

**‘If there is no music, there will be no Mali’:
Conflict, Documentary Film, and Music as Resistance in Mali,
2012–2015**

They Will Have to Kill Us First (dir. Johanna Schwartz, 2015) and *Mali Blues* (dir. Lutz Gregor, 2016) are musical documentaries that were filmed during and after the occupation of Northern Mali by jihadists in 2012. The films feature testimonies from prominent musicians such as Songhoy Blues, Bassekou Kouyaté, Fatoumata Diawara and Kharia Arby. Both directors seek to bring international audiences into contact with a ongoing conflict which, for most of its duration (2012–present), has been chronically underreported.¹ Music, for the artists whose voices resonate through these films, embodies a mode of existence, resistance, education, and livelihood, offering hope, identity and the promise of peace during in troubled and tumultuous political times. As such, a key theme of this article is the role of cultural production in the critique of the occupation of Mali, whereby the films offer a metatextual commentary on the music and musical artists they capture. Drawing on the visual testimonies in these films and first-hand interviews I conducted with the directors, this article is the first to discuss both films and the record they offer of a particular moment in Mali’s rich musical history.² Moreover, the addition of director interviews demonstrates the potential of combining accounts of production and reception information with formal and political analysis, an underutilized methodology in film studies.³

The filmmakers diverged in their intended aims for their films; Schwartz states that she made the film primarily for Western audiences, while Gregor envisaged both a European and African audience for *Mali Blues*. However, this proved difficult due to the dangerous climate of on-going conflict in Mali, as well as the distribution challenges facing independent documentary filmmakers in the Euro-American context. Given the complex histories of white colonial exploitation through representation in Africa, it is important to consider the pitfalls, possibilities, and limitations that structure the relationship between two white Euro-American filmmakers and their Malian subjects.⁴ In so doing, this article considers ethical theory around documentary filmmaking, specifically in relation to the category of observational documentary. Ultimately, this paper argues that although the impact of these films is lessened by social and cultural conditions that impact distribution on both sides of the Mediterranean, these films serve as timely and unique cultural documents of a moment of intense resistance, hope, and despair among musicians and other communities of Mali.

¹ See Alex Whiting, ‘Under-reported conflicts seen affecting millions in 2015’, Reuters, 29 January 2015 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-war/under-reported-conflicts-seen-affecting-millions-in-2015-idUSKBN0L22C320150129>> [Accessed 12 December 2019], and ‘Mali Conflict and Aftermath: Compendium of Human Rights Watch Reporting 2012-2017’, *Human Right Watch* (2017) <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/malicompendium0217.pdf> [Accessed 12 December 2019].

² These interviews were undertaken with the assistance of the British Academy, for a project entitled ‘Radical Screens: The Making of the Terrorist’, about documentary film, affect and political extremism. I would also like to sincerely thank the directors, Lutz Gregor and Johanna Schwartz, for the generosity and time in speaking to me and sharing their insights.

³ Combining a reception study with textual analysis is a major innovation in the field of academic film studies, which tends to eschew empirical work in spite of many indications of useful outcomes; see Wolf Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies’, *History and Theory* 41.2 (2002), pp. 179–197.

⁴ On French colonial visual representation, see, among others, Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 1986) and David Henry Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919–1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

The Occupation of Northern Mali: Social and Political Contexts

In the West, Timbuktu has long been associated with the foreignness, fantasy and distance; according to the Oxford English Dictionary definition, Timbuktu 'is used as the type of the most distant place imaginable'. However, Timbuktu and the Northern Malian region was brought close to Western consumers of news media through the jihadist occupation of 2012. As one Tweet, picked up and distributed by the BBC, exclaimed, 'OMG! Just found out Timbuktu is a real place'.⁵ The exoticization of the city arose mainly from the geographical difficulties encountered by nineteenth-century European travellers accessing the site: one either has to cross the Sahara Desert coming from North Africa or Europe, or sail up the vast Niger River from the South. For this reason, Timbuktu is known as 'the place where the camel meets the canoe'.⁶ To this day, Timbuktu and the Northern Malian region are still isolated by poor infrastructure—as musician Aliou Touré from Malian band Songhoy Blues asks, 'aucune route officielle ne lie Kidal a l'Algérie'.⁷ However, as the point where North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa meet, Timbuktu might best be considered not as an exotic outpost, but rather as a crossroads at the intersection of cultures, languages, and political affiliations. Indeed, world renowned singer and instrumentalist Ali Farka Touré turns the stereotype on its head, noting that 'for some people, when you say "Timbuktu" it is like the end of the world, but that is not true. I am from Timbuktu, and I can tell you that we are right at the heart of the world'.⁸ The region is composed of many ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, most notably the ethnically Berber, nomadic Tuareg tribes of the Sahara, and the Black Songhai peoples.

The 2012 occupation of the city and the region of Northern Mali is an example of how Timbuktu stands at the centre of both local and global political events. The Malian conflict originally began as a dispute between the central Malian government, based in Bamako in the South, and the Tuareg separatist group the MNLA (Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad). The MNLA were fighting to make Northern Mali, what they call 'Azawad', a homeland for the Tuareg people—a regional schism that has existed in Mali since the first Tuareg rebellion in 1963, coming in the wake of the foundation of the state in 1960. This is not a new struggle; as Kelsey Suggitt notes, 'successive Malian governments have struggled to come to terms with competing separatist movements and claims to ethnic difference since the country achieved its independence in 1960'.⁹ The MNLA rebellion of 2012 can be situated within a longer history of colonial cartographies and power relations dating back to French colonial rule and subsequent independence. The leaders of the Tuareg insurgencies of 1963–64 and 1990–96 cited the failures of the French colonial administration, particularly their failure to create an independent Saharan region which would unite the nomadic peoples living there.¹⁰ The Tuaregs ongoing claims of ethnic

⁵ Tom G, 'Who, What, Why: Why do we know Timbuktu?', *BBC News Magazine*, 3 April 2012 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17583772>> [Accessed 15 April 2018].

⁶ Andy Morgan, *Music, Culture and Conflict in Mali* (Copenhagen: Freemuse, 2013), p. 121.

⁷ Quoted in *They Will Have to Kill Us First*, dir. Johanna Schwartz, 2015.

⁸ Quoted in Ali Farka Touré with Ry Cooder, *Talking Timbuktu*, World Circuit Records (1994). CD Insert.

⁹ Kelsey Suggitt, 'Impossible endings? Reimagining the end of the French empire in the Sahara, 1951–1962', PhD thesis: University of Portsmouth, 2018, p. 11.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/417b/f05a6a576509dff70fe645d5cae139061d89.pdf> [Accessed 28 September 2020].

¹⁰ One organisation which might have offered such unification was the the Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes (OCRS), an economic grouping created by the French colonial administration in 1957 and subsequently abandoned. Scholars and regional specialists have diverse views on the historical potential of the OCRS, and the potential utility of an organisation like it in the present. For more on this, see Pierre Boilley, 'L'Organisation commune des régions sahariennes (OCRS): une tentative avortée', in *Nomades et commandants: Administration et sociétés nomades dans l'ancienne AOF*, ed. by Edmond Bernus, Pierre

difference and the desire for political independence has hindered integration in Mali, alongside the corruption of central government in Bamako, perceived by Tuaregs and Black Malians alike.¹¹

Returning to the conflict of 2012, on 22 March, President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted in a coup d'état and in the ensuing chaos, the MNLA, with the help of Malian jihadist group Ansar al-Dine, took over Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal and part of Mopti. Ansar al-Dine was founded by former Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghali and most of Ansar al-Dine's fighters are former Tuaregs from Ifoghas tribe and Berabiche Arabs. The fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya also precipitated conflict in the region, with the return of many rebel Tuaregs to the north of Mali (including one of the musicians featured in *Mali Blues*). In March and April of 2012, following the expulsion of the Malian army from the region, Ansar al-Dine, in conjunction with other non-Malian jihadist groups like Al-Qaïda au Maghreb Islamique (AQMI) and Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), imposed Sharia Law in the region and desecrated some of Timbuktu's unique architectural and literary heritage.¹² The MNLA, often described as a secular group and composed of many moderate Islamic Tuaregs, parted company with the jihadists that the Battle of Gao on 26–28 June 2012.¹³ French troops arrived to great local fanfare and mass support in January 2013 and began the process of expelling jihadists from the area. Therefore, within this complex and changing set of affiliations and rivalries, local historical conflicts between the nomadic Tuareg and the Songhai people of the north played out alongside globally significant events: Salafism, jihad, terrorism, competing internal nationalisms, state fragmentation and corruption, and climate change.

Art in a Time of Terror: Filming the Occupation

The events in Mali attracted the attention of a number of filmmakers: Abderrahmane Sissako, François Margolin and Lemine Ould Salem, Lutz Gregor, and Johanna Schwartz.¹⁴ Perhaps the most well-known film to arise from the Malian occupation is Sissako's *Timbuktu* (2014), a fiction film set in Timbuktu during the years of the occupation, nominated for a Foreign Language Oscar in 2015. *Timbuktu* captures the daily life of the city's inhabitants under the strictures of Islamist rule and many of the events it depicts are based on factual accounts: the lashings received for playing music, the stoning of an unmarried couple in the small northern Malian village of Aguelhok. The story of the couple, killed for having children out of wedlock, affected Sissako greatly, 'surtout par le fait que cette information n'a pas du tout occupé l'actualité. C'était juste un petit entrefilet dans la presse'.¹⁵ According to the directors of another film about the occupation, Margolin and Ould Salem, this short press item was written by Ould Salem, a Mauritanian journalist. Margolin and Ould Salem also claim that Sissako saw their rushes for *Salafistes* and was

Boilley, Jean Clauzel, & Jean-Louis Triaud (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1993), pp. 215–239 and Suggitt, *Impossible Endings?*, pp. 10–24.

¹¹ See Michael Bratton, Massa Coulibaly and Fabiana Machado, 'Popular Views of the Legitimacy of the State in Mali', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 36.2 (2002): pp. 197–238.

¹² An ancient site of Islamic learning that reached its zenith in the fifteenth century, Timbuktu is home to approximately 700,000 manuscripts, mostly held in private libraries.

¹³ Hussein Solomon, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Africa: Fighting Insurgency from Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 67.

¹⁴ Wim Wenders and Michael Meredith were also set to release a film about Mali in 2014, which thus far has not been released. See Wender's website: <<http://www.wim-wenders.com/return-to-timbuktu-a-documentary-by-michael-meredith/>> [Accessed 12 January 2020].

¹⁵ Siegfried Forster, 'Salafistes' et 'Timbuktu', enquête sur une querelle d'images', *RFI Afrique*, 3 February 2016 <<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20160203-salafistes-timbuktu-abderrahmane-sissako-margolin-lemine-ould-salem-cinema>> [Accessed 28 September 2020].

provided with a DVD copy, accusing Sissako of plagiarizing their images: '[Sissako] a copié beaucoup de plans qui étaient dans les images que nous avions!'¹⁶ Nonetheless, *Salafistes* is a very different film to *Timbuktu*; a deliberately provocative and shocking work that integrates images of extreme violence, it mixes interviews with jihadis from groups like Ansar al-Dine, AQMI and ISIS members in Tunisia with jihadi propaganda videos, mostly from the so-called Islamic State. While there are a few short scenes that depict civilians, most of the film is taken up with lengthy and sometimes exhaustive interviews with extremists. The violence of *Salafistes* led to its short term banning in France in January 2015, followed by a lifting of the ban and an extremely limited, short-term release in cinemas in March of that year.

During the occupation, the jihadists leveled a number of prohibitions against the population against smoking, drinking alcohol, playing football, women's dress in public, and, most controversially, music. Both *Timbuktu* and *Salafistes* refer to the musical tradition in Mali. In *Salafistes*, music is referenced principally through the soundtrack that accompanies the 'Police Islamique' as they tour the streets of Gao. However, although the soundtrack features Tuareg guitar, there is little narrative exposition of the importance of Malian culture and tradition, musical or otherwise. In *Timbuktu*, the central character Kidane is a musician, and renowned Malian musician Fatoumata Diawara (a principal character in *Mali Blues*) plays the role of a young Timbuktuian woman who is caught singing in private and subjected to forty lashes in the public square. This scene is one of the emotional climaxes of the film: as the whipping continues, Diawara begins to sing, and in this way, Sissako captures a moment of personal resistance to the dictates of the jihadists [Figure 1]. Thus, he hints at the inevitability of their eventual defeat, for punishment for singing can only be salvaged with the balm of song itself. As Sissako notes, 'This is forbidding something you can't forbid. If you forbid someone to sing, he's going to sing in his head'.¹⁷

While *Timbuktu* and *Salafistes* showcase Malian music, with Sissako highlighting its social and spiritual significance, Schwartz's *They Will Have to Kill Us First* and Gregor's *Mali Blues* focus almost exclusively on the impact that the jihadist ban on music has on the country's internationally renowned musicians. Mali has a long tradition of musical excellence and innovation, dating back to the thirteenth century. 'Desert blues', griot, mande, Tuareg guitar, wassalou, Afro-pop and rap are some of the musical genres and styles currently present in Mali's ethnically and linguistically diverse musical scene. Although Mali is one of four countries in West Africa with the lowest rates of literacy in the world, the country has produced more popular artists on the world music scene than any other African nation. Grammy award winning Malian artists include Ali Farka Touré, Toumani Diabaté, Amadou and Mariam, and Bassekou Kouyaté while artists like Songhoy Blues and Fatoumata Diawara, working with Damon Albarn's 'Africa Express' project, have gained international renown and frequently tour Europe and North America.

The ban on music was officially implemented by MUJAO on the 22nd August 2012 in the city of Gao, although music had been effectively prohibited in the north for several months already.¹⁸ The following announcement was made by a MUJAO spokesperson, Osama Ould Abdel Kader: 'We, the mujahedeen of Gao, of Timbuktu and Kidal, henceforward forbid the broadcasting of any Western music on all radios in this Islamic

¹⁶ Maria Flood, 'Critics and controversy: the reception of *Salafistes* (2016) in France, followed by an interview with co-director François Margolin', *Studies in French Cinema*, 18.2 (2019): pp. 233–245, p. 242.

¹⁷ Sissako quoted in John Anderson, 'The Enemy as Hapless Clown', *The New York Times*, 23 January 2015 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/movies/abderrahmane-sissako-on-the-jihadists-in-timbuktu.html>> [Accessed 28 September 2020].

¹⁸ The ban officially ended in January 2013 when the extremist groups ceded power, but music still has not returned fully to Northern Mali due to fears that extremist groups may be covertly monitoring the situation.

territory...we do not want Satan's music'.¹⁹ Andy Martin notes that the ban was 'disingenuous': although the ban only mentions 'Western' music, 'it did in fact mean most forms of music: modern, traditional, electrified, acoustic, foreign and local'.²⁰ Other prohibitions, such as football, smoking, and restrictions on women's circulation and dress had not been received positively, but the ban on music certainly elicited some forceful reactions from the country's musicians and cultural leaders. For example, director Cheick Oumar Sissoko argues that 'music is memory. Music is tradition. There isn't a single tradition in our country that isn't magnified by music'. Manny Ansar, director of the 'Festival in the Desert', argues that the prohibition on music serves to highlight the ideological gap between the jihadists and the Malian population: 'that declaration [banning music] tells me that we're dealing with people who don't know what they're doing, who aren't serious and who won't win [...] They don't understand the culture that they're operating in'. Kouyaté ties the practice and performance of music to the essence of the country as a whole, stating 'if there is no music, there will be no Mali. Mali is known through its music. It is a cradle for music'.²¹

'Music is Universal': *They Will Have to Kill Us First*

The words of another musician, the Tuareg artist Fadimata Walet Oumar (known as 'Disco'), lend themselves to the title of Schwartz's film, the first of two musical documentaries to be analysed in this section. Oumar links music to life itself: 'If you kill me, I won't be able to play anymore. But as long as I'm alive, I will do it. *They will have to kill us first*'. The film, with its thought-provoking title, was first conceived by Schwartz as she sat on a bus in London: the story of the ban on music appeared on her social media feed and she mentions having felt gripped and distressed by the notion that something as quintessentially Malian, and essentially human, could be banned. This became what she calls the 'hook' for the film, what might be described by documentary theorist Bill Nichols's as the 'plausible proposal' of a particular documentary, its pathway of viewer access to a 'way of seeing the historical world'.²² Schwartz decided to tell the story of the Malian occupation through the ban on music to reach the widest possible audience for the film; 'everyone understands the concept of something that you love being taken away from you. Music is unbelievably universal'.²³

Schwartz adopts a range of narrative strategies to give the viewer a sense of the stakes of the situation in Mali. Thus, if we draw on Bill Nichols's six modes of documentary filmmaking, *They Will Have to Kill Us First* spans three categories. In the *poetic* mode, which Nichols defines as emphasizing 'visual association, tonal or rhythmic qualities [...] and formal organization'.²⁴ We see that Schwartz uses post-production digital effects such as colour filters, oversaturation, and the soundtrack to tell the story of the conflict alongside the main narrative. A postmodern, 'music-video' aesthetic in the opening scene is designed to grasp the viewers' attention while also succinctly outlining the key players in the conflict.

¹⁹ Morgan, *Music, Culture and Conflict*, p. 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ Sissoko, Ansar and Kouyaté are quoted in Morgan, *Music, Culture and Conflict*, p. 92, p. 90, and p. 99 respectively.

²² Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010 [2001]), p. 14.

²³ All quotations from Schwartz and Gregor are taken from the interviews I conducted with them. Full transcripts can be found on the Keele University Film blog; *They Will Have to Kill Us First* <<https://filmstudieskeele.wordpress.com/2020/03/06/they-will-have-to-kill-us-first-2015/>> and *Mali Blues* <<https://filmstudieskeele.wordpress.com/2020/03/06/interview-mali-blues/>>.

²⁴ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p.31.

The film opens with the sound of a heavy, resolute rap beat, and an image of Amkoullé, a Malian rapper, framed within a 1950s style black and white analogue television set.

[Figure 2].

The overall effect is to give an immediacy and intensity that is ‘Instagram-style’, faux nostalgic (analogue TV, imperfect, sepia-tinted framings) and resolutely ‘modern’. Colour coding, created using filters, distinguishes between the musicians, who are overlaid in cool blues and purples, and the combatants, shot in harsh yellows and oranges. The pivotal role that music plays in the film extends to the ‘formal organisation’ of the soundtrack itself which uses rhythm and repeat refrains to tell the film’s story. Schwartz states that she wanted it to be an artistic experience and a standalone account of the conflict. Therefore, the history of the conflict is chronologically narrated in the lyrics of songs that were specially commissioned for the film, alongside twenty-two musical cues by Malian artists which were developed into full songs by Nick Zinner (guitarist of the U.S.-American rock band Yeah Yeah Yeahs). As Schwartz notes in our interview, she believed that ‘putting the narration into the hands of the musicians added another layer of authenticity’.²⁵ Thus, the film combines live performances from the four musicians or musical groups at the heart of the narrative, with a specifically constructed track. It also includes spontaneous renditions, and the closing scene, which runs to full length over the credits, shows Tuareg guitarist Moussa Sidi performing, ‘Ayama Yama Yama’, a song written by Hassan Ag Touhami, by a campfire.

They Will Have to Kill Us First is also a documentary in the *observational* mode: a film that ‘emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera’.²⁶ There are four musicians or musical groups that the film ‘observes’: the desert rock group Songhoy Blues, the ‘Nightingale of Timbuktu’ Kharia Arby, Disco, whose husband Jimmy is a former Malian army general and current MNLA leader, and Moussa Sidi, a jobbing Tuareg guitarist and Jimmy’s nephew. Each of the characters offers a different perspective on the conflict, but they are all united by a shared experience of exile. At the time of filming, Arby, Songhoy Blues and Sidi are all living in the capital Bamako, which saw a massive influx of refugees from the North, and Disco and Jimmy are living in a camp for displaced persons in Burkina Faso. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 475,000 people, of a total Malian population of 15 million, have been displaced by the conflict. 175,000 of those fleeing have gone to neighbouring countries, principally Burkina Faso and Mauritania. The UNHCR estimates that it has been the largest migration of people in the Sub-Saharan region in history, and at the time of writing, the conflict is on-going.²⁷

Schwartz describes the making of *They Will Have to Kill Us First* as a ‘charmed production’, where, in spite of the fact that she had no contacts, ‘[we] met the right people at the right time, stumbling across stories that were remarkable [...] the musicians that we met all let us into their lives’, such as encountering Kharia Arby on the first day she arrived in Bamako. Arby was a powerful figure on the Malian music scene. Born to a Tuareg father and a Songhai mother, she was the first woman in Mali to launch a musical career under her own name. Although she gained international success, touring in the United States and Canada, her songs remain potently rooted in Malian social and cultural concerns. Arby has

²⁵ More information on the creation of the soundtrack can be found in the interview cited above, as well as the film’s official website: <<https://www.theywillhavetokillusfirst.com/>>. The website also includes a ‘Take Action’ section, with information on how viewers can support Malian musicians.

²⁶ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p.31.

²⁷ ‘Malian Refugees in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger and IDPs in Mali’, *UNHCR: Government* (2019) <<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/malisituation>> [Accessed 30 December 2019].

written works, for example, condemning female genital mutilation (FGM), and advocating peace and the rights of women. In *They Will Have to Kill Us First*, we see her performing a song that encourages people to vote and express the democratic rights during the Malian elections of 2013,

[Figure 3]

Arby expresses the situation of exile eloquently throughout the film, her intense desire to return to the North which she fled after jihadists threatened her family and destroyed her musical instruments.²⁸ She laments that the place she knew has been lost: ‘à Timbuktu, j’avais une liberté totale... Timbuktu était tellement beau et doux, on pouvait même pas le décrire’.²⁹ Although the film ends with a joyful concert led by Arby and Disco in Timbuktu, there are ongoing difficulties encountered by musicians in returning to the North—a concert and film screening that producers and musicians were attempting to organize has been repeatedly delayed due to security concerns.

Although Songhoy Blues were the last group of musicians that Schwartz encountered, they occupy a significant portion of the narrative due to their eloquence and burgeoning international successes, something that the film charts as they journey to the UK to complete a nationwide tour. The young men are introduced early in the film, as they ride through the streets of Bamako on motorbikes. Three members of the group, Aliou Touré, Garba Touré and Oumar Touré were in exile from Timbuktu living in the capital when they met drummer Nathanael Dembelé.³⁰ The members of the group are defined by an intelligent, nuanced and politically engaged style that seeks to intervene in Malian politics through a musical style which blends rock and Malian Desert blues. Many of their songs speak to the conflict in Mali, and their desire for peace and reconciliation between the different peoples in the country. During a conversation filmed in Bamako, they discuss the hypocrisy of the jihadists and Oumar notes that many of the extremists smoke and drink alcohol, and while they claim to shun ‘modernity’, the weapons, vehicles and GPS systems they use are resolutely items of the twenty-first century. **Speaking about this topic could put their lives at risk**, a risk augmented by the fact that they are musicians. As Garba states in a newspaper interview, he heard the jihadists’ threat over the local radio in Timbuktu in 2012, when they ‘threatened to chop off musicians’ hands of musicians and cut off our tongues’.³¹

Nonetheless, the uplifting, energetic refrains of the band’s songs also speak to a desire to endure and live as normally as possible, for instance, ‘Petits Métiers’ highlights the importance of continuing everyday life. The song’s chorus repeat ‘après la guerre / dans mon village / chacun fait son petit métier’. After war, and even during war, people go on working, caring, living, and loving, and these actions, within the context of the occupation, can constitute acts of resistance in and of themselves.³² The desire to move beyond conflict, both in terms of peace-making but also in representation, is reflected in Schwartz’s

²⁸ David Commeillas, ‘Au Mali, le luth continue’, *Libération* 12 February 2016 <https://next.liberation.fr/musique/2016/02/12/au-mali-le-luth-continue_1432986> [Accessed 3 January 2020].

²⁹ All quotations from the musicians are taken from the film they feature in (either *They Will Have to Kill Us First* or *Mali Blues*) unless otherwise indicated.

³⁰ The members of the group are not related, but it is worth noting that Garba Touré is the son of Ali Farka Touré’s long-time percussionist and the group started out covering Farka Touré’s songs.

³¹ John Dingwall, ‘Meet the Mali band who defied a ban on music by radical Islamists to play a Scottish festival’, *The Daily Record*, 26 August 2016 <<https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/entertainment/music/music-news/meet-mali-band-who-defied-8712970>> [Accessed 20 August 2020].

³² This theme of resistance through continuing everyday life in the face of violent extremism is found in films that depict the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s, such as Yamina Bachir-Chouikh’s *Rachida* (2002).

account of her goals for the film: 'It was important to show that although we were filming in a conflict zone, people are living their daily lives'. Schwartz seeks to capture this normality through extended sequences that show the group practicing, one which takes place on the banks of the Niger River in Bamako, writing songs as the sun sets in the background. The sequence progresses slowly as drums blend with lyrics about exile and the sounds of cicadas fill the air. The final shot in this sequence is exquisitely composed: a melting pink and purple streaked sky, against which the black silhouettes of the boys stand out, their cigarette ends glowing intermittently in the darkness.

[Figure 4]

The story of the occupation and conflict in West Africa more broadly is highly complex, feeding into some of the issues around tribal and ethnic difference and colonial histories discussed in the first section. By focusing on music, Schwartz claims that audiences could 'fathom and understand Mali and the political situation there'. Like Gregor, she covers the perspective of both Black Malians and Tuaregs, one of whom, Jimmy, is a high-ranking member of the MNLA. The characters of Disco, Jimmy and Moussa are all Tuaregs who have been displaced by the conflict. Disco and her husband Jimmy are in a refugee camp in Ouagadougou where Disco works with other female refugees and is shown to play a prominent role in community cohesion and organisation. Disco is a gregarious and talkative woman, who laughingly tells us that she acquired her nickname in the 1980s because she won a dance competition to Madonna's song 'Holiday'. However, her relationship with husband Jimmy is complex. Without inhibition, she critiques him in front of the camera for his part in the conflict as a leader in the MNLA. For Disco, the freedom of women and the freedom to play music are profoundly intertwined in Tuareg culture, and cannot be separated:

In reality, it's not just music, it is the freedom of women that [the jihadists] want to destroy. Because as you well know, in our culture, women are almost freer than anywhere on earth [...] without free women, without strong women, there'll be no Touareg and no Tamashek culture.³³

Disco's rejection for her husband's politics and her progressive gender beliefs garnered some surprise among Western audiences, according to Schwartz, yet underlines that 'women speaking their minds didn't seem particularly revolutionary in Mali because it is how things are ordinarily'.

In spite of the film's dominant focus on the musicians, there is a strong thread of exposition throughout *They Will Have to Kill Us First*, the 'epistophilic' urge behind documentary filmmaking and viewing: in short, the desire to know, to understand. This accord with Nichols's definition of the *expository* mode of documentary, which stresses 'verbal commentary and an argumentative logic'.³⁴ This is the style most associated with television news, and Schwartz herself has worked for many years as a filmmaker from news networks like BBC World. Yet the question of how much background information a director should offer the viewer of a documentary about an issue shapes the eventual look, feel, and viewing experience of a film, and Gregor cites the lack of expository material as a key difference between his film and that of Schwartz. Indeed, in our interview, Schwartz strongly expressed the desire to expand awareness of the crisis in Mali, particularly in the West, and thus made the decision to include extensive background information about both Mali and the conflict. Thus, *They Will Have to Kill Us First* contrasts intimate interviews with

³³ Quoted in Morgan, *Music, Culture and Conflict*, p. 97.

³⁴ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p.31.

the musicians with compilations of archive footage from news reports (principally from France 24), YouTube footage, some IS propaganda footage and even HD digital footage from reporters in the French army. These informational segments are primarily used to express the scale of violence in the country and to contextualize the musicians' personal testimonies in the geopolitical events.

All of the musicians have experienced violence directly or indirectly, and for Schwartz, it was vital to include some imagery of the brutality to which civilians in Northern Mali were subject. As she states, 'danger was everywhere, and I wanted the audience to understand the violence without it feeling gratuitous or sensationalized'. A sequence depicting an IS soldier cutting off a man's hand, also depicted in *Salafistes*, inspired the most controversy due to its graphic depiction of physical violence. The decision whether to depict terrorist violence is one that I have encountered with many documentary directors who I have interviewed, and it speaks to wider ethical concerns: respect for victims, the promotion of terrorist propaganda, and media sensationalism.³⁵ Schwartz was concerned that some of the footage (such as Figure 4) was so aesthetically pleasing that audiences in the West might not grasp the full extent of the terror that people have experienced. Indeed, this perspective is reinforced when considering the reception of *Timbuktu* in Mali and Mauritania: in spite of many scenes depicting atrocities, some audiences felt the film did not go far enough in capturing the horror of the situation.³⁶ Finally, Schwartz justifies the choice of this particular scene with reference to the images quality and texture: the 'grainy YouTube footage', she suggests, gives 'some distance' as opposed to the stark clarity of HD.³⁷

Music as Resistance, Film as Observation: *Mali Blues*

Lutz Gregor's *Mali Blues* places the conflict in Northern Mali in the background of the story: no news footage is shown, nor is any overt political information provided. Instead, Gregor states that the focus is squarely on 'the central message of *Mali Blues*, which is about humanity. It is not about the news but the extra-political situation'. *Mali Blues* is primarily an observational documentary, with characteristics such as lack of voice-over, intertitles, or commentary. The observational documentary generally uses portable cameras and spontaneous filming practices. It also integrates a high number of non-narrative sequences which serve to create a sense of place and space, as well as generating mood. *Mali Blues* is filled with a number of atmospheric long shots and long takes: the image pans along the banks of a river, captures the dusty ochre roadsides as people turn to glance towards the camera, or sits quietly observant at a number of intimate jam sessions between the musicians.

[Figure 5]

Gregor also states that the use of slow motion, employed in the nonnarrative sequences mentioned above, augments the feeling of proximity the audience feels towards the subjects and spaces of a film: 'slow motion as a technique gives me the possibility to watch

³⁵ Discussions around the representation of extreme violence abound and are beyond the scope of my discussion here, but Judith Butler's *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2010), Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrer, Strauss and Girous, 2001) and Shohini Chaudhuri's *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) offer very useful discussions of the topic.

³⁶ See Phylis Taoua, 'Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* and its controversial reception', *African Studies Review*, 58.2 (2015): pp. 270–278, p. 276.

³⁷ For a thoughtful discussion of grainy, fragmented images and mortality, see Laura Marks's *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (London/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 91–110.

more precisely, to see smaller movements, to see a smile, to see a gesture'. The overall emphasis, then, is on what David McDougall calls showing rather than telling: instead of knowledge being transmitted through commentary, 'talking heads', or compilation and archive material, the viewer is encouraged to participate in the meaning-making process through with visual images.³⁸ According to Silvio Carta, this allows spectators to 'think and draw their own conclusions and interpretations'. This is not to say that observational documentary is to be read as a form of objective truth, a point which will be discussed further below.³⁹

Another characteristic of the observational documentary, according to Kate Nash, is the absence of an overall 'driving argument'.⁴⁰ The 'hook' or argument for Schwartz was the ban on music and its 'universal' appeal to audiences, while *Salafistes* seeks to demonstrate that Salafism is an intellectual, as well as a socio-political, threat. By contrast, no clear proposal or proposition is laid out in *Mali Blues*, beyond Gregor's assertion that it is about 'humanity'. While the expository and poetic modes of documentary use images 'in order to shape proposals or perspectives on a general topic', in the observational mode filmmakers, in theory at least, 'observe lived experience spontaneously'.⁴¹ Gregor strives to create a sense of the personalities depicted, the music they play and the feelings it evokes, and of the atmosphere in Mali at this particular place and time. The film follows four musicians, Fatoumata Diawara, Bassekou Kouyaté, Master Soumy and Ahmed Ag Kaedi, and charts the encounters and occasional tensions between the varying musical styles they represent: African pop, griot, rap, and Tuareg guitar. Bassekou Kouyaté is a towering figure in Mali, and a Grammy-award winning musician of international recognition.⁴² As a griot, Kouyaté is inheritor of a centuries old musical heritage, and a clear social distinction is drawn between the griots, born into musical lineages, and those who are not.⁴³ Francis Bebey, a Cameroonian writer and composer, describes the role of the griot in the following terms: 'The West African griot is a troubadour, the counterpart of the medieval European minstrel [...] He is a living archive of the people's traditions [...] The virtuoso talents of the griots command universal admiration'.⁴⁴ In Mali, both men and women are griots, and different ethnicities have their own griot traditions and often play different instruments.

Kouyaté is a jovial figure and it is clear he takes his social duty as a griot seriously: although he could afford to live in a wealthier neighbourhood, he lives in a deprived area in Bamako where he gives money to local people for food and schooling. Kouyaté also orchestrated the creation of a music video with four musicians of different ethnicities, singing in four different languages—Tamashek (sung by Ag Kaedi), Bambara, Songhai, and French – in order to demonstrate the unity of the musicians in a divided country and plead for forgiveness and reconciliation.

[Figure 6]

Griots have a separate social status to from the rulers whose praises they traditionally sung,

³⁸ David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 77– 78.

³⁹ Silvio Carta, 'Visual and Experiential Knowledge in Observational Cinema', *Anthrovision*, 3.1 (2015): pp. 1–18, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Kate Nash, 'Documentary-for-the-Other: Relationships, Ethics and (Observational) Documentary', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 26.3 (2011): pp 224–239, p.228.

⁴¹ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 156 and p. 172.

⁴² Kouyaté's website is <<https://www.bassekoukouyate.com>> [Accessed 4 January 2020]. While Kouyaté is a master of the ngoni, a long-necked instrument with five or six strings which, he claims, was the origin of the American banjo, he plays this instrument and others using modern amps.

⁴³ The word for griot in Manika is 'jeli', meaning 'blood'. See Trevor H. J. Marchand, 'It's in our blood: Mali's griots and Musical Enskilment', *Africa*, 85.2 (2015): pp. 356–364.

⁴⁴ Francis Bebey, *African Music: A People's Art* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1975), p. 24.

as well as distinct from other musicians and members of the population. While some of these distinctions have become more fluid in recent years, the connections between the griot and power and politics are still very much evident in *Mali Blues*. Indeed, there were some tensions between Ag Kaedi and Kouyaté during the making of the film: for the concert at the end of the film at the ‘Festival sur le Niger’ in Segou, Gregor thought all four musicians would perform together, offering a sense of conclusion and becoming the film’s final scene. Kouyaté, as a griot, was to invite the others onto the stage, and although he called Diawara and Master Soumy, he did not invite Ag Kaedi. Historical tensions between Black Malians and the Tuareg still linger, and it is worth noting that Gregor did not include this moment in the film, thus preserving a sense of harmony for the audience. Kouyaté also had close connections to the former president Touré, ousted amid charges of financial corruption and mishandling of the crisis in Northern Mali; as Gregor notes, ‘being very close to power can corrupt, and the path of a griot is a very complex negotiation’.

Thus, although in the film Kouyaté says that griots are ‘the ones who calm the population’, Master Soumy and Ag Kaedi view the role of the griot and music in Mali somewhat differently. Ag Kaedi’s trajectory towards music contrasts sharply with that of Kouyaté; he fought in Libya in the service of Gaddafi, who had a Tuareg wife and strong connections to Timbuktu. While in a military camp in Libya, he learned guitar and on returning to Mali, according to Gregor, he ‘swapped his machine gun for a guitar’ and founded the group Amanar. This is noteworthy, given the fact that it was the fall of Gaddafi and the return to Northern Mali that arguably destabilized the region in the first place.⁴⁵ Ag Kaedi, whose equipment was burned in Kidal by Ansar al-Dine, clearly suffers from his forced exile. In *Mali Blues*, he speaks movingly of the desert, contrasting the confinement in Bamako and the freedom he had in Kidal: ‘Je n’ai jamais eu l’envie d’aller en Europe ... [à Kidal], tu peux être en brousse pendant vingt jours, tu n’as pas entendue un moteur. Je ne serais pas ailleurs qu’à Kidal’. Ahmed’s sense of rootedness to his home also feeds into the music he makes and like Disco, Ahmed also equates music with life itself: ‘if [modern Tuareg music] dies, I’ll die with it, because playing music is the only thing I can do’.⁴⁶

The rapper Master Soumy is part of a younger generation of technologically savvy artists who speak out and challenge power, engaging in scathing social critique. Soumy argues that rappers are very different to griots: ‘le griot fait des éloges aux chefs. Mais le rappeur ne fait pas d’éloge: le rappeur a été créer pour dénoncer les maux de la société, pour viser à changer les mentalités, les comportements’. Underscoring the difference between the griot and the rapper, in *Mali Blues*, Master Soumy is consistently filmed in public spaces: the streets, at cafes and concerts, talking and listening to people.

[Figure 7]

By contrast, we mostly see Kouyaté performing at concerts, in the enclosed courtyards of his home, or at the mosque. This spatial distinction underscores the idea that rappers speak to the immediate concerns of the population, and Gregor describes Master Soumy as ‘the voice of his generation’. Soumy’s social engagement has recently extended to creating videos instructing his audience in correct behaviours to stop the spread of Coronavirus.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See Morten Boås and Mats Utas, ‘Introduction: Post-Gaddafi Repercussions in the Sahel and West Africa’, *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 35.2 (2013): pp. 3–15.

⁴⁶ Qtd. in Morgan, *Music, Culture and Conflict*, p. 90.

⁴⁷ N.A., ‘Coronavirus : Le rappeur Master Soumy interpelle la jeunesse’, *DW.com*, 27 March 2020 <<https://www.dw.com/fr/coronavirus-le-rappeur-master-soumy-interpelle-la-jeunesse/av-52942071>> [Accessed 27 August 2020].

As of December 2019, 66.92% of Mali's population is under the age of 25.⁴⁸ Yet young people are largely denied access to political power. According to Morgan, they feel frustrated with their parent's generation, 'who won independence, suffered dictatorship, then won back democracy, only to waste it'.⁴⁹ Master Soumy is part of a collective known as 'Les Sofas de la Republique'; *sofas* is the name given to the warriors of Samory Touré, a politician and Islamic cleric who lead an important resistance to the French Empire in West Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. As such, Les Sofas see themselves as carrying on this mantle of resistance to power in all its forms, from critiques of the government to eviscerating attacks on the Islamists. Master Soumy's track 'Explique ton Islam' is an eviscerating critique of the jihadists' hypocrisy and brutality, calling them 'drug traffickers' and 'terrorists', and showing how their violence flouts the dictates of Islam.⁵⁰ However, Les Sofas and other rappers are also critiquing their own generation; as Morgan suggests, 'deep at the heart of their dissatisfaction there lies the realisation that [...] people get the politicians they deserve'.⁵¹ Rapper Amkoullé notes the growing resignation among Malians regarding the situation of the occupied territories in the North and a corrupt army and government in the South: 'the worst thing in all this [conflict] is that I came away with the impression that human beings are capable of getting used to anything'.⁵²

The principal musician-protagonist of *Mali Blues* is Fatoumata Diawara. Diawara is a major figure on the international African world music scene. Born in the Ivory Coast to Malian parents, Diawara moved to France as a young woman where she starred in a number of well-known feature films, including Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *La Genèse* (1999) and Dani Kouyaté's *Sia, le rêve du python* (1999). Without a manager, Diawara subsequently launched her musical career, developing a style that blends Northern Malian Wassalou traditions with international pop influences. She has toured globally, notably performing in Glastonbury in 2013, but remained somewhat unknown in Mali; the film captures her first concert in her homeland.

Diawara is highly politically engaged, particularly in the area of women's rights in Mali and Africa more broadly: her songs and speeches cover issues such as forced marriage, FGM, and migration. Throughout the film, her political consciousness is evoked through her discussions of the role of women in Malian society, the tensions between various ethnic groups, and her experiences of exile (Diawara fled Mali at the age of 19 and has toured extensively since 2011). This is illustrated, for southwestern Mali. Diawara greets members of her extended family, all female, who had scorned and rejected her as an adolescent when she fled an arranged marriage. They sing of the derogatory names that they had called her, and apologize, while celebrating all that she has done for women through her music; this, Gregor states, was a kind of 'ritual of forgiveness'.

The scene features Diawara performing 'Boloko', a song about FGM from her album *Fatou* (2011). Gregor describes in detail how the scene was arranged and shot: rather than using a handheld camera, which would have created a freer, more spontaneous feel to the image, he decided to set a scene. Thus, Diawara is placed on her own directly facing a row of women and girls as she plays the song.

[Figures 8 and 9]

⁴⁸ 'Mali Age Structure', *Index Mundi* 9 December 2019

<https://www.indexmundi.com/mali/age_structure.html> [Accessed 10 January 2020].

⁴⁹ Morgan, *Music, Culture and Conflict*, p. 81.

⁵⁰ Master Soumy, 'Explique ton Islam', 9 January 2015

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqLGkMrJk3E>> [Accessed 17 December 2019].

⁵¹ Morgan, *Music, Culture and Conflict*, p. 81.

⁵² Qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 85.

The effect created may be more artificial, but due to the sensitive nature of the topic, Gregor argues that 'I did not want to create a sensational effect, but to create a steady, artistic effect'. Diawara performed the song three times, while the women's reactions were shot only once: the emotions that pass across their faces range from sorrow, discomfort, and sadness in the older women, to confusion and anxiety in the younger girls. It is an extraordinary moment, where a woman who was scorned and vilified as promiscuous returns to their family, their village, bringing a devastating yet compassionate critique of this practice.

Observational Documentary: Positionality, Reception, Audiences

There is certainly a tension in analysing a 'purely' observational documentary whilst also considering how these scenes in the village were staged. Certainly, of all documentary modes, observational work implies the least amount of intervention on the part of the filmmaker, and Gregor's staging of the scene, and repeat recordings, do not square with Nichols's notion of directors who 'abandon all of the forms of control' over a filmmaking process.⁵³ Yet it is also worth pointing out that the making of a documentary, and its analysis, are not scientific processes—the scene filmed in the village may, for example, be more strictly *poetic*, in line with Nichols definition of this mode. Moreover, truth claims and debates about authenticity in relation to technologically mediated representation (film, photography, television) have been subject to extensive critique.⁵⁴ What is more relevant in the case of observational documentary in general, and these films in particular, are the relationships between the filmmaker and the subjects and the ethics of such interactions. As Carta notes, 'filming in an observational manner means to be close to the subjects and intimately involved with the processes of their lives'.⁵⁵

Many discussions of documentary ethics rightly centre on the fact that there is an unequal power relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects of a documentary: one wields the camera, and the other is its object; one creates and manipulates the image of the other. One of the earliest interventions into the field of documentary ethics, by Calvin Pryluck, states, 'a simple human principle can be evoked here: those least able to protect themselves require the greatest protection'.⁵⁶ The greater the social disparity between the two, through markers of gender, race, ethnicity, social status, nationality, ability, and sexuality, the greater potential there is for dynamics of power, prejudice or exploitation to play out. As white Westerners filming in Africa, both Schwartz and Gregor risk turning the subjects they film into curiosities, victims or simple objects of knowledge for Western spectators, a 'cinema of attractions'.⁵⁷ In our interviews, both Schwartz and Gregor express a desire to move beyond stereotypes and both stress that they wanted to create alternative images of the continent that move beyond conflict, famine, or poverty. Yet the form of the musical documentary set in Africa itself poses problems; ethnomusicologist Lucy Durán rightly cautions against clichés that posit the centrality of music to people's lives in

⁵³ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 172.

⁵⁴ See, among others, Jacques Rancière, *Figures de l'histoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012); Nico Baumbach, 'Jacques Rancière and the Fictional Capacity of Documentary', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 8.1 (2010): pp. 57–72; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

⁵⁵ Carta, 'Visual and Experiential Knowledge', p. 2.

⁵⁶ Calvin Pryluck, 'Ultimately We Are All Outsiders': The Ethics of Documentary Filming', *Journal of the University Film Association*, 28.1 (1976): pp. 21–29, p. 28.

⁵⁷ The history of ethnographic filmmaking in Africa is long and fraught; for a concise overview with a focus on musical ethnographic documentaries, see Leonardo D'Amico, 'People and Sounds: Filming African Music between Anthropology and Television Documentary', *Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música*, 11 (2007): pp. 1–10.

Africa, with scholars citing the ‘rich musical environment’ of the continent as a whole.⁵⁸ Indeed, in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Frantz Fanon critiques the ways in which images of African music and musical instruments have been used to uphold stereotypes about both the ‘barbarity’ and the ‘greater spirituality’ of Black people.⁵⁹ Yet the films largely avoid these pitfalls by featuring extended interviews with all of the musicians, in which their personalities, emotions, political opinions, and experiences are communicated. Neither film is merely a series of performances, which situate the musician as spectacle with the audience as observer. The verbal encounters serve to contextualize each musician’s work and further an understanding of the character of the individual in question.

Furthermore, Nash cautions against blanket dismissal of the observational mode, and a tendency in scholarship to assume that an ethical relationship cannot exist, or only exists with difficulty, between filmmakers and subjects who occupy unequal social positions. She builds on this argument by underlining the reciprocal nature of the relationship that can be established between filmmaker and characters/interviewees: in many instances, the images produced are a co-creation, and the relationship in question can be ‘long-term and intimate’.⁶⁰ In our interviews, both directors acknowledged their perspective as outsiders to Malian cultures. Both were reliant on local fixers and translators, and Schwartz visited the country for the first time to make the film, while Gregor had previously made a film in Mali in 2009. According to Schwartz, the ‘mission’ of the film for the director and the production team was to ‘simply to allow Malian musicians to use their own voice, their own language, to tell their own story’, most notably through the soundtrack and musical segments. While not vetoing or altering content, Schwartz and her production team also verified that participants had consented to broadcast their statements on camera in order to ensure their safety, which was particularly important in the cases of Disco and Jimmy.

In this context, Gregor demonstrates a certain awareness of the cultural prejudices and assumptions that he brought to the production and how a collaborative process of filmmaking (director, crew, and subjects) can help mitigate potential biases in the final film:

I’m a white person and I have to ask myself what kind of image a white person can create about Africa? Even when you are well intentioned, and you want to create something positive, we are full of pre-conceptions about Africa. It can be a positive kind of racism. We were working with a Black sound engineer from the Caribbean, Pascal Capitolin. He told me, ‘we can’t film a white person in the middle of all these kids. He was right, and so I wanted to be very careful while filming in Fatou’s village.

In this case, Gregor’s misguided desire to place himself within the film as he is greeted by children in the village is tempered by his colleague. Such an image, a ‘benevolent’ white man in the midst of a group of black children, feeds into white saviour narratives that have been squarely critiqued in popular media, such as the ‘African Child Meme’ or the controversial photograph of British television presenter Stacey Dooley holding a Black

⁵⁸ Lucy Durán, ‘Growing into Music in Mali: Perspectives on Informal Learning from West Africa’, *European Perspectives on Music Education, Volume 4: Every Learner Counts*, ed. by Natassa Economidou and Mary Stakelum (Innsbruck: Helbing Verlag, 2015), pp. 49–64 (p. 54). She cites L.H. Coops, “Deñuy jàngal seen bopp” (They teach themselves): Children’s Music Learning in the Gambia’, *Journal of Research in Music Education* 58.1 (2010): pp. 20–36, p. 27.

⁵⁹ See Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), pp. 99–102

⁶⁰ Nash, *Documentary-for-the-other*, p. 224.

child in Uganda.⁶¹ Gregor also acknowledges the immense importance of collaboration: he states could not have created the village scene without Diawara, because ‘it needs a woman, a black woman, and somebody from the village. Fatoumata created this’.

Nash also notes that one way in which the barrier between filmmaker and subject can be broken down is through an acknowledgement of the filmmaker’s vulnerability ‘to demonstrate their trustworthiness to participants’.⁶² In the interviews conducted with Schwartz and Gregor, both hinted at their own attempts of making themselves vulnerable in front of their ‘subjects’, for instance, through emotional involvement. The documentary process can be a productive experience that can contribute positively to the lives of those concerned; for example, Gregor states in our interview that the clip of Diawara singing ‘Boloko’ has been used **in regional campaigns in villages in Mali.**

An important indicator of the nature of the relationship between an external filmmaker working with a community of another culture, where the risk of reproducing stereotype is high, is how audiences perceive the film, including audiences made up of those depicted in the the film. *They Will Have to Kill Us First* premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in the United States in 2015, and Schwartz claims that audiences have taken away many different themes from the film: music and jihad, but also an altered understanding of Islam and the situation of refugees. **In Mali, the film went on tour to Timbuktu, Goa, Segou, Mopti and Bamako, and was attended by the protagonists Disco and Kharia.** While those involved in the making of the film expressed content, the long-form documentary as a style of filmmaking puzzled many audience members in Mali. Some Malians felt that there was too much material about the background of the conflict in the film, information that they already knew, yet Schwartz points out that this was included because ‘we were appealing to people who wouldn’t normally go and see a film about Africa’. *Mali Blues* was screened in Germany to acclaim, followed by interviews with Gregor and Diawara on prime-time news, but unfortunately was not screened in France, where the majority of the West African population of Europe lives. *Mali Blues* screened in Mali, but only to a small audiences with the participants and other collaborators and friends.⁶³

In praising ‘our Griot daughter, Diawara’, one of the women in the village acknowledges that ‘a song is nothing without its meaning’: in a similar sense, a film is nothing without its audience, and in spite of positive reviews, distribution for films like *They Will Have to Kill Us First* and *Mali Blues* is difficult and limited.⁶⁴ Producers can be sceptical about the potential audiences; Gregor’s producer, for example, jested that ‘an African film about African music is just for ladies over fifty-five’. Increasing audience engagement with independent, non-commercial documentary film is vital: this is a medium in which makers and participants take enormous emotional, social, political, and physical risks to tell stories that are often overlooked. *They Will Have to Kill Us First* and *Mali Blues* are pleas for recognition of the potential that music and film can have to inform, educate, entertain, and unite. While interviewing the directors, their optimism and idealism about

⁶¹ See, for example, Sarah Young, ‘Stacey Dooley Defends Comic Relief Trip to Uganda after “White Saviour” Row’, *The Independent*, 14 June 2019 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/stacey-dooley-comic-relief-white-saviour-instagram-uganda-controversy-a8958511.html>> [Accessed 29 July 2020].

⁶² Nash, *Documentary-for-the-other*, p. 237.

⁶³ This information about the reception of the films comes from the director interviews.

⁶⁴ For more on the considerable challenges faced by independent documentary filmmakers in a ‘turbulent’ distribution landscape, see Devin Thorpe, ‘Documentary Filmmakers Face Entrepreneurial Challenges: Financing And Distribution’, *Forbes* 27 March 2016 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/devinthorpe/2016/03/27/documentary-filmmakers-face-entrepreneurial-challenges-financing-and-distribution/>> and Susan Margolin, ‘Independent Documentary Distribution in Turbulent Times’, *Independent Documentary Association* 17 January 2017 <<https://www.documentary.org/feature/independent-documentary-distribution-turbulent-times>> [Accessed 2 January 2020].

this potential to resist violence and create community was evident. Gregor, for example, stated ‘let’s share the beauty, the creativity, the hope that people have in very bad circumstances [...] This is a political message; if we integrate, we can all learn something and share something that might enrich our personalities and our lives’. Schwartz states that she wanted *They Will Have to Kill Us First* to be ‘a record of what happened in Mali’ and this may be a useful way of thinking about both films. The significance of recording and preservation of culture at this time in Mali is significant, especially regarding, for instance, the destruction of cultural heritage during the conflict and the ensuing prosecutions by the International Criminal Court. Yet already, the films carry a sense of a moment that has gone: Kharia Arby and Moussa have both passed away since the film was made, and on the 24 August 2020, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the Malian President who had been in power since September 2013, resigned after being detained by a military coup. Made at a time of immense social upheaval during a conflict that still remains unresolved, the films capture a key moment in Mali’s cultural history, depicting an extraordinary group of artists who use their talents and voices to resist violence and create change.

Figure 1: A close up of a young Timbuktu woman, played by Fatoumata Diawara, being whipped for singing—as she breaks into song. *Timbuktu*, dir. Abderrahmane Sissako, 2014.

Figure 2: The rapper Amkoullé opens the film with a musical summary of the conflict. *They Will Have to Kill Us First*, dir. J. Schwartz, 2015.

Figure 3: Kharia Arby performs a song encouraging people to vote. *They Will Have to Kill Us First*, dir. J. Schwartz, 2015.

Figure 4: Songhoy Blues play at sunset by the River Niger in Bamako. *They Will Have to Kill Us First*, dir. J. Schwartz, 2015.

Figure 5: One of a number of atmospheric, non-narrative panning shots. *Mali Blues*, dir. Lutz Gregor, 2016.

Figure 6: A music video for peace: artists from different ethnicities unite. *Mali Blues*, dir. Lutz Gregor, 2016.

Figure 7: Master Soumy, ‘the voice of his generation’. *Mali Blues*, dir. Lutz Gregor, 2016.

Figures 8 and 9: Fatoumata Diawara’s deeply moving performance of ‘Boloko’, and the audience’s reactions. *Mali Blues*, dir. Lutz Gregor, 2016.