

Toolkit: Ethiopia and Amharic Cinema

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ScreenWorlds



Colors of the Nile Film Festival (Coniff) 2014 edition at the Ethiopian National Theater in Addis Ababa
Photograph by Adriano Marzi

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A commercially viable Amharic-language film industry emerged in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2002. The industry depends on theatrical releases inside Ethiopia to make viable profits. This economic model encouraged the opening of privately-run, single screen cinemas across the country, all devoted to screening the latest locally produced films. The centrality of cinemas in the industry sustain a diverse cinemagoing culture drawn from young adults who make up the urban lower/middle classes in Ethiopia. Roughly 60% of these cinemagoers are women and this gender dynamic is reflected in the films themselves, which often follow the stories of female protagonists. Despite producing around 100 films per-year the industry remains insular in nature, with only a few filmmakers actively interested in screening their films outside of Ethiopia. Ethiopian diaspora filmmakers often based in America, such as Haile Gerima, Rasselak Lakew and Yared Zeleke, operate through different networks and have made Amharic films that have gained critical acclaim after successful screenings at international film festivals. There are also films being made in various other languages spoken in Ethiopia, most prominently in Oromiffa, Tigrinya and Somali, all addressing the lived experiences of these different ethno-linguistic groups and their various communities. These screen worlds are less commercially oriented and have less celebrity culture surrounding them than the Amharic industry but are nonetheless important spheres of cultural production, each contributing to the multi-layered screen worlds emanating from the Horn of African region.

Outside of the cinema auditoriums, television screens have long broadcast non-Ethiopian shows but dubbing into Amharic has (as of 2016) been the sole domain of Kana TV. Despite the central position of the Amharic film industry in Ethiopia's screen landscape, cinema from India, America, Egypt, China and Europe and television from Japan, South America, Turkey and Korea have all found audiences in Ethiopia and influenced Ethiopian screen worlds. What can we learn from paying attention to these screen contexts, and how can they be used to help open up our thinking to new ways of understanding global screen worlds? The films below have been chosen for their critical and popular acclaim and impact on their respective industries as well as for their comparative possibilities both thematically and stylistically. The texts provided all encourage comparative approaches to the study of Ethiopian screen worlds in broader African contexts and map multiple layers of connections and relationships of meaning while also explaining points of divergence. The book *Cine-Ethiopia: The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa* (2018) was designed to offer a broad introduction to film and television in Ethiopia and was co-edited by the author of this toolkit – please contact mt97@soas.ac.uk for more information on this and further readings.

Key Texts

- Jedlowski, Alessandro. 2015. 'Avenues of Participation and Strategies of Control: Video Film Production and Social Mobility in Ethiopia and Southern Nigeria'. *Production Studies, The Sequel! Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries*, edited by Miranda Banks, Bridgit Connor, and Vicki Mayer, 175-186. Routledge.
- Jedlowski, Alessandro. 2018. 'African Videoscapes: Southern Nigeria, Ethiopia and Côte d'Ivoire in Comparative Perspective'. *A Companion to African Cinema* edited by Kenneth Harrow and Carmela Garritano, 193-214. Wiley Blackwell.
- Thomas, Michael W, Alessandro Jedlowski and Aboneh Ashagrie, eds. 2018. *Cine-Ethiopia: The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa*. Michigan State University Press.
- Thomas, Michael W. 2015. 'The Local Film Sensation in Ethiopia: Aesthetic Comparisons with African Cinema and Alternative Experiences'. *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*. 7:1. 17-41.
- Thomas, Michael W. 2020 (forthcoming). 'Contesting Visions of Ethiopia in Two Amharic Sports Films: Between Film Festivals and Local Commercial Cinema'. *Sport, Film and National Culture*, edited by Seán Crosson. Routledge.

Key Films

Amharic films Disclaimer: where films are accessible online, for educational purposes I have provided a link, although the legitimacy of some of the uploads may be unverified. Where possible, I have supplied legitimate ways of accessing either DVDs or online versions which require payment. All films on the list have English subtitles, many Amharic films are not subtitled which has meant I am unable to include some which I would have liked to. Although English subtitles makes films accessible to a more diverse audience, the fact that many Amharic films forego subtitling is characteristic of the insular nature of the Amharic film industry and perhaps even a mark of an already decolonised mindset. If you have trouble locating/accessing any film, please contact Mike at mt97@soas.ac.uk.

Topic: The Emergence of a Commercially Oriented Cinema in Ethiopia

- ጉዳፊቸ - **Gudifecha/Adoption**. 2002. Tatek Tadesse. Ethiopia: Combe Pictures and Black Lion Film Production. English subtitled version available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnPzNsF_T_k

The story of a taboo romantic relationship between an Addis Ababa University student and her adopted brother. One of the earliest Amharic video films to enjoy a prolonged theatrical release in Addis Ababa's cinemas, opening up new opportunities for entrepreneurs in the sector. The film is also an early example

of the የፍቅር ፊልም – yefiker film/love film genre which focuses on issues of love in modern Ethiopian society.

- ቅዝቃዛ ወላፊን – **Kazkaza Welafen/Cold Flame**. 2002. Tewodros Teshome. Ethiopia. Sebastopol Films. English subtitled version available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dt4J0gxOGLc>

The life of a promising Addis Ababa University student unravels as her best friend tests positive for HIV/Aids and she is forced into agreeing to marry a man she does not love. Another early example of the የፍቅር ፊልም – yefiker film/love film, marking the beginning of Tewodros Teshome's influential ventures in the film industry in Ethiopia.

Reading:

The chapter 'Whether to Laugh or Cry? Explorations of Genre in Amharic Fiction Feature Films' in *Cine-Ethiopia* (2018) discusses both the above films from page 99–103. The 'Introduction' and chapter entitled 'From Yeseytan Bet – Devil's House to 7D: Mapping Cinema's Multidimensional Manifestations in Ethiopia from its Inception to Contemporary Developments', also both in *Cine-Ethiopia*, offer a broader cultural and historical context to the study of cinema and screen culture in Ethiopia and Horn of Africa region.

Topic: Amharic Film Genres

- የወንዶች ጉዳይ – **Yewendoch Gudday/Men's Affair**. 2007. Henok Ayele. Ethiopia: Arki Sira Production. English subtitled version available at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3o1slf>

After being rejected by his girlfriend for a member of the Ethiopian diaspora who lives in America, Aimerio decides to pretend he is also visiting from America in order to win over women. This film instigated a trend in the አስቂኝ የፍቅር ፊልም – asikiñ yefiker film/humorous love film (romantic comedy) genre making household names of its ensemble cast of comedic actors.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnPzNsF_T_k (but stretched widescreen aspect ratio)

- ሌርሜላ – **Hermela**. 2005. Yonas Birhane Mewa. Ethiopia: EthioFilm P.L.C. English subtitled version available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcS9Hvq2LOo>

Based on a true story of a man who stalked and threatened a young woman, the film was both a commercial and critical success in Ethiopia, winning the award for Best Feature Film at the first edition of the Ethiopian International Film Festival (ETHIOIFF). An early example of the ልብ አንጠልጣይ ፊልም – lib anteltay film/suspense film genre. Low-key lighting, staccato musical scores and the appearance of actor Girum Ermias in the lead male role have become common elements in successful films from this genre.

- ስርዓት - **Siryet/Absolution**. 2007. Yidnekachew Shumete Desalegn. Ethiopia: Tom Film Production. English subtitled version available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ydgE9aA3rl>

Two inexperienced brothers attempt to solve the mystery of the one eyed, mute murderer who stalks their streets in order to prevent further killings. This film sparked intense debate in Ethiopia surrounding the issues of dealing with past atrocities. Stylistically, the film was also accomplished by industry standards, seen as an important film in the ልብ እንጠልጣይ ፊልም - lib anteltay film/suspense film genre. Winner of the Best Feature Film at the second edition of the Ethiopian International Film Festival (ETHIOIFF), like *Hermela* the film also featured Girum Ermias in a lead role, this time playing the hero.

Reading:

The chapter 'Whether to Laugh or Cry? Explorations of Genre in Amharic Fiction Feature Films' in *Cine-Ethiopia* (2018) more broadly discusses genre in relation to Amharic cinema. An analysis of *Hermela* and *Siryet* features in 'The Local Film Sensation in Ethiopia: Aesthetic Comparisons with African Cinema and Alternative Experiences' (2015) from pages 28-41 along with short descriptions of other films and the diverse themes they cover.

Topic: Ethiopian Nationalism, Introspection and Philosophy in Amharic Films

- የቶጶ - **Utopia**. 2015. Behailu Wassie. Ethiopia: Maki Film Production. English subtitled version available from: <https://www.sodere.com/videos/utopia-edit-6-hd>

A Cambridge University graduate, disillusioned with life in England, returns to his homeland and finds a fulfilling position as a primary school teacher in Addis Ababa. This film speaks directly to the need to decolonise education at all levels and in all contexts as our teacher protagonist Zerihun frees the voices of his young students to the dismay of his superiors.

- ታዳ - **Taza/Eave**. 2017 Kidist Yilma. Ethiopia: Eskis Film Production and 123 Film Production. English subtitled version available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYJV2q2K0GM>

Set during the 70s/80s when Ethiopia was governed by the military dictatorship known as the 'Derg', *Taza* tells the story of a liberal woman who flirts with danger whilst developing a relationship with a stern military commander. One of a number of films in recent times that uses the atrocities of Ethiopia's civil war to warn contemporary audiences of the perils of the recent past while referring to the precarious present.

- እቴጌ ፪ - **Etege II/Empress II**. 2010/11. Abiye Fenta. Ethiopia: Studio A. English subtitled version available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Roib0QqgJDY>

A disillusioned journalist explores interpretations of love – ‘ፍቅር/fiker’ by interviewing his friends and begins a personal journey of self-discovery paralleled with a deeper appreciation of notions of an Ethiopian national culture.

Reading:

The interview with Behailu Wassie in Cine-Ethiopia offers a glimpse into the influences and thinking behind some of the contemporary filmmakers in Ethiopia. Behailu philosophises about the centrality of love in Amharic films, the challenges of making a successful film in Ethiopia and offers thoughts on cinema’s dual role in entertaining and educating audiences.

Topic: Influential Women Filmmakers

– እንቆላ – **Enkopa**. 2016. Alemtsehay Bekele and Abraham Demisse. Ethiopia: Yodit Getachew Film Production. English subtitled version (with sound that drops in and out) available at: <https://www.ezega.com/Communities/ViewVideo/3868/enkopa-ethiopian-movie-2018>

The Story of one woman’s attempt to migrate from Ethiopia through Sudan and her encounters with fellow migrants and human traffickers. Based on true events, the story narrates the real human and emotional tole of migration and is one of the most accomplished films on the theme of immigration which has proved popular with Ethiopian-based filmmakers and producers in recent years.

– ረቡኒ – **Rebuni/Teacher (of moral everyday instruction and traditions)**. 2014. Kidist Yilma. Ethiopia: Galaxy Film Production and 123 Studio. English subtitled version available from: <https://www.sodere.com/videos/rebuni-full>

A young woman takes it upon herself to defend her family’s land from encroaching developers and in doing so forges new bonds. Rebuni represented a renewal for the የፍቅር ፊልም – yefiker film/love film genre garnering high praise within Ethiopia at local film awards, helping to cement director Kidist Yilma’s position as a leading figure in the industry.

Reading:

Eyerusalem Kassahun’s chapter in Cine-Ethiopia entitled, ‘Women’s Participation in Ethiopian Cinema’ offers a comprehensive overview of key female filmmakers, producers and actresses. Profiles of these influential women and their works are developed through personal interviews and textual analysis. As most of the audience in Ethiopia is made up of young women, Amharic cinema has reflected this gender dynamic both in its content and, to a large extent, in its personnel, despite the gendered boundaries which remain in society.

Topic: Amharic Films in Ethiopia and at International Film Festivals

- አትሌቱ - **Atletu/The Athlete**. 2009. Rasselas Lakew and Davey Frankel. Av Patchbay (USA), El Atleta (USA), Instinctive Film (Germany), Riot Entertainment (Ethiopia) BiraBiro Films (Ethiopia). English subtitled version available from: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Athlete-Rasselas-Lakew/dp/B00FYNYAK4>.

The less well-known story of the latter part of the life of legendary marathon runner, Abebe Bikila. A film festival favourite which also enjoyed limited theatrical release in the UK prior to the London 2012 Olympics. The film was critically well received in Ethiopia but screened only in one cinema due to the informal and unorganised structures of film exhibition and distribution in the country.

- የፍቅር ዋጋው - **Yefiker Wagaw/Price of Love**. 2015. Hermon Hailay. Ethiopia: HM Film Production. English subtitled version available from: <http://priceoflovefilm.com/>

The story of a taxi driver and a prostitute who fall in love and attempt to break free from their past lives and precarious means of employment. One of the most technically and stylistically accomplished films to emerge from the Amharic film industry. It achieved the rare accomplishment of being profitable within the local cinemas while also enjoying well received global screenings through the international film festival circuit, most high profile of which being at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Reading:

The chapter, 'Contesting Visions of Ethiopia in Two Amharic Sports Films: Between Film Festivals and Local Commercial Cinema' (M.W. Thomas 2020) takes a wholistic approach to comparing a locally produced Amharic film with a transnationally produced Amharic film. The chapter takes into account contexts of production and reception, textual analysis and interviews with the directors of the respective films in order to understand the multiple perspectives which have given rise to both films achieving success in Ethiopia and at film festivals across the world – something which is most uncommon (as referred to on pages 107-108 in the aforementioned 'Whether to Laugh or Cry? Explorations of Genre in Amharic Fiction Feature Films' in Cine-Ethiopia).

Topic: L.A. Rebellion in Ethiopia – Haile Gerima's Amharic Films

- ምርት ሰሰት ሺ ዓመት - **Mirt Sost Shi Amet/Harvest: 3,000 Years**. 1976. Haile Gerima. USA: Mypheduh Films. English subtitled version available from: <https://www.filingo.ch/en/films/198-harvest-3000-years>

A revolutionary film in many regards which is heavily embedded within Third Cinema theory and the L.A. Rebellion film movement which came out of UCLA Film School during the time Haile Gerima studied and produced this film there. Although never formally screened in Ethiopia upon its release and largely unknown in the country where it was shot, the critical approach the film takes to politics and the film's style are rare feats of cinema.

- ጤዛ - **Teza/Morning Dew**. 2008. Haile Gerima. Negod-Gwad Productions (USA) and Pandora Filmproduktion (Germany). English subtitled DVD available from: <https://www.trigon-film.org/en/shop/DVD/Teza>

A man arrives back home to his small village near Gondar, Ethiopia but is confronted by the memories and dreams of his past as Ethiopia tore itself apart in civil war and as life outside the country changed him forever. A highly self-reflexive film, *Teza* was also Haile Gerima's most widely acclaimed film at international film festivals but it is still relatively inaccessible and unknown to most Ethiopian cinemagoers.

Reading:

A chapter in *Africa's Lost Classics: New Histories of African Cinema* (Bischoff 2014) is devoted to a textual analysis of *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, while Kate Cowcher's chapter in *Cine-Ethiopia*, 'The Revolution has been Televised: Fact, Fiction, and Spectacle in the 1970s and 1980s', positions Haile Gerima's work and other important audio-visual texts within the context of revolution in Ethiopia. Tekletsadik Belachew's chapter in *Cine-Ethiopia* entitled 'The Dead Speaking to the Living: The Religio-Cultural Symbolisms in the Amharic Films of Haile Gerima' takes a more detailed textual and cultural look at Haile Gerima's Ethiopian-set oeuvre.