artist collectives *Il faut créer* by Natacha Diafferi Dombre (Haïti); and a documentary, *La Inna Gobir* by Ado Abdou (Niger), revealing a royal occult tradition of powerful, dominant women in Niger.

It was interesting that we all used emails to guide our discussions of the films, rather than instant messaging or Facebook. My partner Vaughn (who would also have attended the festival in Montreal with me) watched almost all the films. But interestingly, we watched titles (usually not at the same time) on different laptops, in different rooms in the house, texting our impressions to each other and then discussing films over meals. In Victoria, British Columbia, Sada Niang shared that the online festival gave an opportunity to watch, rewind, and watch again. It offered the opportunity to have a close look at the images, notice the cinematography, linger on the colours, and listen to sound scores again and again. It also offers a greater flexibility in the viewing of films. It allowed me to look for reviews before watching and decide on the order in which to watch. I was able to think and critique the selection of films at my own pace, with real evidence, not impressions. I think one of the big plusses of online festivals is the opportunity for greater engagement, but of course one loses the discussion with other viewers at the end of screenings at in-person festivals.

For Abdoulaye Yoh in Regina, Saskatchewan, watching films during COVID-19 was special.

For the teleworker like me, you don't have to come home and watch a movie. The film is there in front of us, at hand, the mind wanders between two tasks, or two Zoom sessions. Africa inhabited me throughout the festival. In other words, it was Africa at home, in my home. In view of the fact that I will not be able to travel back to Africa this summer because of the pandemic and closed borders, the festival has been my balm to the heart.

Also in Regina, photojournalist Esperanza Sanchez Espitia disclosed her preference for political documentaries such as *Congo Lucha*, which depicts youth activists in the Democratic Republic of the Congo fighting for the peaceful overthrow of President Kabila, and *Qu'ils partent tous* in which Algerian youth fight for a new Algeria 2.0, free of President Bouteflika and the old guard. In Espitia's words: 'These are two productions that have elevated pacifism to its highest level leaving the audience hoping for a free and democratic Africa.'

The online platform allowed a discussion within our 'bubble' of the film *Tilo Koto, Sous le Soleil*, by Sophie Bachelier & Valérie Malek, as a fascinating example of *mise-en-abîme*, or film within a film.[9] Sada asked if we had noticed the number of African films on death lately. The feature documentary focuses on Yancouba Badji, a young man from the Casamance region of Senegal, who tried four times to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe only to end up back in Tunisia in a camp for vulnerable migrants, the Centre Al Hamdi in Médenine. It is here that the film begins with Yancouba explaining to the camera/audience that 'there are too many lies along the route'. The film is a study of the risks desperate migrants take to seek what they believe will be a better life in Europe. Many of the film's sequences begin in tight close-ups of Yancouba, lending a claustrophobic feel to the discourse. The images open up to medium shots to include two of his fellow travellers as they smoke, cook, and eat together, discussing their traumatic experiences. This visual and narrative structure invites the audience into the conversation as the experience of one migrant becomes that of many. The film is punctuated by haunting melodies such as, 'the clandestine route is dangerous ... don't take it', and shots of paintings of the migrants' perilous experiences by Yancouba that frame walls and doorways. These act as a creative chronicle of the migration experience, the adventure and the difficulties – the human right to travel freely – 'as Africans we want the same rights as everyone else', explains Yancouba. As he describes how he decided to return to Casamance, the images dissolve into medium long shots of him presenting a film to his village, shot by his migrant comrades, explaining to the mostly youthful audience the violence and exploitation endured by African migrants. The film within the film opens up a reflexive space where the extra-diegetic audience watches the film being watched by the intra-diegetic village audience. In the end there are no real solutions: Yancouba's mother declares at the end of the film that 'if we could make a living here, people wouldn't think of crossing the sea ... staying together here in poverty is better than dying somewhere else'.



Fig. 3: Tilo Koto, *Sous le Soleil*, courtesy of Vues d'Afrique.

The final message is about connecting and communicating in both good and difficult times. If online festivals represent a way of reimagining and reinventing exhibition modes, they also offer innovative ways for audiences to connect in the difficult times of COVID. Vues d'Afrique rose to the challenge and will serve as an inspiration to other film and cultural events.

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Notes

[1] Dovey 2015, p. 118.

[2] Ibid, p. 119.

[3] Le Chêne quoted in Forster 2020.

[4] Email exchange with Gérard Le Chêne, P.D.G. International, Vues d'Afrique, 29 August 2020.

[5] Email exchange with Dédy Bilamba, Conseiller au développement, Vues d'Afrique, 28 August 2020. The class with Tshoper Kabambi can be accessed at: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=2311707368932247&ref=watch_permalink

[6] Le Chêne quoted in Forster 2020.

[7] Naficy 2001, p. 5.

[8] Reading quoted in Allen 2012, p. 5.

[9] Interestingly, MIBFF is also screening this film in their upcoming 2020 online edition (23 September – 4 October), while claiming they are presenting the Canadian premiere.