



IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC

# Yeelen (Brightness)

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

It was, if memory serves, the young and impertinently iconoclastic journalist François Truffaut who walked out of the Cannes festival screening of *Pather Panchali* with the airily blunt comment that ‘I don’t want to see a film about Indian peasants.’ The slight was, of course, reprehensibly racist and patronising (its arrogance slightly extenuated, however, by the fact that Satyajit Ray was an unknown quantity in 1956). And yet... It is surely one of the functions of the critic to, if one may say, cut through the crap, the ‘crap’ in this instance being the idea that European or American cinephiles, when once installed inside an auditorium, become non-racist almost by definition and are as deliriously pleased to be watching a film about the oppression of an Egyptian farming community, say, as one about the machinations of a Wall Street arbitrageur or the framing of a cartoon bunny wabbit. As we all know, even if no one dares to admit it, this is simply not true. Most of us, in fact, are still, like Truffaut in the 1950s, not tremendously keen on films about Indian (or African or Chinese or Latin American) peasants. What, then, makes it so pleasurable to report on Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen* is not merely that it is a masterpiece, the most beautiful film ever to have emerged out of Africa, but also that it happens to be the very first in the history of that continent’s cinema for which absolutely no allowance, of whichever order, needs be made.

The Bambara word ‘yeelen’ has been translated as ‘brightness’ or ‘light’; and the film’s narrative (whose mythico-tragic, crypto-Oedipal resonances can claim an unexpected kinship with those of certain Hollywood mega-hits of recent years) is concerned not with an elemental conflict between the forces of light and darkness but with two violently opposed and irreconcilable incarnations of the former. We are, here, in *lightest* Africa.

A young tribesman (with the deep, limpid eyes, slender figure and long, long legs of the Bambara people in what is now Mali) has reached the age when he may be entrusted with the shamanic lore of his ancestors. His aged mother having forewarned him of the perils he will encounter this black Parsifal sets forth on an initiatory peregrination, in the course of which he will naturally be tested by the ordeals and humiliations traditional to quest fictions. Empowered, for instance, with the necromantic properties invested in an ornately carved and sceptred wooden panel, named the Wing of Kore, he delivers his own people’s immemorial enemies, the Peuls, from a raiding party; later, though, commissioned by the Peul chieftain to cure his wife’s barrenness, he sleeps with her and is compelled to confess his misdeed: ‘My penis betrayed me,’ he penitently owns up with hung head and charming candour. Finally – and this, too, is a convention of such fictions – his journey’s end is revealed to coincide with its point of departure: if he was exiled from his mother’s home, it was that he might escape the wrath of his father, who has refused to acknowledge him as his equal. In an extraordinary climactic scene the two generations confront each other in a mortal combat of light against light that is not a million light years distant (or is, perhaps, a million light years

distant) from the duel of laser beams fought by Luke Skywalker and *his* father Darth Vader.

Should that make *Yeelen* sound all too like some folksy tribal romance complete with spells, bewitchments, amulets, fetishes and burning bushes, it should be said that no precis can do justice to the film's astonishing virtuosity and sophistication – in a word, its artifice. Artifice of texture (the colour cinematography, in startling contrast to the raw granularity familiar from certain miserabilist Third World films and which paradoxically obscures the very images it has generated), conjures up the Malian landscape through a rich and sensual palette of yellows, greens and scorched-earth ochres; of imagery (one recalls, among others, a shot of the hero's mother standing knee-deep in spongy marshland, silhouetted against a mauve sunset and ritualistically baptising herself in milk); and of effect (the special effects – a weirdly backwards-trotting dog, an occult pestle, the Kolonnkalani, which zeroes in on its targets like an Exocet missile – are not, by western standards, 'good' but they are truly magical). Cissé's artifice, moreover, has nothing in common with that practised by a Beineix or a Besson, who endeavour to dazzle the spectator in an exclusively literal, ocular sense by fragmenting each shot into as many brilliant, eye-jazzing surfaces as it can decently compass: mirrors, blazing automobile headlamps, shiny aluminium 'design' furniture. Here, given the film's paltry budget and natural locations, the dazzle is purely one of *mise en scène*.

*Yeelen* concludes with the end and regeneration of the world – which is to say, the world as understood by the Bambarans and the Peuls. As father and son are simultaneously dissolved in the light that emanates from their respective doomsday machines, a naked infant scrabbles in the desert and uncovers two eggs, enormous and pearly white like the pupil-less eyes of some blind giant interred in the sand. And if I have already cited *Star Wars*, the film that Cissé's may most appropriately be likened to is *2001*, with its desert, its rockets, its lethal but also revivifying monolith and, ultimately, its starchild. Whatever its strictly science-fiction connotations in 1968 – when Kubrick's film was made – *2001* is currently only 13 years off; so that the 'future' of which *Yeelen* constitutes the gorgeous and breathtaking dawn may well be that of a whole new generation in African cinema.

**Gilbert Adair, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1988**

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**YEELLEN (BRIGHTNESS)**

*Director:* Souleymane Cissé

*Production Companies:* Films Cissé, Atriascop, Midas

*Assistance:* Government of Mali, Ministère de l'Information du Burkina, Direction of Cinematography Productions, Ministère Français de la Culture, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Ministère de la Coopération, Centre National de la Cinématographie, Compagnie UTA, Westdeutscher Rundfunk

*Producer:* Souleymane Cissé

*Associate Producers:* Salif Traore, Youssouf Coulibaly, Kadiatou Konaté

*Production Assistants:* Kibily Demba Diallo, Ama Djire, Alou Kante, Alou Konate, Moussa Coulibaly, Mamadou Coumare, Ladji Cissé, Samou Diarra

*Assistant Directors:* Seydou Diallo, Ibrahim Sory Koita

*Screenplay:* Souleymane Cissé

*Director of Photography:* Jean-Noël Ferragut

*Camera Operators:* Benoît Fereol, Abel Naba, Boubacar Sidibe, Mamadou Cissé

*Special Effects:* Frédéric Duru, Nicos Metelopoulos

*Editors:* Dounamba Coulibaly, Andrée Davanture, Marie-Catherine Miqueau, Jenny Frenck, Seipati N'xumalo

*Art Director:* Kossa Mody Keita

*Set Decorators:* Frédéric Duru, Mamadou Togola

*Costumes:* Kossa Mody Keita

*Music:* Michel Portal, Salif Keita

*Sound:* Daniel Ollivier, Michel Mellier

*Translators:* Balla Moussa Keïta, Youssouf Tata Cissé, Bassidiki Touré, Thérèse-Marie Deffontaines

**Cast**

Issiaka Kane (*Nianankoro*)

Aoua Sangare (*Attu*)

Niamanto Sanogo (*Soma*)

Balla Moussa Keïta (*Peul King*)

Soumba Traore (*Nianankoro's mother*)

Ismaila Sarr (*Djigui*)

Youssouf Tenin Cissé (*Attu's son*)

Koke Sangare (*Komo chief*)

Brehima Doumbia

Seyba M'baye

Djemori Traore

Sidi Diallo

Sibiri Koné

Toumani Soumaoro

Douananké Traore

Zan Zoumbia

Monzon Coumare

Souleymane Coumare

Tienan Fane

Sekou Konate

Nadje Doumbia

Mali-Burkina Faso (Upper Volta)-France-West Germany 1987  
105 mins

**Contains scenes of animal cruelty which some viewers will find distressing**

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**IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC****The Brother from Another Planet**

Fri 1 Jul 18:05; Wed 6 Jul 20:45

**Sankofa**

Sat 2 Jul 14:00 (+ intro by June Givanni, June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive); Wed 20 Jul 20:35

**Daughters of the Dust**

Sat 2 Jul 20:30; Wed 13 Jul 20:40

**Yeelen Brightness**

Sun 3 Jul 15:50; Thu 14 Jul 20:40

**Top of the Heap**

Mon 4 Jul 18:10; Sat 30 Jul 20:45

**In the Afrofuture**

Tue 5 Jul 18:20; Sun 17 Jul 16:00

**Atlantics (Atlantique)**

Thu 7 Jul 20:50; Sun 31 Jul 15:40

**Kuso**

Sat 9 Jul 20:50; Fri 22 Jul 18:10

**Touki Bouki**

Wed 13 Jul 17:50 (+ season introduction); Wed 27 Jul 20:50

**The Burial of Kojo**

Fri 15 Jul 18:30; Thu 28 Jul 20:40

**The Black Atlantic**

Mon 18 Jul 18:15 (+ Q&A); Sat 30 Jul 12:00

**Eve's Bayou**

Tue 19 Jul 20:45; Thu 28 Jul 18:00

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CENTRE**

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Runs **29 Jun to 18 Sep** at **Hayward Gallery**.