Shooting Through the Barrel of a Gun:
Using Film to Challenge the ‘Single Story’ of Africa

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A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University
May 2017
Abstract

This thesis is an extensive critical examination and analysis of the Ethiopian film *Difret* (2014). The aim of this study is to examine *Difret* to seek to answer three specific questions:

1. Does *Difret* challenge the common Eurocentric/Western representations of Africa and the African experience?
2. Are there ways in which the film perpetuates the dominant story or stereotypes?
3. Is the film successful in decreasing African illiteracy and/or altering the way people in the West perceive Africa/Africans?

Since the advent of cinematography, Western filmic images of Africa and Africans have been ahistorical, decontextualized, one-dimensional, and static. Recurring negative representations, that are both Eurocentric and Afropessimistic, have systematically been used as tools of power to exert control and influence, both in Africa and globally, to progress Western interests and agendas. Given cinema’s global reach and Hollywood’s prevailing force in our mass-mediated and interconnected world, often the only experience people have with Africa is through the stories they see in films produced by Western cultural industries. Consequently, filmic misrepresentations of Africa and Africans have produced and continue to fuel what I propose to call, “African illiteracy” throughout the world. Many contemporary African filmmakers recognize cinema as a revolutionary tool for growth and development and set out to create films with the intention to empower and rebuild African society, while bringing about lasting social, political and economic change internally.
This critical analysis of Difret relied on a methodological framework grounded in visual culture theory and utilized many common case-study research methods including a review of background and historical information and relevant literature, data collection, interviews, observation and interpretation. The research gathered in this analysis supports my original hypothesis that Difret does challenge common representations of Africa created by the dominant cinemas of the West. Evidence also supports my hypothesis that when taking in to account all aspects that comprise the field of vision framework, Difret both challenges and reinforces the “single story” told by Western cinemas. Finally, some evidence substantiates my hypothesis that the film may decrease African illiteracy amongst Western audiences. However, there is also evidence that suggests that while the film may inform or educate the viewer, it may not necessarily alter ingrained perceptions of Africa and Africans.
Until lions have their own historian, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter.

-Akan proverb

Only the imagination can stop the world today from being anything other than a pulverized rock or a ruined echo.

-Aimé Césaire
Dedication

I have come to know that if you scratch the surface of a human disaster you will find creators responding to the most difficult of circumstances, making art to live, to eat, to kindle the human spirit, to bring peace or to resolve conflict. In these circumstances, you will also find art makers manifesting beauty in the face of horror, and revealing the ugly truth in the face of denial. They are doing this to rally, or bring order, to educate and inspire, to entertain, to heal, but most of all, to tell the story—the hidden story, the story denied.

-William Cleveland, Art and Upheaval

This work is dedicated to the world’s artists who are telling stories through the barrel of a gun—knowing that their artwork could get them killed, but creating it anyway. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to the world’s spectators who look beyond the surface to find meaning, knowing that there is always much lying beneath.
Acknowledgements

There are several people who I must thank, for without each of them, this thesis would not have come to fruition. Firstly, I would like to express sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor, Doug Bond, who went above and beyond his duties. Doug, your enthusiasm for this project and consistent effort to help me succeed was never unnoticed and I am truly thankful to have worked with you. Secondly, I must acknowledge my incredible thesis director, Professor Diane Moore. Professor Moore, your course “Religion, the Arts, and Social Change” inspired this topic and having you oversee my research was a true privilege. Your expertise and passion is inspiring and I thank you so very much for your support. I would also like to thank Meaza Ashenafi for taking time away from her extremely busy life in Ethiopia to be present at the screening of Difret in Cambridge. Meaza, your story is astounding and you are a remarkable and courageous woman. Finally, I must thank, most of all, my incredibly supportive parents, Eric and Debra, and sisters Tiffany and Marcella. Mom, your strength is the guiding light I look for and rely on whatever direction I am walking. Without your unwavering support and constant encouragement, this thesis, and so many other successes, would not have been possible. Eric, Tiffany and Marcella, throughout this extensive undertaking, there was never a time when I did not feel each of you right beside me. I love you all so much.
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Chapter I
Introduction

Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie asserts, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and malign. But stories can also be used to empower and humanize.”¹ Since its creation, the cinema has been one of the most widely utilized and powerful storytelling mediums. Historically, North American and European cinemas have dominated the film industry while Third Cinema productions have been ignored or treated with condescension as the “subaltern shadow of the real cinema” of the West.² This reality is potentially threatening when an entire continent made up of fifty four countries, with its vast histories, a myriad of cultures and peoples, and complex realities, is condensed and simplified into a “single story” and cinematically represented through a Eurocentric lens by those in power and therefore in control of what is widely seen by the majority of the world.³ Such is the case with Africa.

Since the advent of cinematography, Western filmic images of Africa and Africans have been ahistorical, decontextualized, one-dimensional, and static. For over one hundred years, these films have depicted Africa as “the dark continent” and caricatured Africans as “objects of spectacle” and as nameless, stereotypical, archetypal


³ TED, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story.”
figures. These recurring negative representations, both Eurocentric and Afropessimistic, have systematically been used as tools of power to exert control and influence, both in Africa and globally, to progress Western interests and agendas. Given cinema’s global reach and Hollywood’s prevailing force in our mass-mediated and interconnected world, often the only experience people have with Africa is through the stories they see in films produced by Western cultural industries. Consequently, filmic misrepresentations of Africa and Africans have produced and continue to fuel what I propose to call, “African illiteracy” throughout the world.

Since its inception, black African cinema has aimed to reverse “the demeaning portrayals presented by the dominant colonial and commercial cinemas which blatantly distorted African life and culture.” Many contemporary African filmmakers recognize cinema as a revolutionary tool for growth and development and set out to create films with the intention to empower and rebuild African society, while bringing about lasting social, political and economic change internally. In addition, they strive to tell stories that project the complexity of the African experience to assist in overcoming global African illiteracy and, ultimately, alter the way the world sees Africa.

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6 Ibid.
This thesis is an extensive critical examination and analysis of the film *Difret* (2014). *Difret* is a feature length narrative film from Ethiopian writer/director, Zeresenay Berhane Mehari. The film’s story is based on the true-life story of Aberash Bekele, an Ethiopian girl who in 1996 at the age of 14 was arrested and charged with murder after killing the 29-year-old man who abducted and raped her in an attempt to marry her. This ritualistic practice of abduction for marriage, referred to as “telefa,” is a common and accepted tradition in rural parts of Ethiopia. While working in the capital city, Addis Ababa, Meaza Ashenafi, a native Ethiopian women’s rights lawyer and president of Andinet Women Lawyers Association, hears of Aberash’s arrest over the radio. Understanding the magnitude of the situation and the potential that this case had to progress Ethiopia’s women’s rights movement, she decides that her legal aid organization will provide Hirut with free representation. After a two-year battle that involved overcoming multiple struggles and fighting Ethiopia’s legal system at several levels, she and her legal team argued successfully that Bekele acted in self-defense. The defendant became the first Ethiopian woman to be acquitted based on those terms. The success of this case was unprecedented, resulting in a change in Ethiopian law regarding “telefa.”

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7 *Difret*, directed by Zeresenay Berhane Mehari (Ethiopia: Haile Addis Pictures, 2014), DVD.

8 *Difret*, “About the Film: Film Synopsis” *Difret*: Feature Film, accessed July 1, 2015, http://www.difret.com/#film-synopsis

*Difret* tells the story of these women and their efforts to challenge accepted cultural norms and a centuries old tradition in Ethiopia.¹⁰

*Difret* is Mehari’s first feature film production and the first produced by his company, Haile-Addis Pictures. The agency’s website states, “‘Haile Addis’ means ‘a new force’ in the Amharic language. We believe that 21st century Africa is thriving with a new force that is determined to rise-up to the challenges that the continent faces. We are a part of that ‘new force’.”¹¹ It also states that their work is largely inspired by Adichie’s call to tell the many stories of Africa and what it means to be African: “We make films that challenge people to think different [sic] about Africa.”¹² It is clear that the filmmakers’ intentions are to tell a story that will help to create awareness and ultimately bring about change – change both in Ethiopia, as it transitions from traditional life and culture toward an age of modernity, and change in the way those outside of Africa “see” Africa.

**Purpose of This Study**

The aim of this study is to examine *Difret* to understand if and how the filmmakers’ intentions are met. The three specific questions that this thesis seeks to answer are as follows:

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¹² Ibid.
1. Does *Difret* challenge the common Eurocentric/Western representations of Africa and the African experience?

2. Are there ways in which the film perpetuates the dominant story or stereotypes?

3. Is the film successful in decreasing African illiteracy and/or altering the way people in the West perceive Africa/Africans?

Firstly, I hypothesize that the film challenges Eurocentric representations of Africa and portrays an African experience not commonly depicted in Western cinematic representations. Secondly, I hypothesize that considering all the elements that make up the film’s overall “field of vision” will reveal ways in which *Difret* is influenced by Western mediations and institutions, thus, may in some ways be mimetic of the single story it aims to dispute.\(^\text{13}\) Finally, I hypothesize that *Difret’s* African visual content and its uniquely groundbreaking story, that differs so drastically from most of the representations of Africa familiar to Western viewers, provide an opportunity to reduce African illiteracy in Western audiences and alter the way a viewer sees Africa; though this remains dependent upon who is viewing the film and the context in which it is presented.

Benefits of This Study

This thesis will provide a case-study for filmmakers and scholars of Third and African cinemas and visual culture interested in how film can serve to empower marginalized groups, decolonize Western visual mediations, and decolonize Western

\(^{13}\) Plate’s work will be explained as a methodological foundation for this analysis in Chapter IV.
perceptions of ‘the Other’ by moving away from a Eurocentric way of seeing to a polycentric multicultural vision of the world’s histories and current realities.

Pragmatically, the results may provide filmmakers with insight into storytelling and filmmaking that aim to achieve the specific goal of presenting Africa in a way that challenges dominant portrayals. In terms of international relations and politics, the findings of this research may also contribute to the broader discussion on the global use of film, and art in general, to combat any type of illiteracy - religious, cultural, racial, etc. - that fuels conflict and misunderstanding throughout the world.
Chapter II

Definition of Terms

African Illiteracy: As it pertains to this investigation, African illiteracy refers to a general lack of understanding of Africa (its histories, political economies, geographies, nationalities, religions, cultures, etc.), the complexity of the African experience, and the unique challenges that each nation faces.

Afropessimism: “the consistently negative view that Africa is incapable of progressing economically, socially, or politically.”

Cinematic Style: “the systematic use of specific techniques characterizing a given film or group of films.”

Eurocentrism: “a paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world’s center of gravity. It is a form of vestigial thinking, which permeates and structures contemporary practices and representations even after the formal end of colonialism. Eurocentric thinking attributes to the West an almost providential sense of historic destiny. Eurocentric discourse projects a linear historical trajectory.”

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16 Stam, Film Theory: An Introduction, 269.
Narrative: “a chain of events in cause-effect relationships occurring in time…A narrative begins with one situation; a series of changes occurs according to a pattern of causes and effects; finally, a new situation arises which brings an end to the narrative.”\(^{17}\)

Polycentric Multiculturalism: a perspective or way of thinking that asserts that the “world has many dynamic cultural locations, many possible vantage points. No single community or part of the world, whatever its economic or political power, is epistemologically privileged.” Polycentric multiculturalism “sees all cultural history in relation to social power” and calls for “changes not just in images but in power relations.”\(^{18}\)

The ‘Single Story’ of Africa: This term comes from Chimamanda Adichie’s speech “The Danger of the Single Story” in which she discusses how Africa has been narrowly and inaccurately represented in literature and cinema by those in power. The term refers to the representations of Africa that have been, and continue to be, employed by colonial and former colonial powers that depict Africa from a Eurocentric point of reference. These representations are one dimensional, incomplete, racist and perpetually stereotypical.\(^{19}\)

Third Cinema: “Third World” refers to the “colonized, neo-colonized or decolonized nations and ‘minorities’ of the world whose economic and political structures have been shaped and deformed within the colonial process.”\(^{20}\) Third cinema

\(^{17}\) David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 50.

\(^{18}\) Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 271.

\(^{19}\) TED, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story.”

\(^{20}\) Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 93.
practice and theory emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the wake of achieved national independence, and the revolutionary efforts to achieve independence, by former colonized states. “Third-worldist film ideology was crystallized in the wave of militant film manifesto essays” which called for a “tri-continental revolution in politics and an aesthetic and narrative revolution in film form.”

“Third cinema” broadly refers to the “vast cinematic productions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and of minoritarian cinema in the First World.” Some film theorists define “Third Cinema” as “a body of films adhering to a certain political and esthetic program, whether or not they are produced by Third World peoples themselves.

Visual Culture: “the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities.”

The West: The United States and former European colonial powers. In terms of cinema, “the West” refers to Hollywood and other dominant European film industries.

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23 Ibid.

In 1831, German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel described Africa as a “land lying beyond the daylight…, enveloped in the black color of night…where men are children.”\textsuperscript{25} In \textit{Philosophy of History}, he dedicated a mere eight of the book’s four-hundred pages to Africa, and concluded the brief section on the continent stating: “At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.”\textsuperscript{26} Hegel had never traveled to Africa, nor was he a serious scholar of the region and its peoples and cultures.\textsuperscript{27} The European construction of Africa as “the dark continent” that came about during the nineteenth century, relied on the power of the same stereotypes and myths that had been created by Europeans to justify the Atlantic slave trade centuries earlier.\textsuperscript{28} Africans became “the other,” the antithesis to the European, seen only in relation to “darkness, savagery, the immoral, the incongruous.”\textsuperscript{29}

In “The Cited and the Uncited: Toward and Emancipatory Reading of Representations of Africa,” Garuba and Himmelman note that “the framework within


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 147.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 144.
which representations of Africa function is a system of contrasts and antinomies that sets up the continent and its people as the space of radical difference, the site of alterity” and “the schema of Self and Other that is the driving logic of this form of representation is founded on binarisms.”

The spread of theories of black inferiority—by missionaries, travel writers, and scholars alike—created the environment that allowed for western colonial expansion throughout Africa.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, operating under the assumption that “the dark continent” was in need of civilization, Christianity, and the benefits of enlightenment, Europeans targeted Africa for resource, territorial and cultural colonization. By the early twentieth century, most of Africa, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, was under the control of European powers. Western hegemony over the vast majority the continent resulted in the perpetual transmission of distorted images of Africa and Africans to those in Europe and the United States. Through constant repetitions of racist imagery, a superiority-inferiority relationship developed in the psyche of those in the West and “a racist cognitive structure was transmitted consciously into European and American domestic institutions such as schools, churches, governmental institutions” and eventually the entertainment industry.


32 Ibid., 148.


The Camera/Gun

In “Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa,” Paul Landau explains that during the colonial era, there were two forms of Western contact with Africans. The first was actual (trading, working, killing, negotiating, etc.) and the second was virtual (photographs, words in literature, and images projected onto screens). He further notes that the “virtual interface” positioned Europeans as spectators and Africans as objects to be observed and it was only through printed images and the written word that most Europeans knew anything about the places “their countrymen were busy ruling.” The cinema, specifically, was heavily relied upon for European colonial administration and expansion.

In “An Image of Africa: Representations of Modern Colonialism in Africa in Peter Jackson’s King Kong,” Clifford T. Manlove explains that the connection between the cinematic and colonial processes can be seen in philosophical terms; both “have the capability to—using the ability to manipulate time and space for an audience—revise and reconfigure the given horizon of the world.” However, as Manlove explains further, the processes similarly relied upon the same mechanical advancement as well:

Modern colonialism in Africa and cinema owe their existence to a crucial invention in 1889 by Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim, the fully automatic machine gun. The same intermittent mechanism used to quickly advance

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37 Ibid.

a strip of cartridges into the firing chamber of a gun at rapid, precisely regular intervals could also be used to run a strip of film stock through a camera or a projector. This pair of inventions—the machine gun and the moving-picture camera—made “savage” triumph over “civilization” appear impossible.\textsuperscript{39}

This technical relationship may explain the use of similar figurative language to describe the functions of both the gun and camera: to shoot, to take a shot, to capture, aiming, stalking, loading, clicking, etcetera.\textsuperscript{40} In \textit{On Photography}, Susan Sontag points to this language overlap, further noting that even before the term “snap shot” was defined as “an off-hand photo,” it referred to a specific military technique of shooting a gun.\textsuperscript{41}

Beyond their linguistic connection, it is also interesting to note that both Peter Davis and Teshome H. Gabriel compare the eye of the camera to the barrel of a gun and highlight film’s potential use as a weapon for liberation.\textsuperscript{42} The camera/gun trope can be seen even further in the historic relationship between national militaries and national cinemas. In “\textit{King Kong and the Military},” Lawrence Suid explains that film’s “inherent propaganda value” has made it a particularly attractive tool for government and military authorities.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{43} Lawrence Suid, “King Kong and the Military,” \textit{American Classic Screen} 2, (July-August 1977), 14.
Colonial Cinema

According to Olivier Barlet, to label colonial cinema as “purely propaganda film” would not be reductive, as “it indeed crystallized the colonial myth and reinforced a racial imagery that is still alive today, celebrating and reinforcing the subjugation of the colonies through its images.” Soon after cinema reached Africa, European governments established film units throughout their territories for the purpose of making films that promoted colonial interests. Consequently, early films of Africans were used for ethnographic, educational or propaganda purposes, representing Africans negatively in order to garner support for colonial rule and expansion. Filmic images carried messages to and from the West and Africa and by telling the “story of colonialism from the colonizer’s perspective,” the cinema proved to be an effective tool that would continue to be harnessed by those in power.

Beyond giving no priority to African interests and presenting Africans as natives who were “ingenuous, outlandish, somewhat mysterious beings who were nevertheless loyal and grateful to the Europeans for coming to ‘guide and protect them,’” early colonial films completely excluded African participation in their production. The first notably significant contact that many Africans had with cinema production was via an experiment conducted by the British Colonial office known as the Bantu Educational

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46 Ibid., 7.

47 Shohat and Stam, Kindle Edition.

Kinema Experiment (BEKE). BEKE, which operated from 1935-1937, had a sole assignment: to produce and show instructional films, particularly those related to health care, to Africans.49

Soon thereafter, the British Colonial Film Unit (CFU) was established in 1939 which firmly institutionalized the practice of “instructional cinema.”50 As noted by Shaka in “Instructional Cinema in Colonial Africa: An Historical Reappraisal,” instructional cinema was “an educational cinematic practice dedicated to teaching Africans modern methods of doing things,” and its introduction into sub-Saharan Africa was rooted in the British colonial government’s “desire to exploit the educational capacities of the medium.”51 The cinema was seen as a powerful tool particularly for the education of illiterate African populations and the CFU showed films throughout African colonies via traveling “lantern slide shows.”52

Additionally, during colonial rule, all films shown to Africans were heavily censored and British colonial law banned Africans from viewing films that related in any way to Europe or America.53 Censorship laws were also applied to other national cinema industries, pressuring American filmmakers to respect and abide by them. In Unthinking Eurocentrism, Stam and Shohat note that as a result of these “positive image of empire”

49 Ibid.


51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Prabhu, 7.
laws. Hollywood films often demonstrated as much enthusiasm for European colonialism as European films did.\textsuperscript{54}

**Hollywood and Africa**

At the turn of the twentieth century, the cinema was allowing audiences around the globe an “unprecedented sense of capturing the world” and given the fact that colonial powers controlled film production, exhibition and distribution, Western ideologies and aesthetics were most influential.\textsuperscript{55} By the mid-twentieth century employing misrepresentations and blatant falsifications of Africa and Africans had become accepted as the operating standard or norm for “African” films produced in Hollywood and Europe.\textsuperscript{56} Narrative features were often set in exotic African locales and incorporated Africans into the storyline in superficial, marginal roles. Scholars of cinema have acknowledged that just as colonialism persistently marginalized Africans in terms of power and wealth within their own continent, Hollywood’s portrayals of Africans paralleled this subjugation by relegating them to savages, buffoons, and villains on screen.\textsuperscript{57}

As the global impact of the dominating film industries of the west deepened, Africa, presented through a Eurocentric lens, became visible on a much larger commercial scale.\textsuperscript{58} Consequently, the dominating frameworks of representation of

\textsuperscript{54} Shohat and Stam, Kindle Edition.

\textsuperscript{55} Ukadike, \textit{Black African Cinema}, Kindle.


\textsuperscript{57} Conteh-Morgan, Kindle, 148.
Hollywood and European cinemas further established a presumed “civilization divide” between the West and Africa. Africans were seen only in terms of “objects of spectacle” for Western voyeuristic gaze, as “nothing but savages or docile primitives doing funny things in the jungle to amuse white thrill seekers.”

During the time between the two world wars, “explorer films” and fiction films set in exotic locations enjoyed more profitability and visibility than all other films. In *Black African Cinema*, Frank Ukadike explains how these Hollywood “jungle and safari melodramas” regurgitated popular misconceptions derived from African romance-adventure writings from the previous century. *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918) is an example of one such film that glorifies the animal and the jungle, while reducing Africa to a mere landscape. The film was financially successful, being one of the first to gross one million dollars, and the response in the media revealed a sense of believability that even fictional films provided spectators. Though *Tarzan of the Apes* was not shot in Africa, is ridden with inaccuracies, clichés, and condescending attitudes, when the film was released the *New York Times* declared, “the picture as a whole, in addition to being interesting, also has a touch of educational value.”

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
While Hollywood’s primary interest in the creation of motion pictures was largely commercial success, mid-century European cinemas focused more on using film to justify the continued occupation of African territories. As a result, “the white hero” was heavily relied upon in the narratives, and the modern British way of life was presented as more desirable and superior than traditional African life. Further, films presenting the African experience as “foolish” were shown to Africans in order to instill in their minds a sense of “inferiority about their own traditions, culture, and indeed, their whole being.”

These Western “African” films became a functional component of the cultural hegemony apparatus as they satiated the Western audience’s “appetite for fantasy, escape, and exoticism with picturesque, sensational material.” Despite having slightly different agendas and motivations, Hollywood and European cinema industries similarly created films that presented Africans as savages, lazy natives, childlike, needy recipients of Western aid, helpless victims unable to progress or be agents of their own change, and loyal to the white Westerner who, alone, has the knowledge and power to save them from all trouble. These perpetual misrepresentations and caricatures of Africans on screen have allowed for a massive miseducation of Western audiences and these damaging stereotypical images have had significant lasting effect on African societies.

But as Karl Marx’s political theory of dialectical materialism asserts, the mere existence of something (the thesis) assures that it has an opposing side (the antithesis).

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
68 Conteh-Morgan, Kindle, 150.
When applied to the context of film, colonial and Hollywood cinemas inherently had a contradictory side and this was Third Cinema—a kind of revolutionary cinema, both theoretically and practically, whose primary goal was to counter the negative, inaccurate, racist representations that had dominated film culture for decades.

Third Cinema

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the wake of newly achieved independence of former colonial territories from European powers, third world cinema ideology was “crystallized in a wave of film manifesto essays” calling for a revolution in politics as well as an aesthetic and narrative revolution in filmmaking.70 Though each of the manifestos emerged from particular cinematic and cultural situations, they shared common concerns and were rooted in the “philosophical grounds that film and politics are inextricably linked.”71 Cinema in the Third World thus evolved from the pressing need to counter the dominant cinemas of Europe and Hollywood. Ukadike claims that Third Cinema ideology is the only sector of film theory that did not begin within a Euro-American context and “no other theory of cinema is so imbued with historical specificities…and yet so universal in its claims to represent the highest aspirations of a post-colonial world.”72

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70 Stam, Film theory: An Introduction, 95.


72 Ukadike, in Rethinking Third Cinema, Kindle, 126.
Stam and Shohat note that in recent years, there has been a “terminological crisis” surrounding the use of term “Third World.” However, in regards to cinema, the term is empowering in that it brings to light the “collectively vast cinematic productions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and of minoritarian cinemas in the First World.”

**Early African Cinema**

The period of European decolonization that began to take place in Africa during the second half of the twentieth century encouraged the arrival of two differing trends in the representation of Africa on film. First, was the stark decline in Hollywood and European films about or set in Africa. The second trend was the emergence of an African cinema. In Postcolonial African Cinema, Ken Harrow explains that while African pioneers began making films in the 1920s in Tunisia and Egypt, sub-Saharan African cinema first appeared in 1955, when a group of African students in Paris produced the short fiction film Afrique sur Seine. However, it wasn’t until the 1960s, when Africans began to gain independence, that African cinema truly began to develop. The first film to be made in sub-Saharan Africa by an African was Borom Saret (1962), directed by Sembene Ousmane.

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73 Shohat and Stam, Kindle.

74 Ibid.


77 Prabhu, 10.

78 Oscherwitz, Kindle, 241.
During the pioneering decade of this new cinema, the aspirations of its first filmmakers ran parallel with the 1960s revolutionary efforts inspired by Third World ideologies, which focused on decolonization and liberation from empire rule. Harrow asserts that this new cinema was one of “revolt against colonialism, and then against neocolonialism, dependency, and Eurocentrism.” As Black cinema emerged alongside the movements to liberate African states, pioneering African filmmakers’ major concerns were to provide more realistic images of Africa from an African perspective, completely oppositional to the stereotypical, distorted, and blatantly inaccurate expressions of the dominant cinemas that were grounded in colonial thought and rationale.

According to Harrow, the overall sentiment of early African filmmakers was that they could not afford to create “subjective explorations of individual sensibilities and personal relations, as in European New Wave cinema, while the larger questions of life or death important for the African community were at stake.” Thus, through the early eighties, politically conscious films constituted the majority of African produced films. However, toward the end of the twentieth century, emerging African filmmakers, seeing themselves as no longer on the “periphery” of cinema production, shifted away from the didactic formulas of their predecessors to more narrative practices that aimed for “entertainment over instruction.”

79 Ukadike, in Rethinking Third Cinema, Kindle, 126.
80 Harrow, 1.
81 Ukadike, Black African Cinema, Kindle.
82 Harrow, 22.
The Power of Hollywood

Third Cinema gained momentum throughout the second half of the twentieth century and film production became a tool harnessed for the advancement of political, social and cultural development throughout the world. However, because exhibition and distribution were still controlled by dominant cinemas of the West, very little of what Third Cinema produced was shown to a global audience. Stam and Shohat explain, “while the majority of cinematic productions are from Third Cinema, there exists a sense of media imperialism which implies that the West dominates and controls what is seen by the majority of the world.”84 They continue to argue that, while former colonies and developing nations are inundated with North American films, TV, popular music, and news programs, the “First World receives precious little of the vast cultural production of the Third World.”85 So, while Africans have been able to utilize film as a tool of self-representation, Western audiences’ perceptions of Africa are still influenced almost entirely by the images produced by Western media sources that contribute very little to overcoming African illiteracy.

Hollywood’s dominating mediation of knowledge and it’s unparalleled power of information dissemination forces the acknowledgement that “whether Hollywood tells a story well or not, the very fact that it tells a story on Africa, any story at all, has a lasting impact.”86 As a prominent social institution with global reach, the Hollywood apparatus

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84 Shohat and Stam, Kindle Edition.

85 Ibid.

significantly influences political, economic and social perceptions and actions. For example, during a town hall meeting in Milwaukee in 2004, United States Vice President Dick Cheney referenced Ridley Scott’s film *Black Hawk Down* (2001) to illustrate lessons that he believed should be gathered from American military forces throughout the world. That Hollywood films are referenced by political leaders to assert or prove the importance of any policy or intervention is an ever pressing insight; especially when Hollywood films, even since the turn of the century, continue to appropriate centuries-old stereotypes, myths and blatant lies about Africa for the sake of profit maximization, agenda or emotional affect.

The African Human Rights Film

In *Africa on Film: Beyond Black and White*, Kenneth Cameron assesses and discusses in great depth the overwhelmingly racist representations of sub-Saharan Africa in British and American cinema and identifies incisive archetypal figures in film from the early 1900s to the early 1990s. He concludes that at the end of the twentieth century, European and Hollywood cinemas have yet to transcend century old representations; therefore, the possibility of a different cinematic Africa emerging in the twenty-first century, according to Cameron, looks gloomy.

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87 Ibid.


89 Conteh-Morgan, Kindle, 151.

In “Hollywood’s Representations of Human Rights,” Ashuntantang notes that in recent years, Hollywood has produced several “human rights films”—“films that expose egregious abuses inflicted on ordinary people who do not receive support from local systems of justice and who do not have the means to articulate their stories to wide audiences.”91 While many of these contemporary “human rights films” created by Western industries are not explicitly racist in their depictions of Africa or Africans, many stereotypes and misrepresentations persist. Films like Hotel Rwanda (2004), Blood Diamond (2006), and The Constant Gardener (2005) represent attempts to shed light on the African experience while raising awareness about black African issues. In fact, in many ways, their filmmakers do not resort to predictable storytelling techniques or racist stereotypes.92 However, as Stam and Shohat warn, “it is quite possible to be antiracist at both a conscious and practical level and still be Eurocentric.”93

These noted films all utilize recycled archetypes identified by Cameron, while continuing to represent Africans as victims, either of each other or the West.94 Further, these stories afford Africans no immediate agency in their own lives, and portray Africa through a Eurocentric lens.95 Because these and other commercially successful films enjoy the highest level of visibility of all cinematic representations of Africa, Western


94 Mafe, 81.

95 Ibid.
audiences are left with what Landau labels “decontextualized vision-bites of the continent and its peoples.”\textsuperscript{96} He continues to say: “Steamy jungle, arid savannah, bronze bodies, spears, lions, witch doctors and bones, and wildebeest on the plains, all hang in front of Africa like a theatrical scrim. They reproduce themselves over and over again, fade into the dark, the squalid, the starving child and the refugee camp, and the irrational war cry.”\textsuperscript{97}

The Ramifications of a “Single Story”

Today, there continue to be many reasons to be concerned with the chronic perpetuation of these damaging stereotypes. Ukadike asserts that, “the images of this world once implanted in our memories can take a long time to eradicate.”\textsuperscript{98} Jack Shaheen acknowledges further that, a “stereotype may endure in defiance of all evidence.”\textsuperscript{99} But while all negative stereotypes are potentially hurtful, they do not all hold the same power in the world.

Stam and Shohat discuss how stereotypes of dominant social groups may create feelings of discomfort among the people within the group, however the community has the social power to resist and defend them. Yet, stereotypes of marginalized groups “participate in a continuum of prejudicial social policy and actual violence against


\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.


disempowered people, placing the very body of the accused in jeopardy.” For example, in “Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror,” Sides and Gross write that scholars have long known that persistent stereotypes of social groups serve as “convenient heuristics in decision making,” and that citizens often rely on their perceptions of other groups to form political opinions.

Consider what Stam and Shohat proclaim, “racist films can mobilize for the Ku Klux Klan, or prepare the ground for a retrograde policy.” Thus, films not only shape perceptions of others, they influence concrete actions and may result in practical applications in many lives. It is clear then, that the gravity of negative stereotypes and misrepresentations of historically marginalized groups lies in their powerlessness to control their own representations and tell stories that are true to their experience. Such realizations bring attention to the “danger of the single story” that has been given to Africa and the damage that it has caused for centuries. It also supports the need for Africans to utilize the cinema to challenge it.

Contemporary African Cinema

In Contemporary Cinema of Africa and the Diaspora, Anjali Prabhu notes that Africans and non-Africans have significant room for the reeducation of “their instincts in

100 Shohat and Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media (Sightlines), Kindle Edition.

101 Kimberly Gross and John Sides, “Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror,” Journal of Politics 75, no. 3 (July 2013), 590.

102 Shohat and Stam, Kindle Edition.

103 TED: Global 2009 “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story.”
perceiving” Africa and Africans through media representations. Contemporary African cinema is concerned with the role film can play in this reeducation of how people see Africa, as well as with cinema’s potential to rebuild African society and culture. Like the pioneers of African cinema, contemporary African filmmakers see film as a powerful medium that the developing world must harness for political, social and artistic achievement and development.

Additionally, African cinema ideology is characterized by a deliberate attempt to use film as an authentic “voice of the people” in order to decolonize perceptions of Africa. This framework of thought derives from a vision that acknowledges African development as having value beyond its continental borders. Prabhu notes that contemporary African cinema conceives “Africa as an actor on the world stage, as consequential for the destiny of mankind, a notion that has been largely ignored or hampered by European and American economic and political interests throughout and well after colonialism.”

The first years of the twenty-first century have seen a radical shift in African cinema. Filmmakers have successfully gained control of the medium and have effectively made films that speak in their own voices and express the complexity of the African experience. Prabhu claims that African cinema of the twenty-first century

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104 Prabhu, 21.
106 Ibid.
107 Ukadike, in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, 126.
108 Prabhu, 14.
109 Prabhu, 13.
provides films that not only “exemplify and interrogate African realities, imagination and aspirations,” they also invite audiences around the globe to have a “stake in them.”\(^{110}\)

Contemporary African cinema acknowledges the important role that the spectator plays in making meaning of the film during the viewing process. Through films with an Africa-oriented perspective, filmmakers invite spectators to see the world from African spaces and to then invest themselves in issues that are apprehensive to African progress in contemporary society.\(^{111}\) This focus on the importance of the international spectator has propelled the interest of African filmmakers to “internationalize Black African cinema” in order to reach audiences on a larger, global scale.\(^{112}\)

Stam and Shohat declare that, “questions of address are as crucial as questions of representation,” and “neither text nor spectator is a static, preconstituted entity; spectators shape and are shaped by the cinematic experience within an endless dialogical process.”\(^{113}\) African filmmakers acknowledge the power that the cinema has to alter the outcome of this dialogue and set out to create representations that challenge the Eurocentric story of Africa. Adichie asserts that, “stories can rob a people of its dignity, but stories can also be used to restore that dignity.”\(^{114}\) And while dominant cinemas have historically misrepresented marginalized peoples throughout the world, African cinema is

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., 13.


\(^{113}\) Shohat and Stam, Kindle.

\(^{114}\) TED: Global 2009 “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story.”
utilizing the power of the medium to counter the prevailing representations and to open spaces for African engagement with citizens of the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{115}

The question remains, however: do African films created with the distinct intention to bring about local change, as well as challenge the dominant images created through a Eurocentric lens, and ultimately change how people around world see Africa succeed in achieving their goals? This thesis is a case study that critically examines one film in an attempt to provide evidence to answer this crucial question.

\textsuperscript{115} Shohat and Stam, Kindle.
Chapter IV

Methods

Since the filmmaker’s stated intention is to be a “force” of change in perception and action, this critical analysis of Difret relied on an analytical framework grounded in visual culture theory.

Visual Culture

In *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, Paul Landau states, “power is hidden in ‘ways of seeing’.” Visual culture is interested in transformation, in fostering “ways of seeing” that bring about a type of vision of the world that is ‘truly engaged and issues forth social practices that ‘take to heart’ what is seen.” Visual culture is concerned with both the makers and viewers of art and is motivated by the connection between “how we see and how we live,” the link between “aesthetics and ethics.” Scholars of visual culture acknowledge that “seeing” is a culturally constructed activity with profound consequences. However, they also profess

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118 Ibid.
that seeing is a learned activity, relative to many factors and so therefore it is possible to teach people to see differently.119

Field of Vision

For a shift in seeing to occur, an analysis of any form of visual art, when viewed through the lens of visual culture, must not only look at the objects seen, rather it must consider all components that makeup the overall “field of vision” surrounding the artwork.120 These components include:

- The image itself - what it looks like, its execution, physical materials, etc.;
- The relationship between the medium and the message;
- The creator of the image - his or her ethnic, religious, sexual, racial identity;
- The nature of the language that surrounds the image in terms of explaining it, arguing for or against it;
- The responses, on all sides, to the image - the physical and verbal responses, media or legalistic responses;
- The historical context of the image;
- The identity of those who view the image - religious, national, ethnic, level of education;
- The particular cultural crossings that are constantly taking place - both with the creator and spectator;

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120 Plate, “Introduction” in Religion, Art and Visual Culture, 5.
• And the role of social, political, and cultural institutions in the creation and reception of the art.  

_Difret_ Analysis

My analysis of _Difret_ examined each of the nine components that comprise the field of vision, as explained by Plate in _Religion, Art and Visual Culture_, that surrounds any artwork. This study utilized many common case-study research methods including a review of background and historical information and relevant literature, data collection, interviews, observation and interpretation.

My own interpretation and film analysis of _Difret_ is included in which I draw upon the theories and ideologies of Classical Hollywood, Third and African cinemas. I also compared and contrasted _Difret_ to other contemporary cinematic representations of Africa from both Western and African filmmakers. Taking a formalist approach to film review, setting, narrative structure and plot, point of view, cinematography, editing and sound were the among the filmic elements examined.

_Difret_’s narrative is premised on an actual event involving a young Ethiopian girl, Aberash Bekele. I researched the Bekele case and the media responses that accompanied it. One notable contribution from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a documentary film entitled _Schoolgirl Killer_ (1999) that chronicled Bekele’s case as well as the plight of other telefa victims in rural Ethiopia.

Western and Ethiopian newspaper articles surrounding the production and release of _Difret_ were collected and reviewed to gather information about the climate in which

\[\text{121 Ibid.}\]
the film was created. Previously documented interviews with the filmmakers and those involved in the production of the film were reviewed to further assess the film production process in its entirety. This method of data collection also provided information on the production climate in Ethiopia as well as the intentions of the filmmakers, their expectations in creating the film and an interpretation of whether their goals were achieved. I did not have the opportunity to personally interview the lead filmmakers, therefore I relied on secondary sources. I also viewed video documentation of dialogue between the filmmakers and audience members that took place at festivals and other events where the film was screened.

On April 27, 2016, I met with and interviewed Meaza Ashenafi, the founder of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association and the attorney whose legal efforts are chronicled in *Difret*. In addition to providing facts regarding Bekele’s case, Ashenafi also provided information regarding what has occurred legally and/or politically as result of the creation and release of the film in Ethiopia.

Biographical information on the filmmaker was gathered via the *Difret* website as well as through interviews and published online sources. The film’s website was also referenced to gather information on the various stages of production, awards and accolades *Difret* has received, as well as screenings and special events. The film’s social impact campaign provided information about the legal and socio/political implications of the film’s creation.

Further, *Difret* was screened at Harvard University on April 27, 2016 and viewers’ responses to the film were directly observed and perceptions assessed via an audience survey and post screening discussion. This was done to learn if the film
changed how people in a Western context see Africa or increased African literacy amongst viewers within that context. I prepared a survey/questionnaire, which was approved by the Harvard International Review Board (IRB). Participation in the screening as well as answering the pre/post survey was open to anyone and was completely voluntary. The audience was comprised of approximately forty people who were recruited via on campus promotion at Harvard University. Meaza Ashenafi was present at the event and following the screening spoke with the audience regarding her role in the legal case as well as her work as an attorney in Ethiopia. She also engaged in a question and answer session with the audience.

My direct observation and analysis of viewer’s responses was limited to one screening in one location and therefore, is by no means a comprehensive representation of the opinions of all audience members. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of audience responses to the film, I relied upon public thought and opinions shared by viewers on web and internet sources and recorded statements made during discussions with the filmmakers. I also read and assessed several critical reviews and interviews published in varying online sources and newspaper articles to gauge responses from the media.

My research was limited by my inability to conduct multiple screenings and survey varying audiences in multiple contexts. Further, personal identification information of viewers and audience members was often limited or not provided. Therefore, determining viewers’ individual cultural crossings and identities was not feasible. Also, I did not have the opportunity to conduct personal interviews with the filmmakers. Thus, previously administered interviews that are documented in secondary
sources were relied upon. Finally, I am unable to read or understand the Amharic language, which limited my access to documents and interviews in Ethiopian news and media sources to those that were originally produced in English or have been translated.
Chapter V

Results

This critical examination and analysis of the film *Difret* observes each of the nine components of the “field of vision” surrounding the film: the image itself, the relationship between the message and the medium, the creator of the image, the nature of the language that surrounds the image, the historical context of the image, the responses to the image, the identity of those who view the image, the particular cultural crossings that are constantly taking place, and the role of social, cultural, and political institutions in the creation and the reception of the art.\(^{122}\) The results of this critical analysis follow.

The Image

The assessment of the film’s image includes an examination of the creation of the image (background, production, physical execution) as well as the external imagery surrounding the film (e.g. the *Difret* DVD cover and theatrical release artwork). Further, I applied a formal analysis of the film based on my own observations and interpretations.

Background and Execution

*Difret* (2014) is an Ethiopian film shot on Kodak 35mm film stock.\(^{123}\) The film was shot in thirty-seven locations in Ethiopia in September of 2012.\(^{124}\) The film’s spoken


language is Amharic, Ethiopia’s official language, and is ninety-nine minutes in

duration.\textsuperscript{125} The film’s script took Mehari three years to research and compose.\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Difret}
is co-produced by Haile Addis Pictures (Mehari’s film production company) and Truth
Aid Media, a nonprofit organization that “produces creative content and educational
programming that challenges the world to think different.”\textsuperscript{127}

\textit{The film’s title.} Mehari initially titled the film \textit{Oblivion} however, as explained by the
director, after another film was released by the same name, it was altered. He states,
“Tom Cruise went and made a film, so we couldn’t use that title.”\textsuperscript{128} During post-
production the name was changed to \textit{Difret}. The Amharic word “difret” is polysemic and
has several varying English translations. In its most widely used way, it means “courage”
or “to dare.” Contrarily, however, it can also be used to mean “rape” or “a violation.”\textsuperscript{129}
Mehari explains that “Amharic is a complicated language filled with double-meanings”
and that of all the possible meanings of “difret,” “we believe the film speaks more to the
courage it takes to change traditions and customs which is why we named the film
\textit{Difret}.”\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{124} “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: \textit{Difret}” (video), March 16, 2015, accessed February 1,
2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSX9SkBp4BY.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Difret}, DVD.

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Difret}, “About the Film: Film Synopsis.”

\textsuperscript{127} Truth Aid, “About,” Truth Aid Media, accessed February 1, 2017,
http://www.truthaid.org/about/.

\textsuperscript{128} Stephen Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference
with \textit{Difret},” \textit{The Moveable Fest}, December 13, 2014, accessed February 1, 2017,

\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Difret}, “Name Change and Post-Production News,” \textit{Difret}: Feature Film, May 17, 2013,

\textsuperscript{130} Leonardo De Franceschi, “An Ethiopian Story: A Conversation with Zeresenay Berhane
Pre-production. During pre-production, Mehari assembled a core crew of ten seasoned professionals from around the world to fill the department head positions and hired approximately fifty-five Ethiopian crew members, many of whom had little to no film production experience.

The entire casting process took eight months during which the filmmakers met over 400 actresses before casting Meron Getnet, one of Ethiopia’s most popular film and television stars, as the lead role of activist and attorney Meaza Ashenafi. Tizita Hagere, aged thirteen at the time of production, was cast as Hirut Assefa, the young heroine of the story. Mehari explains that casting for this lead role was one of the biggest challenges he faced due to Ethiopia’s lack of young trained actors.131 After months of searching, Mehari together with his casting director, discovered Hagere at an after school acting workshop in Addis Ababa two weeks prior to the scheduled first day of shooting.132 Hagere, who lived in an orphanage, had no prior experience acting in theater or film.133 Each of the film’s seventy-one speaking roles and 300 extras were filled by Ethiopians, eighty percent of whom were first time or non-actors.134

131 Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with Difret.”

132 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: Difret” (video).


Production. Principal photography began in September of 2012 and continued for 34 days.\textsuperscript{135} The cast and crew worked six days a week, often putting in fourteen hour days.\textsuperscript{136} Difret’s director of photography, Monika Lenczewska, is the first woman to shoot a film in Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{137} The film’s humble budget influenced Lenczewska’s filming technique as she was not sure how extensive the post-production phase would be (i.e. correction, etcetera). She explains her style: “I tried to do everything in the camera, like old-fashioned cinematography. I was trying to be responsible because I didn’t know where I’d be doing the DI (digital intermediate), if at all.”\textsuperscript{138}

Post-production. Cinematography post-production took place at Technicolor Hollywood.\textsuperscript{139} Editing was completed in the U.S. by Polish film editor Agnieszka Glinska.\textsuperscript{140} After production was complete, Angelina Jolie-Pitt signed on to the project as Executive Producer and Presenter of the film.\textsuperscript{141} The total budget for the film was $875,000.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{138} Wolski, “To Live and DI for Park City.”

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.


Musical Score. The musical score was created by David Schommer and David Eggar and combines regional and classical music. Mehari has stated that he wanted the film score to provide the audience with a sense of “what Ethiopian music sounds like.” Mehari discusses his creative process and his choice to create a hybrid music theme:

I thought about the fact that in Ethiopia, we don't have any filmic music. So, David Schommer (who had been to Ethiopia many times, who knows Ethiopian music very well) and I sat down and came up with a plan. All the big emotional notes are played on cello, but because they are Ethiopian themes, when you hear the music, it doesn't sound like it is from Europe. We used Ethiopian themed music played on Western instruments.

Difret DVD Cover and U.S. Theatrical Release Artwork

The DVD and U.S. film release image incorporates both photographs and text. A medium close-up picture of Hirut is placed in the foreground of the upper two-thirds of the image. Six men on horseback are positioned far behind, riding toward her. A rural landscape is set in the background. The lower third of the image is a shot of Meaza and Hirut sitting in a car smiling at one another. The word “Difret” is the boldest and largest text on the image and it is placed in the center. “Angelina Jolie-Pitt Presents” is placed above the movie title. Below the film’s title is, “A Film by Zeresenay Berhane Mehari” followed by the phrase “Based on a True Story.” Zeresenay Berhane Mehari’s name is presented in the smallest font on the image. The image is void of the actors or other film


144 Ibid.
players’ names. Finally, the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award and the Berlin Film Festival Audience Award logos are featured.\textsuperscript{145}

Formal Film Analysis of \textit{Difret}

To assess the film’s visual imagery, a formalist approach was taken. Both the film’s narrative elements as well as several film techniques were observed including: setting, narrative structure and plot, point of view, cinematography, sound, and editing. 

\textit{Setting}. The story takes place in Ethiopia; in both the capital city of Addis Ababa as well as an unspecified rural community. However, the viewer is not made aware that the story is set in Ethiopia until twenty-eight minutes into the film. Further, the narrative never discloses the time in which the events take place.\textsuperscript{146}

\textit{Narrative structure and plot}. \textit{Difret’s} story rests on a dialectical narrative pattern; Ethiopia’s adoption of the modern concept of a universally accepted set of human rights is presented as the antithesis to the preservation of the deeply-rooted patriarchal cultural traditions that allow telefa to occur. Here, Mehari puts the contradicting worlds in dialogue with each other. The film’s plot follows a classical Hollywood storytelling formula and is structured following a three-act linear format.

Through parallel storylines that jump between the story’s two protagonists, Act I introduces Meaza Ashenafi, a young determined lawyer working for the Andinet Women Lawyers Association in Addis Ababa and Hirut Assefa, a smart and vibrant fourth-grade student in a rural village outside the city space. The viewer becomes familiar with

\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Difret}. 2014, DVD.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
Ashenafi’s work as a women’s rights defender when she meets and confronts Mr. Zanebe, the alcoholic and abusive husband of her client, Mrs. Belaynesh. During the confrontation, Meaza threatens to have him arrested if the abuse continues. The viewer also witnesses Hirut’s capture by seven men while on her way home from school. The young girl is taken away on horseback, locked in a hut, and raped by one of her abductors. Hirut then steals her abductor’s unattended gun, escapes and is chased into the forest by the seven men who first kidnapped her. Act I concludes with the film’s first plot point: Hirut shoots and kills the man who raped her. As his accomplices are near cutting her throat, village civilian police arrive on the scene, stop them and proclaim they are taking her to the police.

In Act II the plot develops as Meaza learns of Hirut, the fourteen-year-old girl who killed a man, has been arrested and is being charged with murder. Knowing the gravity of Hirut’s situation, she and her legal partners decide to defend her and travel to the distant rural village to meet her. The viewer is also introduced to several men who work at multiple levels within the Ethiopian legal system, some of whom are in constant opposition to Meaza and her efforts to defend Hirut. However, Meaza’s former employer, a prominent and influential judge, is supportive of Meaza. With his help, she is able to overcome several obstacles placed before her by the antagonistic legal authorities.

The second act also introduces Hirut’s family; poor rural farmers devastated by Hirut’s ordeal, but believe they are unable to help her because of their belief in the relevance of telefa in their community. In addition, the viewer is also provided with a resolution to the conflict introduced in Act I with Mrs. Belaynesh and her husband Mr.
Zanebe. Mrs. Belaynesh visits Meaza’s office and happily expresses gratitude for helping her get her husband back.

Throughout the second act, the protagonists’ shared goal is met with a challenge, and as one resolution is achieved, another obstacle arises. Through this employment of an elliptical narrative, the viewer is frequently led to believe that things will go badly for Hirut and Meaza but then, at the very last moment, circumstances shift and the possibility of a positive outcome returns. This is apparent toward the conclusion of the act when Meaza decides to sue the Ministry of Justice for refusing to overturn the decision made by the men in the customary court to exile Hirut from her village. Despite being forewarned by her former boss and mentor, the tenacious lawyer submits her case to the court. In retaliation to this, the Ministry of Justice suspends Andinet Women Lawyers Association indefinitely, placing Hirut’s fate in jeopardy as her pending court day is just one month away. Determined to continue to defend Hirut, Meaza passionately argues her case against the Ministry in court. Seemingly defeated, Meaza sits at a bar drinking whisky when she gets news that the Ministry of Justice resigned and that Andinet has been reinstated. This second plot point leads the story to the final act.

Act III begins with Hirut in court at her long-awaited trial. The room is filled with people including her family and the legal team. After a witness is called to the stand to speak on her behalf, Hirut is asked by the judge if she has anything to say for herself. She professes to the courtroom that she is not a murderer; she only killed the man who could have killed her. After her few words, the judges deliberate and come to a verdict that the actions Hirut took were the only course she had to defend herself, and therefore
she will not be charged for what she has done. As the judge delivers the court’s final verdict, the courtroom erupts in celebration.

The triumphant mood is tempered by a somber tone as Hirut’s family leaves her to return home without her. Though she has won her case and become the first women to be acquitted for killing a man on the grounds of self-defense, Hirut feels a sense of loss and expresses to Meaza as they leave the court that she does not feel like she has won anything. She fears she will not be able to save her little sister from her same fate. In the scene that begins the film’s denouement, Hirut asks Meaza to let her out of the car so she may walk the rest of the way. While the viewer is not sure where she will go, but she and Meaza leave each other in tears. In the film’s final shot, Hirut walks away from the camera, slowly fading into the crowded street of the busy city.147

Point of view (POV). Difret is not told from the point of view of a single character. Often, the viewer follows Hirut while camera shots and sound choices (i.e. the ringing in her ear when she is hit by her abductor, and POV shot of her noticing his rifle) allow the viewer her perspective.148 Also, several scenes show Hirut’s memories through flashbacks and dream sequences.149 Through these film techniques, Mehari establishes that part of the story is from Hirut’s point of view. However, the viewer frequently sees Hirut from behind, in over the shoulder shots, or walking away from the camera. Each of these angles position the spectator as a witness. Additionally, Meaza is a leading figure in the

147 Difret, 2014, DVD.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
narrative and the story often follows only her, allowing the viewer to see her experiences independent of Hirut.

That the film has multiple intended points of reference is confirmed further when Meaza meets Mrs. Belaynesh. The use of a POV shot allows the viewer to see Belaynesh’s perspective as she looks around the lawyer’s office. Further, the story also incorporates happenings that neither Hirut or Meaza are physically present for, including the nine-minute-long scene in which the village elders meet to discuss Hirut’s actions and decide her fate within the traditional community.150 This provides a perspective that is entirely new. Mehari confirms that the inclusion of several viewpoints was a deliberate attempt to place the audience in a position that allowed for active participation in the traveling journey of the film.151

*Cinematography.* Every scene in the film takes place during the day, and both the exterior and interior shots employ natural lighting. Most of the film was shot using hand-held cameras and Mehari explains this was a deliberate choice: “I wanted people to feel the texture of the story…I wanted the audience to be a part of the film, to judge for themselves. Ninety-five percent of the time the camera is hand-held. It was, in a way, an act of having the film come to you.”152

The film incorporates varying shots when capturing the characters. Notably frequent are the use of close-up, over-the-shoulder, point of view, two-shot, medium,

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150 Ibid.

151 De Franceschi, “An Ethiopian Story: A Conversation with Zeresenay Berhane Mehari.”

152 Sevcenko, “Marriage by Abduction—Based on a True Story.”
long and arc shots. Wide-angle shots showing the rural Ethiopian landscape also function throughout the film.153

*Sound.* The non-diegetic musical score is heavily relied upon to translate meaning to, as well as guide the viewer throughout the film. Shifts in style and composition of sound occur when scenes transition from urban to rural settings. This is noted when the story first leaves Meaza in the capital city and enters the rural setting where Hirut is introduced to the viewer.154 The scenes of the city are coupled with ambient sound typically heard in bustling urban spaces—cars honking, people chattering. Rather, the music that accompanies the jump to Hirut is tribal, playful, and upbeat. Further, alterations in tempo and volume occur during climactic or crucial moments in the story. This can be seen in the pivotal scene where Hirut is abducted as she joyfully runs home from school. The scene begins in silence with only the sound of the wind heard by the viewer. As the men with whips and lassos on horseback approach Hirut, music begins, indicating to the viewer that a shift in mood has occurred. The incorporation and strong emphasis on drums is a sign that the appearance of these men is threatening.155 Even before the viewer witnesses the men grab Hirut and ride off with her, the music makes clear that what is about to happen on screen is not going to be good.

Diegetic sound is also a tool utilized in the film. Loud gun shots, horses galloping and neighing, cacophonous sounds of technology, city ambience, classical music quietly playing in the home of Meaza’s former boss are all used to enhance the image or

153 *Diffret,* 2014, DVD.

154 Ibid.

155 Ibid.
in some cases as symbolic mechanisms or references.\textsuperscript{156} For example, the phone ringing loudly in Meaza’s home and as well as in the police station symbolizes Hirut’s internal struggle with and fear of the unknown and unfamiliar and the disorientation she is experiencing in the modern city after having left her rural home and traditional life.

\textit{Editing}. The editing employed in \textit{Difret} is continuous. The utilization of both long and short takes can be seen throughout the film. The rhythm is steady throughout most of the narrative, only shifting from a slow, natural pace to a faster tempo during climactic moments. This is evident in the scene in which Hirut is abducted by the seven men on horseback.\textsuperscript{157} There are also multiple fade-to-black cuts, often distinguishing a separation of physical space or lapsed time. This can be seen in the climactic moment when Meaza and Hirut are being chased away from the village by men on horseback shooting at their car. Just as is seems the men are going to catch up to the women, the scene is interrupted with a fade-to-black edit and continues with the two women driving in silence having managed to escape the potential life threatening situation.

\section*{The Medium and the Message}

The creator’s choice of art medium and the message of the content are examined next, both individually and in terms of the relationship between them.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
The Medium

_Difret_ is the fourth film to be shot on 35mm in Ethiopia. One of Mehari’s primary reasons for wanting to shoot on film rather than on digital format was to raise the expectations of Ethiopian cinema and to show that the Ethiopian film industry can produce content that has high production value. He clarifies this idea by stating: “I have always wanted to show Ethiopian filmmakers and audiences that we can make a film with the highest standards.”\(^{158}\) During an interview he shares his hopes for the film: “From a filmmaker’s standpoint, what I’m hoping that this film will do is show people that there’s great talent out there and the only way that we will continue to see films that are not made here (the United States) or in Europe is by going out and supporting the artists.”\(^{159}\)

The Message

When abruptly robbed of the life she cherished and forced to submit to the will of a stranger, Hirut Assefa’s determination to return to her family gave her the courage to seize her captor’s gun and defend her life. She inexorably altered her destiny when she used the gun to kill the man who took her from everything she knew and loved so she could serve as his wife. Unlike many young women in her culture forced into such servitude, she did the unthinkable; she created a source of personal power with the very instrument used to coerce her into compliance. The film’s message is about the courage to stand up to any violation and to take back one’s personal agency and determine one’s destiny.

\(^{158}\) De Franceschi, “An Ethiopian Story: A Conversation with Zeresenay Berhane Mehari.”

\(^{159}\) Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.
When asked about the film’s message, Meaza Ashenafi replied that it is about more than just Hirut’s personal story and the film’s plot:

It is about the political space. And about freedom of association. Freedom of speech. It is also about the changing role of women in my country, and in Africa generally. It is also about justice. It’s about the instrumentality of the law, and how you can use law to transform society. \(^{160}\)

_Difret_ producer, Mehret Mandefro, understands that this is a story about how culture changes and that ultimately “change comes from within, and there is really only so much you can say from the outside.”\(^{161}\) Mehari believes _Difret_ is about hope and that the story reminds the viewer not to “underestimate the power of one.” He continues to say, “this is one girl who said no to a centuries old tradition and one lawyer who said ‘I’m going to support you’ and the two of them changed the country forever.”\(^{162}\)

The Relationship Between the Message and the Medium

The message of the film’s story and the medium of choice by the creator share a common theme; change can happen, so long as there are individuals who are willing to challenge what is. Mehari’s deliberate use of cinema to tell a story about the struggle to challenge an entrenched Ethiopian tradition is meaningful because the creator employed a modern art medium, one that has historically been dominated by Western cultures and represented Africa as a place stuck in tradition, to deftly show that Ethiopia is a country capable of progress and that Ethiopians are courageous and powerful agents of change.


\(^{161}\) Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.

\(^{162}\) Ibid.
The Creator of the Image

Zeresenay Berhane Mehari, the writer/director of *Difret*, was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Mehari currently divides his time between both the United States and Ethiopia. He is married to Dr. Mehret Mandefro, *Difret* producer and President of Truth Aid Media. Though Mandefro was born in Ethiopia, she was raised in the United States. She received her bachelor of arts degree in anthropology and her medical degree from Harvard University. The couple has two young children together.

Childhood

Mehari is one of seven children and was raised by both his mother and father in Ethiopia’s capital city, Addis Ababa. Mehari states that as a child growing up in Addis Ababa he was shielded from the day-to-day occurrences in rural areas. “We had electricity, running water, TV, cinema—all of that. The traditional places we’d see in Ethiopian dramas was just something in the back of my mind.”

Mehari’s father is the owner and chef of a small restaurant in the city and was the one who introduced the filmmaker to the cinema. In an interview, he explains that he knew from a young age that he wanted to be a filmmaker and that film was significant to him in his early years:

Since I was six years old until I was eighteen, my dad used to take us to the movies every Sunday. It was a family tradition. I grew up during the Communist military dictatorship in Ethiopia, so there were no Western movies, but we did see three movies every Sunday in Ethiopia—Indian movies, martial-arts movies, Soviet propaganda movies…More

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164 Difret Press notes.
than entertainment, the theaters provided a safe haven for young boys. There was a civil war in Ethiopia, and the government was taking boys from families to serve in the army. But they didn’t dare come into the theaters. My being there was a relief for my mother.  

In another interview Mehari describes growing up in Ethiopian under the Communist military dictatorship:

They did a very good job at isolating us from the outside world. We watched a lot of Soviet propaganda movies, which suggest that the world is the way it is and that Communism is the best political system in the world. I did not know any other way, I didn't have anything to compare it with. In retrospect, I feel like we lost a generation. Many people were killed, many people were picked up from their homes and disappeared. We didn't know where they went. There was no freedom of speech, there were no arts, we couldn't express ourselves. So basically, we are experiencing a delayed period of growth in Ethiopia right now. Before the Communists, we were a monarchy, and we had a great open society. So now we are rushing back to re-establish our arts.

Education and Training

After winning a Diversity Visa lottery in 1996, eighteen-year-old Mehari moved to the United States to study film. He first settled in Cupertino, CA and attended De Anza College for two years prior to his admission to the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts. Determined to earn his degree from USC, Mehari applied only to that institution. He paid for his education through scholarships, Cal Grants, loans and the proceeds of his job at USC cinema operations. He graduated

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166 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”

167 *Difret*. “About the Film: Filmmakers.”
with a bachelor of arts degree in 2002. He went on to create the production company Haile-Addis Pictures shortly after.

Professional Film Career

In 2003, Mehari returned to Ethiopia for the first time in seven years. He spent the next two years working on several film and television projects in both Hollywood and Ethiopia. In 2005, while working on a documentary in Ethiopia, Mehari met Meaza Ashenafi’s brother at a dinner party. After learning about her work as the founder of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association legal aid organization and her involvement in the Aberash Bekele case, he states: “I knew right away that I wanted to tell her story.”

The Nature of the Language Surrounding the Image

The assessment of the nature of the language surrounding Difret examined the rhetoric used when explaining the film, disputing the film, and arguing for the film.

Explaining the Film

Here, the language used by Mehari to explain the film, the vernacular used by those arguing against the film, and the language used by those in support of the film are examined.

168 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
170 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”
171 Difret Press notes.
The inspiration behind the story. Most media sources that describe the film state that it was “based on a true story” or “based on true-life events”, in their reviews. Mehari has explained in multiple interviews the seminal moment in 2005 when he met Meaza Ashenafi’s brother at a dinner party in Addis Ababa. He states, “when I found Meaza’s story I was completely enthralled. What she did to take on a legal system and entrenched tradition is truly inspiring to me.”172 Thus, the entry point for the film’s story was Ashenafi and her endeavors as a women’s rights attorney and founder of the first free legal service NGO in Ethiopia.173 As he examined Ashenafi’s more significant case histories, he discovered Bekele’s case. At this point, he explains: “I was hooked. I knew I had to tell this story.”174

The motivation to make the film. In addition to the case being among the most influential and publicized that Ashenafi successfully took on, Bekele’s story helped Mehari reach a state of discernment: by not talking openly about the tradition of telefa and violence against women in Ethiopia, he was part of the problem.175 He explains further:

This case stopped me and made me think. This tradition is part of our culture. If you look closely, you could find family members who have done this. We’ve never seen it as a form of violence. We’ve never

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175 Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.
questioned that. Usually the girls don't retaliate, and when this girl did, it was the first time we as a country were forced to look at what happens.\textsuperscript{176}

Further, Mehari explains that case made him see telefa from a different point of view. Consequently, he began to question his understanding of the custom, pondering why he had not seen it as a form of violence or considered the custom “from the girl’s point of view.”\textsuperscript{177} This realization influenced his intentions for the film, adding that, “after I found it as a violence, in order to do this film, I needed to suspend that opinion, my opinion, and actually study the culture itself.”\textsuperscript{178}

The making of Difret. Mehari proclaims that, in making Difret, he had a responsibility “to show and tell the story the right way.”\textsuperscript{179} Accordingly, the right way meant, among other creative choices, to shoot the film on 35mm. One of his stated imperatives was to make the look and the feel of the country, its vast highlands and noisy capital city, as much a part of the story as the characters.\textsuperscript{180} Further, he explains the importance of showing “a different type of Ethiopia than people have seen,” asserting the following:

One of the things people noticed (was) they didn’t know that Ethiopia was that green and that was important for me because I wanted to show the opposite of the city and the village. And I wanted to show the film from the point of view of the people, the characters, how they see their country, not necessarily how I see it.\textsuperscript{181}

\textsuperscript{176} Turan, “Ethiopian Filmmaker Hopes Difret Will Make a Difference.”

\textsuperscript{177} Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{179} Turan, “Ethiopian Filmmaker Hopes Difret Will Make a Difference.”

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{181} Mumin, “Interview: Director Zeresenay Mehari on Difret and Creating a Complex Ethiopian Narrative (Now Streaming on Netflix USA).”
Mehari has stated that while writing the script and shooting the film, he was intent not to “point fingers” at one particular village because, as he explains, abduction for marriage is an accepted tradition in many parts of Ethiopia and in other parts of the world, as well.\textsuperscript{182} Thus he hoped to make it “broad enough for people to take ownership because it happens in all corners of our country.”\textsuperscript{183} In one interview Mehari discusses his creative choice to leave the specifics of the location unspecific:

My mother and father are from the village. Not that particular village, but in my mind, I think of all villages in Ethiopia as the same. Except for geographical differences—other than that, their traditions are the same in most places. Abduction is not necessarily one tribe’s problem, or one ethnicity’s problem, or one religion’s problem. It is an overall national problem that we have.\textsuperscript{184}

In terms of organizing the crew, Mehari wanted to “make a difference in the way we (Ethiopians) make films” and since he had worked in Hollywood for ten years prior to filming \textit{Difret}, he felt he “knew how to do things” therefore there should be a “transfer of knowledge” from himself to the crew.\textsuperscript{185} With this in mind, Mehari hired a predominantly Ethiopian crew; in fact, only ten of the sixty-five production team members were from outside the country.\textsuperscript{186}

When discussing his choices for the film’s cinematography, Mehari insists he “didn’t want to make it a typical Hollywood film, therefore he “didn't want to light it like

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\textsuperscript{182} “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: \textit{Difret}” (video).
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”
\textsuperscript{185} Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with \textit{Difret}.”
\textsuperscript{186} Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”
\end{flushright}
a Hollywood film or to have the same camera movements.”

Ninety-five percent of the shots were done with a handheld camera because he wanted the audience to experience the intimacy of the story firsthand, as though they were part of the film and not merely observing spectators.

In an interview with Mehari, Stephen Saito says *Difret* “marries a very naturalistic, doc-style look, with the structure of an old-fashioned Hollywood legal thriller.” Mehari has said that constructing the film’s narrative was challenging because “it’s difficult to take on social issues and strike the right balance of making an entertaining film that captures the imagination of the audience—without forcing it down their throats or beating them over the head with a social message.”

He expounds this further:

So, in order to understand why traditions happen in the way they happen you have to see the country as a whole in the context of their culture and their tradition so that was the toughest thing to do, especially when you’re trying to make a feature film that needs to have all the elements of drama. But in this case, I wasn’t so sure I was going to be able to put all of those elements in there and then still give you suspense, still give you complexity of the characters, still give you some sort of drama and entertainment for you not to be like, “Oh God, here comes another poor African story.”

In a conversation with Mehari, Nijla Mumin describes *Difret* as providing “effective storytelling where villains and heroes become blurred in the milieu of a very

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187 Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with *Difret*.”

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

190 Luz, “*Difret*: An Intimate Film of Profound Political Consequence.”

191 Mumin, “Interview: Director Zeresenay Mehari on *Difret* and Creating a Complex Ethiopian Narrative (Now Streaming on Netflix USA).”
diverse Ethiopia; one we don’t often see onscreen.”\textsuperscript{192} For Mehari, telling the story “the right way” meant not pointing fingers or demonizing the men who are perpetrators of telefa. He suggests “it’s very easy to create monsters, but (the film) would have lost its effect if we painted good here and bad here.”\textsuperscript{193} Consequently, effort was made to understand the tradition and to reveal the complexity of the characters and the multidimensions of their lives.\textsuperscript{194} Further, he asserts that it was important to portray the notion that men can change. This is seen in Hirut’s father and his support of his daughter’s education.\textsuperscript{195} Mehari was also careful to include in the narrative Ethiopian traditions that he considers comforting, amenable to progress, and worth preserving.\textsuperscript{196}

In the aforementioned interview, Mumin recalls the scene in which the elders gather to decide Hirut’s fate in the traditional court, saying “it went beyond one-dimensional characterization” presenting varied perspectives.\textsuperscript{197} Mehari agrees that is often the case when Africans are represented in film. He states that, “as an African filmmaker, I cringe whenever I see an African character portrayed and they’re one-dimensional.”\textsuperscript{198} Thus, the filmmaker emphasized the importance of affording the viewer an opportunity “see their life as a whole, not just this one thing they’ve done.” Mehari

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\item \textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{193} Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with \textit{Difret}.”
\item \textsuperscript{194} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{195} Luz, \textit{“Difret: An Intimate Film of Profound Political Consequence.”}
\item \textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{197} Mumin, “Interview: Director Zeresenay Mehari on \textit{Difret} and Creating a Complex Ethiopian Narrative (Now Streaming on Netflix USA).”
\item \textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
asserts, “pointing fingers is not going to help the issue…If there is a villain in my film it’s not a person, it’s the tradition.” He also points out that Meaza faced obstacles and setbacks in the form of many different people and so for Mehari, “the antagonist in the film did not have a face. Actually, it had many faces.” For him, showing this was the most difficult part of telling the story.

Concerns about and hopes for the film. According to Mehari, “film has a language; it is a universal language. Regardless of what country you are from, if you follow that language, audiences everywhere in the world can relate to you.” However, when asked at the Sundance Film Festival about whether he had any concerns with how Difret was going to be received in Ethiopia, Mehari replied:

> It’s not even a concern for me, but if it would be a concern, the only thing that I might think might be a little bit of a challenge for us is to be able to have the audience get into a different style of filmmaking. The way films are made in Ethiopia, the way the TV shows and radio shows are structured are a little different…introducing this film language might be a little bit of a task, but I have a good feeling about it.

Mehari’s expressed hope for the film is that it opens a dialogue about the traditions within the Ethiopian culture that hold women back. He emphasizes that while it was important for him to create a film that would inform those in the West, he

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199 Turan, “Ethiopian Filmmaker Hopes Difret Will Make a Difference.”

200 Luz, “Difret: An Intimate Film of Profound Political Consequence.”

201 Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with Difret.”

202 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”

203 Meron Getnet and Zeresenay Mehari, interview by Roger Ross Williams (video), Live at Sundance, Park City, Utah, January 20, 2014, accessed on February 1, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lEX_kn--FOQ.

204 Selam, “Q&A with Difret Director Zeresenay Mehari and Producer Mehret Mandefro.”
wanted to have an impact in Ethiopia. The director’s statements express a belief that change begins with education and “untold stories that compel us to think differently,” and his hopes are that Difret “will go a long way toward changing thinking in Ethiopia.”

The film’s producer, Mehret Mandefro, expresses her hopes that the film will leave the viewer with the realization that cultures can change:

I think sometimes people think that there are these things that can’t change—that traditions can’t change. And I want people to realize that actually culture can change if individuals are willing to challenge it. We made a film about Ethiopia and a very specific case, but obviously, the way that culture harms women and girls is relevant to any country everywhere.

Finally, Bekele says she hopes her story, as told through the film, motivates others to take courageous actions, both in Ethiopia and across the globe, to bring an end to child marriage and violence against women.

Language Disputing the Film

Before Bekele became optimistic that the film could be helpful in the global effort to end child marriage, and prior to her outreach partnership working with the filmmakers on the film’s international social impact campaign, she was in complete opposition to the film creation. In fact, she contends that she was never informed of the film or consulted.

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205 Turan, “Ethiopian Filmmaker Hopes Difret Will Make a Difference.”

206 Ibid.


by the filmmakers during the writing or production of *Difret*. Further, when she became informed of its making, she confronted Meaza Ashenafi and the producers and they denied that the film was about her.\(^{209}\) While these parties have since resolved their disagreement, Bekele’s initial reaction to her story being told on film without her consent was, “I feel doubly abducted.”\(^{210}\)

In addition, Charlotte Metcalf, director of *Schoolgirl Killer*, was also in opposition to the film at the time of its release stating that she was not consulted or told the film was being made. Upon viewing it at the London Film Festival she noted “some of the scenes were almost identical to *Schoolgirl Killer*.”\(^{211}\) Daniel Keftassa, one of Aberash’s lawyers featured in *Schoolgirl Killer*, says of the *Difret* premiere in Addis Ababa in 2014:

> I counted eleven big Mercedes dropping off actors that night. They swept up the red carpet, so high, so honoured to meet Meaza and other important people. Meanwhile, far from celebrations, running around out there seeking justice was Aberash. Aberash! The one who went through all the pain and all the trauma. I despair of people’s greed and ego that they say it’s not her story.\(^{212}\)

Language Arguing in Support of the Film

The nature of the language used by players arguing in favor of *Difret* stresses the significance of the story in an Ethiopian context as well as the importance of the film’s topic on a global, more broad level.


\(^{210}\) Ibid.

\(^{211}\) Ibid.

\(^{212}\) Ibid.
Julie Mehretu, *Difret* Executive Producer, Julie Mehretu, discusses her support of the film saying:

(The film) sets and example of how even the most deep-rooted cultural traditions can be transformed from within. It is essentially a story of homegrown Ethiopian heroism by two women who challenge the longstanding practice of forced child marriage. It’s an important story and an example, a model in a sense, of bravery and the will to effect change.213

She also goes further to stress the importance of supporting artists telling these kind of stories: “There are endless barriers to getting stories like this out into the world—intimate stories of African women and girls. It makes it all the more important to support independent African filmmakers like Mehari, who are telling stories from their own perspective from within their home countries.”214

Angelina Jolie. Executive Producer Angelina Jolie discusses the importance of the film saying:

It is inspiring to see such an important story so beautifully illustrated with such creative talent. It draws out the richness of Ethiopian culture and shows how important legal advances can be made while respecting local culture. It’s a story that gives hope for Ethiopia’s future, and for other countries where countless girls grow up without the protection of laws that shield them and their bodies, and shows how the courage of brave individuals can awaken the conscience of a society.215

US Secretary of State John Kerry. Upon seeing *Difret* at a screening of the film hosted by Jolie at the United Nations Summit to End Sexual Violence, United States Secretary of

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214 Ibid.

215 Emery, “Sundance 2014: Angelina Jolie Joins Ethiopian Film *Difret* as Executive Producer.”
State John Kerry mentioned the film in his convening remarks on the global issue of violence against women and children saying:

It is a call to action for all of us, and throughout this week you‘ve heard their stories. You‘ve witnessed their courage. You‘ve learned their names. We‘ve all learned the name of 14-year-old Hirut Assefa, so vividly captured in the film *Difret*, which Angelina helped produce. And there‘s some of you who have already seen this film, seen the film tells of the courage of an Ethiopian girl in the face of abduction and the compassion of one lawyer. But this really is a story of conscience and of conviction that ought to inspire everybody. This issue should be personal to all of us. It really should be. I know it’s become personal for me. As a veteran of war, as the father of two daughters, I can tell you it is very much so. But you know what? It ought to be personal for every man, woman and child on Earth, because it degrades and defiles the very idea of civilization. And the civilized world needs to come together and take a stand.216

The Responses to the Film

Data regarding the responses to *Difret* were compiled from varying sources. Included below are the data gathered from viewers‘ responses as well as the legalistic responses provoked by the film.

Responses from Viewers

Viewers‘ responses to the film were gathered from several sources including an audience survey distributed at the screening of *Difret* at Harvard University, public written responses shared on internet sources, and verbal responses made by viewers during interviews or discussions with the filmmakers.

Harvard screening: audience survey responses. Thirty surveys were voluntarily completed and returned following the screening of Difret and discussion with Meaza Ashenafi. Because this case-study is attempting to provide evidence as to whether Difret alters the way viewers in Western contexts see Africa or increases African literacy amongst viewers in Western contexts, only the results from surveys submitted by audience members from the United States or Europe are included here. Thirteen returned surveys were completed by viewers from a Western orientation. A table of the data gathered from the surveys shows the responses (Table 1).

Online reviews. Sixty-three responses from viewers were gathered from comments voluntarily written and shared on four public websites that allow audiences to post commentary. The four websites are: Netflix.com, Amazon.com, Rottentomatoes.com, and IMDB.com. A table of those relevant to this examination shows the responses (Tables 2 and 3).

Verbal responses. Two verbal responses from viewers that are relevant to this examination are included here. One is a response made by Erin Sharoni, the host of EVOLVER Show.217 While interviewing Zeresenay Berhane Mehari and Mehret Mandefro, Sharoni invokes her own commentary regarding the scene in Difret in which the village community members gather in customary court to discuss Hirut’s fate. Here, she states:

You also showed the pain of the village elders, this little clique of men who gather around a tree, incredibly, trying to debate what the fate of this girl and her family is in this rural village. What I found really striking was that you were able to allow us to empathize, or at least to understand, in a way, where these men were coming from, that in their minds they’re not really barbarians, right, even though we see them as that. For them this is

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217 Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.
a tradition and they must uphold it and justice must be served. And I just thought that was so interesting that you didn’t “Hollywood-ize” it, sort of, it wasn’t like “these are the bad guys and these are the good guys,” even though we know who that is. You sort of, you made it very human, which again, back to the story my parents told me all those years ago which was, you have to understand where these people are coming from. And that’s what I think makes the film really, really special.218

The second response comes from Melissa Silverstein, co-founder of the Athena Film Festival. Silverstein was responsible for Difret’s selection the 2015 Athena Film Festival. The film was screened on the festival’s closing night; succeeding the film, Mehari and Mandefro participated in a discussion with the audience, with Silverstein moderating the dialogue. As Mehari explained to the audience that while shooting the abduction scene, the local men in the village were involved, showing the actors and crew how abductions properly take place, Silverstein interrupts the director’s sentence with, “So, they showed you how they abduct girls? Oh my gosh!”219

Legalistic Responses

Difret was set to premiere in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on the night of September 3, 2014. However, just after Angelina Jolie’s introduction to the film, which included a statement that Difret was based on the untold story of Aberash Bekele, the premiere came to an abrupt denouement. While the room full of people excited to view the film sat in confusion, Mehari stood onstage and said to the audience (first in Amharic and then in English):

This is really embarrassing. We were just told by the police that we are to stop this film because there is a court order on it. We have not been informed prior to this. The Ministry of Culture knows about this, the

218 Ibid.

219 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: Difret” (video).
government knows about this, and this is the first time we are hearing it. This is obviously an attack on us and I’m really sorry for this to happen. I hope we are going to see you again and you'll be able to see this film, I guarantee that.  

Legal action taken against Difret’s production. That night, Aberash Bekele was granted a last-minute court order to stop the film screening. While Bekele’s name was no longer being used in relation to the film or its production, Bekele was suing on grounds that the film was based on her without her knowledge or consent. According to Bekele, she had contacted Ashenafi and the filmmakers who denied the film was about her and refused to attach her name to it.

Shortly after an out of court agreement was made between Bekele and the production team, the film premiered on September 25, 2014 and had a subsequent six week run in the capital city. However, following this release, a second ban was placed on the film when the children of Etagegnehu Lemessa, the attorney who defended Aberash in court, filed a lawsuit against the production claiming that the film depicted “distorted and untruthful accounts about the lawyer who defended Aberash, falsely portraying Meaza Ashenafi, ignoring Etagegnehu who battled for the Aberash at the court.”

Mehari says of the legal responses to the film:

(The) legal challenges that the film has encountered stems from an organized effort to discredit Meaza’s work and legacy on the case we chronicle in the film. Human rights lawyers are often not popular in the

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221 Metcalf, “The Rape Victim Who Fought Back and Shamed a Nation.”

222 Ibid.

countries where they challenge the customs and traditions and Ethiopia is no different. The film was initially banned for allegedly giving ‘too much credit’ to Meaza but there was no legal grounding for the claim nor was it valid so the ban was lifted.

Bekele now works with the Mehari and the film production team on the Difret social impact campaign. When asked why she initially sued the production and had the filmed banned in Ethiopia she says, “I was at a place where my life was still in danger, and I felt like the film coming out would put my life at risk. I hadn’t had a chance to assess the situation.”

*Charlotte Metcalf’s response.* While Bekele battled with the filmmakers over the film’s story rights, on September 16, 2014, Charlotte Metcalf, responded to the legal disagreement with a letter to the editor of Ethiomedia.com:

In 1999 I directed a documentary for the BBC about Aberash Bekele called “Schoolgirl Killer.” I had been working with the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association on another film about child marriages when I came across the story of Aberash and set out to tell it. My documentary charted Aberash's story from the moment of her abduction till her release, following her trial for the murder of her abductor…I am therefore horrified to hear that people are squabbling over the story rights. This is a true story that I have already told and Aberash and I and all the people involved in the making of the documentary would appreciate some recognition of the fact that we brought this story into the public domain well over a decade ago…Anyone who takes the time to watch the documentary will see that this story has already been well documented and told.225


The Historical Context of the Film

Ethiopia is home to eighty percent of Africa’s tallest mountains, and it is the second country to have adopted Christianity as its official religion. Ethiopia is the only African nation to have withstood colonization by European powers, largely because its vast highlands have helped protect the country from foreign conquest.226 While these highlands have historically experienced times of drought and famine, they have allowed for the preservation of one of the “world’s richest cultural treasure chests.”227 Still, while there are customs and rituals that are celebrated by all Ethiopians, there are traditions that divide the nation’s ninety million citizens.

Abduction for Marriage

Telefa, the practice of abducting young girls for marriage, is one such tradition. Meaza Ashenafi insists that abduction is one of the most entrenched and harmful practices in Ethiopia but for many “it’s a way of life.”228 However, for those far removed from the rural areas where telefa persists, it is not a personal reality. This divide was the result of many factors, including the severe lack of paved roads in the country which meant that interaction between cultures, traditions, and different ethnicities was very limited. Mehari, who was raised in the capital city of Addis Ababa, explains:


227 Ibid.

228 Sevcenko, “Marriage by Abduction—Based on a True Story.”
Telefa has been part of our vocabulary and part of our lives forever. It is a centuries old tradition. If you were Ethiopian, you knew about telefa, but since it was removed from your own life, it was not your problem...The people in the city (like me), did not see or were not concerned about telefa.\footnote{Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”}

Bekele’s Case

In 1957, Ethiopian law prohibited abduction for marriage, however, as Ashenafi clarifies, a provision in the law stated that if the person who was abducted agreed to marry the abductor, the abductor would not be charged for the crime. The case of Aberash Bekele, featured in Difret, was unprecedented in Ethiopia’s legal system. Not only did it lead to a legal reform that removed the agreement to marriage provision from the law, making abduction fundamentally illegal and punishable by incarceration, Bekele was the first woman to be acquitted for killing a man on the grounds of self-defense.\footnote{“Tadias Interview with the Women of Difret” (video), Tadias Magazine, October 25, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdOpN7mGqyk.}

Still, despite her release, she was exiled from her village, unable to return home to her family.\footnote{Metcalf, “The Rape Victim Who Fought Back and Shamed a Nation.”}

Media attention. Since this case was documented on every radio and television station in Ethiopia, both Bekele and Ashenafi became household names. Mehari points out that it was the first court case of its kind to be broadcasted daily on the radio. Thus, he explains, in Ethiopia, “everybody knew about it.”\footnote{“2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: Difret” (video).} Further, Western media outlets like the BBC and CNN covered the case for two years.
Post-trial, a documentary chronicling Bekele’s legal journey, *Schoolgirl Killer* (1999), broadcasted Bekele’s story to the Western world.\(^{233}\) *Schoolgirl Killer* is a made for television documentary that chronicles Bekele’s story. The fifty-minute film is directed by Charlotte Metcalf and produced by True Vision. True Vision is a British media production company, formed in 1995 to engage its audience with issues of concern. Their stated goal is “to bring to the audience character led narratives that entertain but also inform and educate.”\(^{234}\) According to Metcalf, when the production aired on the BBC in 1999, “it struck a chord with the British public, who sent in enough money to send Bekele to a safe boarding school to finish her education.”\(^{235}\)

*Mehari learns of the case.* Despite the widespread coverage of this case throughout Ethiopia and abroad, Mehari asserts that he did not learn of the case until 2005, when he began researching Ashenafi’s legal work. After, he spent three years researching and writing the script during which he reviewed all radio coverage and newspaper articles and “spoke to nearly everyone involved in the case.”\(^{236}\) However, he never spoke to or met with Aberash Bekele prior to the release of the film, nor was any contact or interaction with Metcalf made. Metcalf was informed of *Difret* through an Ethiopian cameraman and saw the film for the first time at the London Film Festival.\(^{237}\)

\(^{233}\) Sevcenko, “Marriage by Abduction—Based on a True Story.”


\(^{235}\) Metcalf, “The Rape Victim Who Fought Back and Shamed a Nation.”


\(^{237}\) Metcalf, “The Rape Victim Who Fought Back and Shamed a Nation.”
Omitting Bekele’s name from the story. Though Bekele’s name is not used in the film, it is undoubtedly evident that the film is based on her story. Among other evidence supporting this notion, is the use of Bekele’s name in the film’s initial Kickstarter campaign (under the film’s previous title, Oblivion). However, at some point before production began, Bekele’s name was removed from the project and replaced with the fictional name, Hirut Assefa. Just after the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, Mehari was asked if he had met the “real Hirut.” He replied: “I have never met Hirut. She is in hiding. I don’t believe that she wants to emigrate. She knows about us and the movie. She has not seen it yet.”

Schoolgirl Killer and Difret Likenesses and Variances

Schoolgirl Killer and Difret share many similarities. For example, much of what Hirut’s character says in the film is akin, at times mimetic, to Aberash’s language in the BBC documentary. Also, both films focus on hearing what the perpetrators of telefa believe about the tradition.

On the other hand, there are significant variations between what is depicted in Difret and what is shown in Schoolgirl Killer. For instance, though similar scenes can be found in both films, they play out quite differently. Further, Meaza is not as present of a

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239 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”

240 Ibid.
figure in the BBC production as she is in *Difret*. Mehari has not publicly stated whether he consulted the BBC documentary during his research of Bekele’s case.

The Identity of the Viewer

Mehari has insisted on numerous accounts that his intended audience for *Difret* “was the Ethiopian audience” and the his goal was to ensure that young girls especially see this film and “find themselves in it and be able to be encouraged by this particular story.” However, during an interview at the Sundance Film Festival following the premiere of his film, Mehari explains that while he made this film primarily for an Ethiopian spectator, he hopes this will be an African film that it will be able to cross over to the West. Here, he adds that he made the film “with one eye looking to the west and seeing that we might end up there at one point.”

Emphasis on an Intended Ethiopian Audience

During an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Mehari explains that though it was important for him to make a film that could cross over to Western audiences, it was more important for *Difret* to be shown and have an impact in Ethiopia. He explains that

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242 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: *Difret*” (video).

243 Getnet and Mehari, interview by Roger Ross Williams (video).

244 Ibid.
“the cycle (of abductions) has to break at some point…What you have to do is to educate. I hope this film will go a long way toward changing thinking in Ethiopia.”

*Intention to have the film reach rural communities.* Following a screening of *Difret* at the Athena Film Festival on February 8, 2015 in New York City, both Mehari and the film’s producer Mehret Mandefro explained to the audience that their plans are to screen *Difret* in rural communities throughout Ethiopia. Here, Mehari expresses a level of excitement when discussing taking the film back to Ethiopia as a roadshow. He describes taking the film to places where there is no electricity or running water and having a movie night, showing the film on projectors powered by generators. In one interview Mehari describes what he envisions this to be: “pop-up cinemas—basically a large suitcase with a projector, a screen, a speaker, and a portable power pack.” Following the screening the filmmaker wants to engage in a conversation with community members and discuss the film and the consequences of continuing harmful traditions.

*Difret* Premieres at Sundance

The World Cinematic Premiere of *Difret* was at the Sundance Film Festival on January 22, 2014 in Park City, Utah. The international premiere followed on February 6, 2014 at the Berlin International Film Festival in Berlin, Germany. The film’s Ethiopian premiere in Addis Ababa was first scheduled on September 4, 2014. As noted earlier, the

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245 Turan, “Ethiopian Filmmaker Hopes *Difret* Will Make a Difference.”

246 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: *Difret*” (video).


248 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: *Difret*” (video).
film was stopped by authorities just after Angelina Jolie’s prerecorded introduction of the film played on the theater’s screen. Several weeks later, on September 25, the film officially premiered in Addis Ababa followed by a six-week theatrical release in the city.\

_Difret_ is Screened to International Audiences

Since its first screening in January of 2014, according to the _Difret_ website, the film has been shown at over 100 organized events on six continents, in twenty-two countries including: The United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands, Spain, England, Croatia, Ukraine, Greece, Estonia, France, Curacao, Trinidad, South Korea, Israel, India, Australia, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Tunisia.

Further, according to the list of 103 screenings, seventy-two events took place in the United States, only ten have taken place in a country outside of the U.S., Europe or Canada. Three of those ten took place in Africa. In October, 2015 the film had its U.S. theatrical release in New York City and is now streaming online and is available to watch on Netflix, Amazon Prime and iTunes.

Why _Difret_ Did Not First Premiere in Ethiopia

When asked why the film was not initially premiered in Ethiopia, Mehari explained that after cutting the film in the winter of 2013, it was accepted to the Sundance Film Festival. He continues: “We had to go to Sundance. Five days later we

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249 Ibid.


were in Berlin so we didn't have time, really, to go to Ethiopia because we wanted to do it proper.”

When asked what “proper” meant he replied: “Proper means having an opening, a premiere, acknowledging the actors, the people who helped the film, and also inviting people that are interested in the media, in the film, and also people that are close to this issue.”

The film had been screened at fourteen organized events in ten countries before being shown in Ethiopia for the first time. It is also important to note that the attorney depicted in the film, Meaza Ashenafi, only saw the film for the first time at the Berlin screening. In an interview held with Ashenafi, Mehari, Hagere and Jolie, Meaza stated that she had asked Mehari to see the film prior to its release because she wanted to see it before the journalists. Mehari responded explaining that he wanted her to see the film for the first time in a theater with an audience.

Cultural Crossings Taking Place

The crossing between Ethiopian and Western cultures, contexts and experiences is next discussed.

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253 Ibid.

Crossing Between Ethiopian and Western Cultures

Mehari has revealed when first telling his parents that he was going to be a filmmaker his father’s reaction was less than positive. He explains his father’s wariness stating, “he felt that was what other people did, not Ethiopians.” While there were few Ethiopian filmmakers when Mehari was a child, he and his father were very familiar with the cinema. Mehari recalls his early experiences with the culture: “My dad took me to my first movie theater, The Cinema Ethiopia, when I was just six years old. It became a family tradition to go to the movies every Sunday.”

Throughout Mehari’s early youth, Ethiopia was ruled under a communist dictatorship, so for most of the filmmaker’s childhood the only films he viewed were Bollywood and Russian propaganda productions. When the regime came to an end 1991, video cassettes and VCRs became part of the urban Ethiopian culture. As a result, Mehari’s exposure to Western cinema increased as he spent his teenage years watching American music videos and movies. He explains that this exposure to Western cultural influence and having “lived through movies” all his life, upon moving to the United States at eighteen, he never experienced any sort of culture shock. Instead, he explains, he “felt like he belonged here.”

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255 Turan, “Ethiopian Filmmaker Hopes Difret Will Make a Difference.”
256 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”
257 Ibid.
258 Ibid.
259 Ibid.
260 Ibid.
While cinema played an integral role throughout his youth, Mehari did not develop a model or style of filmmaking until he went to film school. At USC he discovered the works of Bergman, Fellini, and De Sica and “fell in love with cinema verite and the stories of the common man.”\textsuperscript{261} However, it wasn’t until his third-year that he discovered the work of Haile Gerima, Ethiopia’s most influential filmmaker of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{262}

After graduating Mehari returned to Ethiopia in 2003 for the first time since leaving in 1996, and he began working in film and television in the U.S., making semi-annual visits to Ethiopia for the following few years.\textsuperscript{263} During this time, Ethiopia saw a boost in local film production and Mehari describes the profound impact that the screening one of these local films had on the culture:

> For the first time, some guy made an Ethiopian movie, and people were just beside themselves to see it. You could understand that — this was the first time they could actually hear their voices and look at themselves on the screen. So they did not care if the lighting was right, if the audio was right, if the acting was right – they did not care at all! (I can’t blame them.)\textsuperscript{264}

After seeing this film that he described as “theater on camera” he was compelled to do something different than the kind of filmmaking being produced in Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{265} He explains his reasons to want to influence local filmmaking saying, “I had left home and trained at one of the best film schools in the world, and started working in film and

\textsuperscript{261} De Franceschi, “An Ethiopian Story: A Conversation with Zeresenay Berhane Mehari.”

\textsuperscript{262} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{263} Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.
television after finishing school, so I had some experience, and I knew how things were done.”

Because there are no film schools in Ethiopia, he wanted to influence film culture in his home country and find young kids who would want to learn from him.

Cultural Crossings Within the Ethiopian Context

Mehari states that while his childhood was removed from the daily life of rural communities, he knew about the traditional practice of telefa. With that said, he never thought about it as being a form of violence or as a violation of an individual’s human rights “because its wrapped up in this shimmering, very nice sounding ‘tradition’ or culture, something that separates you from the rest of the world.”

Later when he heard about Bekele’s case, he recognized that silence regarding this harmful tradition contributed to the problem. His desire to address the issue became his entry point for writing the film.

He explains that after he began to see telefa as a form of violence against women, in order to make a film that would not demonize those who practice the tradition but rather open up a dialogue between the opposing Ethiopian cultures, he needed to suspend his personal opinions about the practice and have the larger conversation of ‘why this happens and when are we going to talk about it’.

The filmmaker explains:

I know for fact these people are not monsters. They are doing what they are doing because that is their reality...It is very easy to point fingers and

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266 Ibid.
267 Ibid.
268 Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.
269 Silverstein, “Producer Mehret Mandefro on How Her Bride-Abduction Drama Difret Shows that Change Can Happen.”
270 Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.
say ‘here are the good guys and here are the bad guys’ and ‘here is the evil and this is how you get rid of the evil’…that is not how things work in the real world…My goal was to lay everything on the table for people to understand.271

Mehari has explained that even though many Ethiopians do not agree with the practice of telefa, discussing the tradition with Ethiopians while researching the film was often met with hesitation and even members of the diaspora or those educated abroad were uneasy with the dialogue. He states:

They (Ethiopians) don't want to talk about tradition, they want to protect tradition, especially if they sense that you have a little exposure outside the country. So there was a pushback, ‘Oh, you want to expose a tradition that is well and accepted in this country.’ I was furious about that.272

At first, an Ethiopian man wanting to make a film about Ethiopian women provoked skepticism from Ashenafi as well.273 While Mehari’s intention was to show Ashenafi’s efforts in advancing women’s issues in Ethiopia as well as to show the courage of both her and Bekele, he didn’t see himself as “a guy doing a feminist film,” rather he saw this as a “great human story.”274 He explains further: “My entry point has always been the characters and what they experience so when you delve into the characters, their gender becomes irrelevant because we all want the same thing and we all feel the same passions

271 Ibid.

272 Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with Difret.”

273 Mumin, “Interview: Director Zeresenay Mehari on Difret and Creating a Complex Ethiopian Narrative (Now Streaming on Netflix USA).”

274 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”
and determinations.”  He insists, “the courage that both these women had, in effect, became the inspiration for me to have the courage to question my own culture.”

The Role of Institutions in the Creation and Reception of the Film’s Image

The particular roles and influences of various institutions, in and on both the creation and reception of Difret, are discussed next.

Creation

The assessment of the role institutions played in the creation of the film included an examination of the film’s sources and means of funding as well as an exploration of the film’s production climate in Ethiopia.

Funding. Mehari maintains that securing funding for the film was the greatest obstacle in creating Difret. Soon after finishing the script, the writer attached a single investor to fund the production. However, after the 2008 economic collapse, this potential producer backed out of the project. In the months that followed, Mehari was afforded other opportunities, but these were based on conditions that he was not willing to concede with, including potential investors’ demands to have the film shot in English and not in

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275 Mumin, “Interview: Director Zeresenay Mehari on Difret and Creating a Complex Ethiopian Narrative (Now Streaming on Netflix USA).”

276 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”

Ethiopia, and having an American actress play Meaza Ashenafi’s character. In an interview the director explains why he said no to all the offers:

Primarily, I made the film for Ethiopian audiences. I want this film to be accessible for young girls who are facing this situation back in Ethiopia. If I had made it in English or if I had made Difret with a known actor, then it would have been a different film altogether.

Despite arguments that there was not an audience for this type of film, Mehari insisted on making Difret without compromising his vision. To this end, he began looking for alternative funding sources. In 2009, he presented Mehret Mandefro, President of Truth Aid Media, the script with hopes she might assist in producing the film. According to Mehari, after reading the screenplay she “was completely blown away by Difret” and she quickly signing on to the project. This made the film a co-production of Haile Addis Pictures and Truth Aid Media. Mehari has stated, “I don’t think this project would have happened if it was not for Mehret Mandefro’s involvement.”

Mandefro soon began efforts to secure funding for the film. They applied to multiple filmmaking grants, advancing to the final rounds in almost all of them, but failed to land any of them. Mandefro explains that while everyone seemed to love the script and the story, the feedback they received was that the “project was too ambitious for first-time filmmakers.”

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278 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”
279 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
281 Ibid.
282 Mandefro, “The Myriad of Sources of Financing for Ethiopian Drama Difret.”
Looking to non-traditional sources of funding, Mandefro and Mehari began to mobilize their friends and personal relationships. Francesca Zampi signed on to become an executive producer early on. Zampi’s background was in theater and as Mandefro explains, she had “a rolodex of connections that she was willing to offer to help finance the film.”

Through an auction at a cabaret show in New York City, Zampi helped fundraise the production’s initial $50,000 needed to begin pre-production.

Mandefro then sought out wealthy members of the Ethiopian community as potential private investors and states that she “knew the proposition would only make sense for someone who valued art and understood the larger cultural, socio-political mission of our film.” Julie Mehretu, an Ethiopian-American abstract painter based in New York City, learned of the project and after she and her partner, Jessica Rankin, read the script both signed on to be executive producers, guaranteeing enough funds to begin principal photography.

Panovision donated a 35mm film package to the production, and Pipeline donated the necessary production supplies. In order to raise the remaining funds necessary to complete shooting and cover the expected high cost of the film development process, the production team held another fundraising auction in London and launched a Kickstarter

283 Ibid.
284 Ibid.
285 Ibid.
286 Ibid.
campaign with a goal to raise $30,000. With the financial help of 118 backers, the film’s first crowdfunding campaign raised $37,617.\textsuperscript{288}

Once principal photography ended in September of 2012, the funds needed to begin post-production were not secured so the production team put together “a short teaser” to show to potential donors or investors.\textsuperscript{289} After seeing the preview, Matt Stone, co-creator of “South Park,” and his wife, Angela Stone, donated the funds necessary to begin the post-production phase.\textsuperscript{290}

The final fundraising effort was the launch of a second Kickstarter, this time with the goal to raise $20,000. By the end of the campaign, 134 backers pledged $29,581.\textsuperscript{291} In an interview Mehari states that \textit{Difret} was “made by the masses” and it was the crowdfunding campaigns where hundreds of people gave ten and 100 dollars that made making the film possible.\textsuperscript{292} Mandefro explains the benefits of seeking alternative methods of funding:

Financing the film piecemeal meant the entire process took longer than we’d anticipated—three years in total. But it also meant that we were able to retain a large portion of the equity in the project as well as maintain creative control. Ultimately, the way that \textit{Difret} was financed allowed us to stay true to what we had hoped for the film. We didn't have to compromise on the vision. It was certainly a harder path to take, but in the end, the only way we could have made the film we wanted to make.\textsuperscript{293}

\textsuperscript{288} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{289} Mandefro, “The Myriad of Sources of Financing for Ethiopian Drama \textit{Difret}.”

\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{292} Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.

\textsuperscript{293} Mandefro, “The Myriad of Sources of Financing for Ethiopian Drama \textit{Difret}.”
Production in Ethiopia. Because Ethiopia lacks a developed film industry, the production process was met with several logistical challenges. Firstly, casting the film proved difficult, as there are very few trained child actors in Ethiopia, so finding Hagere to play the role of Hirut was a significant feat. Mehari also veered toward hiring non-actors to play many of the film’s speaking roles and this consisted of going to each of the film locations and finding local non-professional actors to fill the roles needed for the scene that would be shot in that particular location. Mehari filled eighty-percent of the film’s roles with first-time or non-actors. Secondly, Mehari explains that shooting on 35-mm was a feat because of the lack of resources and film facilities in Ethiopia. The production team flew in 2,500 tons of celluloid, 110,000 feet of film, and three cameras. And because of the complete absence of film development labs in Ethiopia, the most efficient option for film development was to send the stock to Mumbai, India each day for processing. Mehari explains, “we shot the first nine days without seeing a single daily. We were blindfolded, to be honest with you.” Further, there are very few trained film production professionals so most of the production crew members were completely new to filmmaking.

Aside from these logistical challenges, Mehari states that production in Ethiopia went rather seamlessly. Both the national and local governments cooperated with and supported the production process, and the team received great support from both the city

294 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: Difret” (video).
295 Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.
296 Stein, “Heroic Difret Wins Sundance Audience Award.”
297 Ibid.
and village community members.\textsuperscript{298} In many cases, the director was advised and corrected by those familiar with the context or circumstances being depicted in the scene. For example, while shooting the scene in which Hirut is abducted by men on horseback, the men in the village insisted on showing the professional riders how abductions are correctly done. And while shooting the trial scenes in the Supreme Court, the law officials corrected the wardrobe and provided the crew with the robes worn by Ethiopian judges.\textsuperscript{299}

Reception

The assessment of the role of institutions in the reception of \textit{Difret} included an examination of the institutions at which the film has been screened, an observation of Angelina Jolie’s attachment to the film, and examination of the film’s social impact campaign, the various awards \textit{Difret} has received or been nominated for since its premiere, and a look the impact of premiering the film at the Sundance Film Festival \textit{Institutions at which the film has been screened}. According to the film’s website, since its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January of 2014, \textit{Difret} has been shown at 103 organized public and private events. Several of these events include:

- A special screening of \textit{Difret} was hosted by the Ford Foundation during the United Nations’ 59th Commission on the Status of Women meeting. The event brought together advocates and experts and included a conversation about how supporting cultural change can help advance

\textsuperscript{298} Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.

\textsuperscript{299} “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: \textit{Difret}” (video).
human rights. Aberash Bekele was present and received a standing ovation at the end of the film. The first time that she attended a public screening of the film outside of Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{300}

- \textit{Difret} screened at the Girls Up Leadership Summit, a three-day event hosted by Girl UP, the United Nations Foundation’s adolescent girl campaign. The theme of the summit was “Stand Up. Speak Up. Rise Up” and aimed to provide young girls a chance to develop their advocacy skills.\textsuperscript{301}

- World Bank: Women, Business and the Law 2016- \textit{Difret} screened as part of the launch event for the World Bank’s Women, Business and the Law 2016 report.\textsuperscript{302}

- \textit{Difret} screened at Cine ONU—a collaboration between the United Nations Information Service and the Graduate Institute of Geneva. The event featured a debate about child marriage.\textsuperscript{303}

- Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in London. Angelina Jolie, in her role as United Nations Special Envoy convened the summit,


which sought to establish an international protocol for the prosecution of rape and sexual abuse in conflict. Attended by more than 100 heads of state, survivors, and experts, the conference included a segment where films and art were part of the exchange between attendees. Jolie hosted a screening of *Difret*.\(^{304}\)

- NAFSA 2016- *Difret* was screened at the Association of International Educators Annual Conference in Denver, CO.\(^{305}\)

As per the listed screenings, the specific institutions at which the film has been screened include but are not limited to: over thirty film festivals around the world, numerous U.S. and international government functions, several American universities, multiple churches and faith institutions, as well as various art institutions, museums, community centers, and libraries across the United States.\(^{306}\)

*Angelina Jolie’s involvement with the film.* Angelina Jolie reveals she was compelled to sign on to the film in an executive producer role because *Difret* goes beyond showing a powerful story, rather it educates and informs and is therefore able to help the audience move forward. Above being moved by the content and the subject matter, she is also proud of the high level of art coming out of Ethiopia.\(^{307}\) At this stage in production *Difret* was a locked picture, a finished product, so Mandefro states:

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\(^{305}\) *Difret.* “Past Screenings.”

\(^{306}\) Ibid.

\(^{307}\) “Variety Screening Series: Difret” (video).
We asked her to put her name on it and help make sure the film gets seen. I can’t even remember how many outlets picked up the press release that went out about how she signed on as executive producer. Automatically, people pay attention when her name is added to it. It’s definitely helped getting it to a wider mainstream audience.308

One such media outlet referenced by Mandefro was the Hollywood Reporter, stating in response to Jolie’s attachment: “The Oscar-winning actress will be taking an executive producer and presentation credit on Difret.”309 Other sources referenced the potential outcome of her involvement in terms of audience visibility, saying Difret has “a ‘Presented by Angelina Jolie’ credit, guaranteeing it a wider audience outside Ethiopia than that afforded to the rest of the African nation’s cinematic output.”310

Additionally, her respected reputation for her work in Hollywood boosts the film’s level of merit and credibility within audiences. This is exemplified by a comment made by Erin Sharoni in an interview she conducted with Mehari and Mandefro:

Angelina Jolie Pitt is the executive producer of the film, and so if you don’t believe me when I say that it is literally, without question, the best film that I have seen in 2015, and maybe beyond, at least believe that usually Angelina is usually involved with pretty solid work.311

Similarly, another article suggests Difret is a film “strong enough to have gotten the support of Angelina Jolie as an executive producer.”312

308 Silverstein, “Producer Mehret Mandefro on How Her Bride-Abduction Drama Difret Shows that Change Can Happen.”

309 Emery, “Sundance 2014: Angelina Jolie Joins Ethiopian Film Difret as Executive Producer.”


311 Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.

312 Turan, “Ethiopian Filmmaker Hopes Difret Will Make a Difference.”
As “Presenter” of the film, Jolie introduced the film to audiences at the Sundance premiere. Attendees sitting down to view *Difret* were shown a pre-recorded video of Jolie stating:

It is a great honor to introduce to you, the remarkable film *Difret*. When I first saw this film, I was moved to tears by the story that they managed to show. The sad and the hopeful, the old and the new, the harmful tradition of telefa, and the possibility that culture can change. I’d like to congratulate the filmmakers, Zeresenay, Mehret, and the entire *Difret* team. Films like these are so important to continue to support and to make, as they help us all to push the art of filmmaking forward and shed light on untold stories about Ethiopia and beyond. Thank you and enjoy the film.313

Jolie’s involvement with and presentation of the film is not limited to Western contexts—at the *Difret* premiere in Addis Ababa, Jolie introduced the film to the primarily Ethiopia audience. As her photograph was presented on screen, a recorded voiceover of her words stated:

I would like to congratulate my friends, Zeresenay and Mehret, and the entire *Difret* team on this exciting night. I hope you will continue to make films that advance the art of filmmaking, share untold stories about Ethiopia, and shed light on our common humanity. Thank you and enjoy the film.314

Aside from lending a level of credibility to the film’s artistic merit to audiences around the world, Jolie’s work as respected member of the global human rights arena places the film in the international humanitarian domain. According to Mandefro, Jolie has not only been instrumental at increasing visibility and opening doors, she has been a


global ambassador for the film and by hosting a special screening of *Difret* at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence and Conflict, she has played a pivotal role in the film’s social impact campaign which aims to utilize *Difret* as a tool for social change.\(^{315}\)

**Difret social impact campaign.** In an interview with *Tadias Magazine*, Mandefro explains that both she and Mehari always aspired to make a film that was going to be used as a tool to make a difference.\(^{316}\) In order to implement *Difret* as such, Truth Aid Media partnered with Picture Motion to develop the *Difret* social impact campaign.\(^{317}\) According to the agency’s website, “Picture Motion is the leading marketing and advocacy firm for issue driven films. We work with filmmakers and change makers to amplify awareness, expose injustice, and drive activism, with the goal of advancing social change.”\(^{318}\) Regarding the efforts surrounding *Difret*, the firm explains:

> The impact campaign for *Difret* sought to end child marriage internationally through a theatrical release, key partnerships, strategic screening and a robust social media campaign... The goal of the film’s campaign was to leverage *Difret* and Aberash’s true story to spark action and spur a larger movement. Specific goals included educating audiences on the issue of child marriage internationally through the film’s distribution, engaging with audiences and create opportunities to take action, online and off, and encouraging the U.S. government to intervene, and support NGOs working to end child marriage.\(^{319}\)

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315 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: *Difret*” (video).

316 “Tadias Interview with the Women of *Difret*” (video).


318 Ibid.

319 Ibid.
One significant product of the campaign is the creation of an educational curriculum to be taught alongside the presentation of Difret in classroom settings. This education component is focused on sensitizing audiences in the global north about the issue of child marriage.320 The educational guide states: “A class screening of the film may supplement a global studies, legal studies or women’s rights curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, Difret will challenge students to think critically about the global struggle for women’s rights.”321 The guide has been integrated into schools in the United States and Europe at all levels of education.322 While the impact campaign leaders hope to draft and implement a similar human rights education curriculum to be used alongside Difret in schools in Ethiopia, such efforts have not yet been initiated.323

A primary goal of the impact campaign was to encourage a change in United States policy regarding child marriage. In 2015, Aberash Bekele, with Truth Aid Media, launched a Change.org petition asking President Obama and the U.S. State Department for the release of the Adolescent Girl Strategy, a comprehensive plan to address, and end, early and forced marriages.324 The petition states:

Every day that we wait for the implementation of the new law to become reality, another 39,000 girls are married. This is unacceptable. When girls are forced into marriage early, entire communities miss out on their

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322 “Tadias Interview with the Women of Difret” (video).

323 Ibid.

potential as change makers, economic drivers, and leaders. We must end child marriage to allow girls to realize their full potential in order to achieve the world we want. We need a coordinated, whole-of-government strategy immediately…You can help. Tell President Obama to issue an Executive Order directing the U.S. government to use its full force to protect and empower the world’s girls and end child marriage once and for all.325

At the Women and Foreign Policy: Early and Forced Marriage meeting at the United States State Department on September 24, 2015, Mandefro (on behalf of Bekele who was not present) delivered the petition signed by 135,000 people to Catherine M. Russell, Ambassador at Large for Global Women’s Issues.326 Russell remarked on the receipt of the petition stating:

Earlier this morning, Dr. Mehret Mandefro presented me with a petition with 135,000 signatures in support of our efforts to address early and forced marriage. Thanks to their support—and thanks to the work of many in this room—we plan to launch our adolescent girls strategy later this fall, and we look forward to working with you to carry it forward.327

On March 15, 2016, U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, released the U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent girls. Picture Motion responded to this release stating that through the Difret social campaign efforts “we have been able to ensure that the film has a significant impact on the issue of child marriage.”328

Mandefro states that while the release of the strategy is significant, laws are not enough: “There is a large gap between the laws that are on the books and what is

325 Ibid.


327 Ibid.

328 Picture Motion, “Difret: About the Film.”
enforced. It takes a while for culture to catch up.”329 Which is why, she explains, the impact campaign plans to initiate “a pop-up cinema roadshow where we take the film in the road throughout sub-Saharan countries where the issue of child marriage is all too prevalent.”330 Mehari explains the motivation to use Difret to initiate a dialogue about telefa and why he feels cinema will help make this exchange possible:

Whether you like it or not, if I go into a village and if I say to the local government or local leaders that I want to gather people to tell them about violence against women, I promise you no one is going to come. If you show a film, regardless of what it’s about, they are going to come out and see it. That will open up a conversation, hopefully.331

In 2016, in an effort to launch this rural outreach, Bekele, with the support of Truth Aid Media, launched a Change.org fundraising petition with the goal to raise $10,000.332 The petition explains:

Since my trial, I’ve become an advocate for ending forced and child marriage. Together with the team behind the film Difret, we want to expand our work and help bring the film to rural areas of Ethiopia as a tool to educate and empower women and girls…There are no movie theaters in the rural villages of Ethiopia where the practice of child marriage and abduction are both still prevalent. Yet I believe screening this film in the very places like my village can help educate people and inspire change. In order to do so, our team will need to rent equipment, travel throughout the villages of Ethiopia, and coordinate screenings with community partners. In addition, we need to insure that we have the security in place to have these conversations safely in the places where the practice of child marriage and abduction are still high…All of this will require funding we can’t provide on our own.333


330 Ibid.

331 Watson, “Advocates Hope a Movie Can Make the Difference in Ending Child Marriage.”


333 Ibid.
To date, $9,542 has been raised by 464 people.\textsuperscript{334}

\textit{Awards and accolades received.} \textit{Difret} was submitted as Ethiopia’s official entry in consideration for Best Foreign Picture at the 87\textsuperscript{th} Academy Awards in 2015. According to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences rules and eligibility requirements, a “foreign film” is defined as “a feature-length motion picture produced outside the United States of America with a predominantly non-English dialogue track.”\textsuperscript{335} The rules also state, “the submitting country must certify that creative control of the motion picture was largely in the hands of citizens or residents of that country.”\textsuperscript{336} Finally, according to official submission rules for 2015:

\begin{quote}
The motion picture must be first released in the country submitting it no earlier than October 1, 2013, and no later than September 30, 2014, and be first publicly exhibited for at least seven consecutive days in a commercial motion picture theater for the profit of the producer and exhibitor.\textsuperscript{337}
\end{quote}

\textit{Difret} was Ethiopia’s second film entry to the Academy Awards, though the film did not receive a nomination in the Best Foreign Picture category.\textsuperscript{338} The film has, however, received and been nominated for several other awards including the World Cinematic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{334} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{336} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{337} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Dramatic Audience Award and the Sundance Film Festival, and the Panorama Audience Award at the Berlin International Film Festival.

In response when asked what has influenced such a positive response to the film from audiences all over the world and whether Jolie has influenced this reception, Mehari says that undoubtedly Jolie’s involvement has opened doors for the film. However, he believes “the audience’s acceptance of the film and its multiple awards speaks to…the universal appeal of the issue in the film and the great performances by they (sic) actors.”

In discussing what it meant to win the World Cinematic Dramatic Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, Mehari states:

It was truly awesome to win this award because when we first embarked on making this film so many people told us that there was no audience for a film like ours. Funders told us that the subject was too tough and would not lend itself to commercial distribution. The award obviously says otherwise…I do think winning the audience award at Sundance adds yet another layer of visibility to the film because distributors and others alike pay attention to who wins at Sundance.

Effects of premiering at Sundance. Mandefro explains that after premiering Difret at Sundance, international distributors picked up the film and that had a significant effect, “they got it much wider than we ever thought possible. Additionally, after winning the audience award at the festival, Difret was selected be included in Sundance Film Forward. Sundance Film Forward is a partnership of the Sundance Institute and four

339 De Franceschi, “An Ethiopian Story: A Conversation with Zeresenay Berhane Mehari.”

340 Selam, “Q&A with Difret Director Zeresenay Mehari and Producer Mehret Mandefro.”

341 Silverstein, “Producer Mehret Mandefro on How Her Bride-Abduction Drama Difret Shows that Change Can Happen.”
U.S. federal cultural agencies that “uses the power of cinema to promote broader cultural understanding, inspire curiosity and enhance awareness of shared stories and values across generations, religion, ethnicity and border.”\textsuperscript{342} The initiative is a “touring program designed for students and artists that offers film screenings and discussions to excite and cultivate new audiences for independent film.”\textsuperscript{343} \textit{Difret} was one of eight films chosen to be a part of Sundance Film Forward, 2014.


\textsuperscript{343} Ibid.
Chapter VI

Discussion of Findings

This case study is a critical examination of the film, *Difret*, in order to answer three questions:

1. Does *Difret* challenge the common Eurocentric/Western representations of Africa and the African experience?
2. Are there ways in which the film perpetuates the dominant story or stereotypes?
3. Is the film successful in decreasing African illiteracy and/or altering the way people in the West perceive Africa/Africans?

The research gathered in this analysis supports my original hypothesis that *Difret* does challenge common representations of Africa created by the dominant cinemas of the West. Evidence also supports my hypothesis that when taking into account all aspects that comprise the field of vision framework, *Difret* both challenges and reinforces the “single story” told by Western cinemas. Finally, some evidence substantiates my hypothesis that the film may decrease African illiteracy amongst Western audiences. However, there is also evidence that suggests that while the film may inform or educate the viewer, it may not necessarily alter ingrained perceptions of Africa and Africans.

Challenging Eurocentric/Western Representations

The assertion that *Difret* challenges the “single story” of Africa is supported through the film’s story and characters, its means of production and execution, and the creator’s use of the film medium to tell the story.
Story Content

The ways in which *Difret* challenges common Eurocentric/Western representations of Africa and the African experience are most evident in the uncommon story content and point of view presented in the film. The elements in *Difret* that are unique to films about Africa include: the situation of agency in strong Ethiopian female protagonists, the exclusion of Western figures from the narrative, the presentation of the solution to the problem as existing within the Ethiopian context, the avoidance of the “good guy/bad guy” binarism, and finally, the presentation of the possibility of an ordinary African life.

*Strong female protagonists.* In *Africa on Film*, Kenneth Cameron explains that Hollywood’s treatment of Africans is one-dimensional: “they are objects of history and Western intrigue; they provide the backdrop for romance or heroic conflict between Western protagonists; or they appear as savage combatants or tribal victims fated to genocidal destruction.”³⁴⁴ In an interview with Mehari and *Difret* star, Meron Getnet, filmmaker Roger Ross Williams points out that *Difret* is a rarity in that presents “strong, black, African women as the solution.”³⁴⁵

Meaza and Hirut, two courageous Ethiopian women, are characters not typically found in Western representations of Africans on film. Both protagonists act as agents of change rather than helpless victims or decorative bystanders, thereby challenging the one-dimensional misrepresentations common in Hollywood cinema, as noted by Cameron.

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³⁴⁵ Getnet and Mehari, interview by Roger Ross Williams (video).
No Western heroes. Professor Mbuelo Mzamane points to the idea that the “conventions of Hollywood, but also a long tradition of racism, demand that (Hollywood films) look through the eyes of a white star, a white hero.” Films like Blood Diamond, The Constant Gardener, and Black Hawk Down all rely on white Western male protagonists who dictate the viewers’ experience. In “The Troubled Terrain of Human Rights Films,” Higonnet and Higonnet insist, not only are these Western figures central to the story’s plot, but “their ability to recognize the human rights disasters that they encounter” allows them to “become the ‘focalizers’ through who the African situation is filtered.” Often, these Western figures become the narrative’s hero whose purpose is to deliver a solution to an African crisis. This Eurocentric conceptualization is likened to the international humanitarian order as described by Mahmood Mamdani: Africans are not “active agents in their own emancipation,” but “passive beneficiaries of an external ‘responsibility to protect’.”

Mehari has recalled that when first trying to secure funding for Difret, one Hollywood producer interested in making the film asked the director if he could “write any white people into the story, a story that takes place in deep, rural Ethiopia.”

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348 Ibid.


director did not concede to this Eurocentric request, rather, *Difret’s* narrative is entirely void of Western figures and the plot’s resolution is not offered by a white hero. In this way, *Difret* challenges Hollywood stereotypes of white hegemonic intervention in African spaces.\(^{351}\)

*Presenting the solution within Africa.* In *Ezra* (2007), Nigerian filmmaker, Newton Aduaka, emphasizes African agency by focusing on the role of local Sierra Leoneans in determining their own destiny.\(^{352}\) In “Situating Agency in *Blood Diamond* and *Ezra,*” Osagie suggests:

> In situating agency in *Ezra,* then, we can say that the enigma of the boy soldier phenomenon becomes a problem that the entire African world needs to resolve. Though there is much to despair about in this tragic reality in Africa, Aduaka does not present it as unsolvable. This is a rejection of victimhood.\(^{353}\)

This theme can also be seen in *Difret.* By situating agency in Meaza and Hirut, Mehari suggests the issue of telefa is a problem that Ethiopia needs to resolve. While the viewer is made to understand the magnitude of the problem and the complexity of the deeply rooted tradition, it is not presented as an unsolvable dilemma. And since the film’s resolution comes about from within the African context, *Difret* rejects the idea of African victimhood and challenges the tradition of Hollywood films that persistently portray Africa as a place “on its knees begging for intervention.”\(^{354}\)

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\(^{351}\) Osagie, Kindle, 230.

\(^{352}\) *Ezra,* Directed by Newton I. Aduaka. France: Cinefacto, Arte, 2007, DVD.

\(^{353}\) Osagie, Kindle, 237.

Avoidance of the “good guy/bad guy” binarism. In an interview with Mehari and Mandefro, Erin Sharoni acknowledges that one of Difret’s unique characteristics is that it pays close attention not to create a villain or to make a monster out of an individual or individuals. She discusses Mehari’s treatment of the perpetrators of telefa stating, “I just thought that was so interesting that you didn’t “Hollywood-ize” it…it wasn’t like ‘these are the bad guys and these are the good guys’…You made it very human…and that is what I think makes this film really, really special.” What Sharoni is referring to by “Hollywood-ize it” is Hollywood’s tendency to reinforce binaristic labels (savage/victim and evil/good) in all films related to the African context.

This inclination can be seen in Hotel Rwanda, in which the Hutu/Tutsi genocidal conflict is simplistically framed along the lines of “good guys vs. bad guys,” and thus presents an ahistorical and decontextualized representation of the Rwandan conflict.\textsuperscript{355} This reinforcement of polarizing dichotomies, common in Hollywood human rights films, refuels angst within the viewers and makes reaching a resolution to human rights violations challenging.\textsuperscript{356} In Contemporary African Cinema, Olivier Barlet explains, “that is why the historical and political contexts cannot be overlooked: while violence itself is carried out by individuals, it is always a product of a system that can be constructed and thought through.”\textsuperscript{357}

Sometimes in April (2005), directed by Raoul Peck, also depicts the Rwandan genocide however, the story does not place evil genocide perpetrators on one side, and

\textsuperscript{355} Ashuntantang, Kindle, 60.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{357} Barlet, Contemporary African Cinema, Kindle, 259.
good victims on the other. Barlet explains, “through the relationship between two brothers, Augustin and Honore, who make opposite choices, Peck reveals the complexity of a country gone astray.” Like Peck, Mehari avoids framing the issue of telefa along the lines of right vs. wrong and does not present the perpetrators of child abduction as evil-doing men. Unlike Hotel Rwanda and many other Hollywood African films, Difret shows the complexity of a deeply entrenched tradition in order to understand the root of the problem and move forward.

Further, the narrative includes the voices of the men who cherish and uphold telefa. Barlet highlights, “the great difficulty is not to try to pardon the perpetrators, but to integrate them into the human community […] therefore, the perpetrators’ humanity has to be restored.” He also asserts, “very few films capture what the perpetrators have to say,” thus, by doing so and by highlighting the humanity of those on both sides of the conflict, Difret presents an image of Africa that is unique.

The possibility of an ordinary life. In “Plus Ca Change, Plus C’est la Meme Chose,” Conteh-Morgan explains, “Hollywood films about Africa and Africans have been characterized by deliberate concoction of fact and fiction with an overall inclination toward accentuation of the exotic, the bizarre, the comical, or the horrific.” Sakota-Kokot supports this claim stating, “in many Hollywood films on Africa, the viewer is presented with a narrative that does not allow for an ordinary life, merely substituting the

358 Ibid., 255.
359 Ibid., 257.
360 Ibid.
361 Conteh-Morgan, Kindle, 154.
classic stereotype of the open landscape and wildlife scenes with new ones of a continent that is naïve and open to exploitation because of her desperate situation.” Hollywood films rarely include narratives that embody Africans living peaceful and fulfilling lives and ignore “their daily routine, family lives, and life-affirming cultural practices.”

While Difret’s narrative addresses the harmful practice of child abduction in Ethiopia, the story does not only focus on this singular aspect of Ethiopian reality. The film shows contemporary, middle-class life in Addis Ababa, with well-educated and highly conscious people living lives that are void of conflict and corruption. The viewer witnesses Africans as lawyers, judges, reporters, construction workers, and bartenders. The viewer is also welcomed into the homes of Meaza and her former boss, both of which are peaceful and familiar to the Western spectator. Mehari was also mindful to include Ethiopian cultural values cherished by those living in rural areas that are not a hindrance to progress and are worth preserving, like the strong sense of family and communal ties. Thus, by presenting Ethiopia as a place that is not marked by “the dying poor and the thieving rich,” Difret challenges common Hollywood narratives that identify Africa as a place that can never be ordinary.

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363 Conteh-Morgan, Kindle, 154.

Means of Production and Execution

*Difret’s* production challenges the “single story” of Africa by emphasizing African agency and not following a single, predetermined model of production. This can be seen in the film’s non-traditional sources of funding, and Mehari’s execution of the film on 35mm film rather than digital format. By diverging from means of production that are frequently employed in African cinema, *Difret* presents an alternative perspective of the African filmmaking experience. By not following one pattern or set path, by not succumbing to what it means to be an “African film,” Mehari shows that there is not only one way or one possibility of telling a story, challenging the very notion of the existence of an “African cinema” which is, as Barlet suggests, “a myth that is kept alive to reinforce its relegation to its difference, in a genre unto itself with clearly defined codes.”

*Non-traditional funding.* The absence of film funding policies in many African countries often leaves local filmmakers dependent on international funding. Chadian filmmaker, Mahamet-Saleh Haroun has acknowledged that often filmmakers rely on Western subsidies to make films, and often the acceptance of this external support gives a degree of control to funding institutions who have an expectation that “African directors will create cinema about a certain kind of Africa.” But as *Difret* has shown, dependency upon external financial support does necessarily mean relinquishing creative control or giving in to the demands of Hollywood producers. This film has exemplified that the

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366 Ibid., 98.

367 Oscherwitz, Kindle, 241.
right partnerships can allow for non-traditional funding that utilizes outside monetary support without requiring the filmmakers to alter their creative objectives.

By harnessing funds from nontraditional Western sources, Mehari avoided the dilemma that many African filmmakers face: concessions on content in exchange for financial support. Harnessing unconventional sources of funding emphasized Mehari’s African agency and allowed the filmmaker to maintain independence while not limiting the creative content and high production value he sought.

*Shooting on 35mm film.* It is common for African filmmakers to use digital technology as it reduces the need for external sources of funding. Further, in many African countries, the lack of film institutions and formal training facilities limits the availability of those with knowledge and skill in state-of-the-art technology. Digital film has given filmmakers the possibility of making images without outside help.\(^{368}\) Using digital formatting, Nigeria has created a veritable film industry, regarded as a model for local development requiring little or no outside funding.\(^{369}\) Nigeria’s Nollywood has overtaken India’s Bollywood industry in terms of number of annual productions. However, despite Nollywood’s profitability and visibility within Africa, the industry has done little to help African cinema’s exposure and reputation around the world.\(^{370}\)

One of Mehari’s primary reasons for shooting *Difret* on 35mm film, despite its high production cost and Ethiopia’s complete lack of film development labs, was to prove that Ethiopia can produce films with the highest production value.\(^{371}\) The director also

\(^{368}\) Barlet, *Contemporary African Cinema.* Kindle, 54.

\(^{369}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{370}\) Ibid.

\(^{371}\) De Franceschi, “An Ethiopian Story: A Conversation with Zeresenay Berhane Mehari.”
set out to boost African cinema’s visibility outside of the continent. His intentions were not only to create a film and have it seen, but also to push the boundaries of African filmmaking and elevate the reputation of Ethiopian cinema among those in the established industries of the West.

The deliberate choice by Mehari to shoot *Difret* on 35mm, despite the challenges that came with it, and his successful execution, in spite of the challenges, exemplifies that African filmmakers are capable of producing films with high aesthetic value and technical merit.

The Use of Film as the Medium of Representation

As addressed in Chapter III, film has historically been utilized as a tool of representation by those in positions of power to control or dominate marginalized groups of people. As it relates to the African continent, colonial and later Hollywood cinemas have dominantly represented Africa to the world, and in doing so they have silenced internal voices. The consequences of this are the perpetuation of stereotypical, ahistorical, and inaccurate images have instilled in the minds of Western audiences a sense of the continent that is rooted in racist ideology. Theses dominant cinema industries of the West have created and reinforced a “single story” of Africa, which has inherently placed Africa and much of its population in a position of disadvantage against those who are using the power of film to represent the continent and its peoples.

Further addressed in Chapter III, are the technical and linguistic connections between the gun and the camera that have been recognized by scholars. Also noted is the comparison made between the eye of the camera and the barrel of a gun by both Peter
Davis and Teshome H. Gabriel and the realization, by both scholars, of film’s potential use as a weapon for liberation.

Aduaka’s *Ezra* depicts the lives of young Sierra Leonean child soldiers and propels the audience into a world of war through the narrative lens of Ezra and other children who, according to their commander Rufus, are shaping history through “the barrel of a gun.” For these young combatants, the weapon of force that was used to possess them is also their means of survival; they must fight with their gun if they are to live.\(^{372}\) This reality is a similar one for Hirut in *Difret*. Hirut took control of the weapon used to capture her and turned it into her weapon for liberation. Through the barrel of a gun, she too shaped history.

Just as film has historically been used to dispossess Africans of individual agency in their own representation, the medium has also been taken back by African filmmakers as a tool for liberation, to tell their own stories and present to the world alternative perspectives about what it means to be African. *Difret’s* story presents the idea that Africa is not a static continent unable to change or progress forward, and its people are powerful agents of change. Mehari’s chosen medium delivers the same message. His use of film inherently challenges the idea that Africans are incapable of representing themselves and their stories to the world, a notion that the single story of Africa, as told by dominant cinema industries, rests on. Mehari’s execution of the film proves not only can Africans take back the camera and create images that show the complexity and diversity of what it means to be African in the twenty-first century, it shows that they are

\(^{372}\) *Ezra*, 2007, DVD.
doing it. Through the eye of the camera, Mehari has broadened the idea of what it means to be African and has shaped history.

Supporting the Single Story

While *Difret* does challenge common Eurocentric/Western representations of Africa, the film also supports the “single story.” This assertion is supported by: the creator’s failure to receive Aberash Bekele’s consent to tell her story, the film’s classical Hollywood narrative structure, the use of Angelina Jolie and her stardom to boost visibility, and the social impact campaign that has sought U.S. political involvement to end child marriage in Ethiopia.

Failure to Receive Consent

The filmmakers’ decision to create the film without the consent of Aberash Bekele mimics Hollywood’s perpetual appropriation of silenced African voices. The defense offered by the filmmakers, who claim that they tried to reach Bekele, does not mitigate the fact that they told her story without her permission.

*The camera as a weapon of power.* Of the making of *Difret* without her consent, Aberash Bekele has said, “I feel doubly abducted.” Bekele’s words suggest that the making of *Difret* was a violation to her, one that she likens to her abduction and rape as a fourteen-year-old girl. Her agency to choose whether her story would be represented to a global audience was taken from her. The rhetoric used by Bekele suggests that the confiscation of her right to represent herself was as powerful as the confiscation of her right to her
physical freedom. Thus, her story being captured on film by Mehari was as damaging as being captured and raped by her abductor.

Therefore, by making *Difret* without Bekele’s consent, the camera is represented again as a weapon used to dispossess Africans of their own individual voices and stories rather than empower them.

**Classical Hollywood Structure**

In his critique of Western cultural traditions, Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima states, “One of the most brutal and violent accomplishments of Eurocentric literature and mass media is the historic representation of Black men and women outside the context of the human experience.”

In addition to the concern over the representation of negative stereotypes and damaging content within a film’s narrative, Gerima asserts filmic syntax is just as capable of representing Africans as outside the human context.

Mehari professes that as a filmmaker, his hope is always that his audiences take away something from the film that they can relate to. He explains that his focus, then, with *Difret* was to create accessible characters that share with the audience a human experience that he believes “is relatable to most people.” One of his primary concerns when creating the film’s narrative structure was incorporating all of the elements of drama, suspense, and entertainment so that the image and subject matter appealed to Western audiences and did not leave viewers thinking, “Oh God, here comes another

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373 Allyson Nadia Field, “To Journey Imperfectly: Black Cinema Aesthetics and the Filmic Language of *Sankofa*.” *Framework* 55, no. 2 (Fall) (2014), 179

374 Ibid.

375 Luz, “*Difret*: An Intimate Film of Profound Political Consequence.”

376 Ibid.
poor African story.” In the end, he believes a sense of balance was achieved. He asserts that Difret employs “classical storytelling in a way that it just sets you up for everything...except romance, it has everything in the film.”

While Difret’s narrative story presents ideas about Africa that are uncommon to those depicted in Hollywood cinema, its narrative structure is mimetic to Hollywood’s classical style of storytelling. In this way Difret relies on the established representations of the Hollywood paradigm to shape its syntax, thus, inherently perpetuating similar tropes of Eurocentric/Western representations of Africa.

Jolie’s Stardom to Boost Visibility

While Mehari did not concede in casting a Hollywood celebrity in the film’s diegesis, he nevertheless utilizes one of Hollywood’s most influential players to be an ambassador for the film and to boost visibility among audiences.

Hollywood’s use of stars. In “It’s a Very Rough Game, Almost as Rough as Politics,” Christopher Garland explains that Hollywood stars remain among the most recognizable public figures internationally. The presence of the star is a critical factor in the commercial viability of Hollywood film production. Hollywood films must sell in order to recoup the expense of their production and make a profit, and stars are used to reach a wider audience. In almost all Hollywood Africa films, African American

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377 Mumin, “Interview: Director Zeresenay Mehari on Difret and Creating a Complex Ethiopian Narrative (Now Streaming on Netflix USA).”

378 Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with Difret.”


380 Ibid.
celebrities play African figures and white American Hollywood stars portray white Africans.381

African cinema’s lack of visibility. In 2009, Mehari was presented with an opportunity to make Difret, however, the potential Hollywood producers wanted to have a known American actress play Ashenafi’s role. The director explains, “it was important for me to make the film in Amharic and have Ethiopian actors depict all the characters.”382 Barlet explains, however, “African cinema finds itself caught between two issues: the pertinence of its discourse and its access to the international market-or in other words, its economy, visibility, and participation in the world’s imagination.”383 Similarly, Difret producer, Mehret Mandefro has expressed that (in America) with a film like Difret, “a foreign language film from Africa, there are a lot of barriers in what people think is beautiful.”384

Jolie’s attachment. Jolie’s involvement in the film stemmed from the producers’ conception that Difret would have better visibility and reception amongst Western audiences if the film were to have “its own ambassador in the world.”385 Executive producer, Julie Mehretu, says that Jolie came to mind as a potential ambassador because “the story could have easily been the story of her daughter from Ethiopia” and because she is an “ardent and fierce political advocate for women and against such forms of


382 De Franceschi, “An Ethiopian Story: A Conversation with Zeresenay Berhane Mehari.”


384 Silverstein, “Producer Mehret Mandefro on How Her Bride-Abduction Drama Difret Shows that Change Can Happen.”

385 Kazanjian, “Julie Mehretu on Helping to Make the Powerful (and Angelina Jolie-Pitt Produced!) Ethiopian Film Difret.”
violence.” In a sense, Jolie was seen as a potential link between the film’s “Africanness” and the West.

In discussing how Jolie’s attachment has changed the trajectory of the project, Mehretu says that Jolie and her team have “been instrumental in supporting Mehari as an independent Ethiopian filmmaker” and “worked diligently to support the film’s inclusion in festivals and the like.” Further, Mandefro explains that given Jolie’s high profile in the United States and across the world, having her name attached increases visibility of their project and that the Difret team is very grateful to her for that.

Filmmakers as secondary players to Jolie. Viewers’ commentary surrounding Difret supports the claim that Jolie’s attachment did contribute to a greater level of visibility than what may have been achieved without her involvement. One person’s response shared online reveals that it was Jolie’s name on the film’s publicity artwork that drew that viewer’s attention to Difret. However, viewers’ responses also suggest that some audience members credit Jolie as the creator of the image. One viewer refers to Jolie as the director of the film, completely omitting from their response any mention of Mehari or other players involved in the creation of the film.

The dependency on Jolie’s stardom to reach a wider audience exemplifies how Difret follows the typical model of production of Hollywood Africa films which almost

386 Ibid.
387 Ibid.
388 Selam, “Q&A with Difret Director Zeresenay Mehari and Producer Mehret Mandefro.”
389 Table 3, Respondent no. 2.
390 Table 2, Respondent no. 2.
always rely on white stardom. Further, while her attachment to the film has allowed *Difret* greater visibility, it simultaneously places Mehari and the other film players as secondary figures to Jolie; thus, diminishing their African agency.

**Social Impact Campaign and U.S. Involvement**

The film’s social impact campaign has focused nearly all efforts in Western contexts and institutions rather than in Ethiopia. This suggests that the solution to telefa lies outside of the nation and out of the hands of Ethiopians. This notion is contrastive to the filmmaker’s statements and what the film’s story advocates.

While *Difret*’s diegetic narrative tells the account of two African women acting as powerful agents of change, and while it avoids involving Western figures or characters to provide any sort of solution or aid, the film’s social outreach campaign does otherwise. By using Bekele and petitioning the United States government to intervene and end this “once and for all,” the campaign diminishes the efforts and success of Aberash and Meaza. 391 It suggests, though they were successful in one case, the issue persists and will not be solved without the help (in terms of policy changes/interventions and financial donations) from Western political powers and benevolent Western audiences.

Further, the efforts intended to be made in Ethiopia focus on a rural outreach campaign that will involve taking *Difret* on the road and showing the film to communities throughout Ethiopia. It is worth noting that these “pop-up roadshows” somewhat mirror the efforts made by colonial film units, in which film was employed by European powers to educate and civilize tribal communities throughout the African continent. 392

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391 Bekele, “End Child Marriage, Sign the Executive Order!”

392 Girls Not Brides, “*Difret*: The Film Petitioning the US to End Child Marriage.”
Additionally, this African outreach is seeking financial backing through a Western-based donation campaign through which Bekele asserts, “In addition, we need to insure that we have the security in place to have these conversations safely in the places where the practice of child marriage and abduction are still high...All of this will require funding we can’t provide on our own.” Beyond proposing the outreach will only be feasible with the help of Western donors, the fundraising petition presents to Western audiences the idea that backing is needed to ensure the physical safety of Bekele and others who will engage in a dialogue with rural communities. This insinuation challenges Mehari’s desire to present those who practice telefa not as violent barbarians, but as men who carry out abductions because they do not know any better.

Through efforts of the social impact campaign, Difret supports the colonial/imperial logic that Africa can only be civilized “under the auspices of Western authorities.” Thus, the film falls victim to the Hollywood paradigm that represents Africa as incapable of progressing or solving problems without at least some assistance from Western agents, who, unlike Africans, have the ability, resources and power to create lasting change.

African Illiteracy and Western Perceptions

Mehari acknowledges that film is often more than just “art,” stressing the importance of telling human stories. He recalls:

I remember one of my favorite teachers said, “You can never take politics out of art.” Even though you're not going into filmmaking under the auspices of advocating for something, I welcome it. I’m fortunate to be

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393 Bekele, “Help Us Screen Difret in Rural Villages in Ethiopia.”

394 Guthrie, Kindle, 114.
able to learn about this issue and to be able to say something about it. If you have a medium like film and you're a writer or a director, I could say it’s an obligation to share your opinion and to shed light in things that might not be easy to talk about.\(^{395}\)

He also insists, “film, in its perfect form, is a critic and it talks about issues that we would not talk about at the dinner table. It shines the light on things that we are not courageous enough to say… In its perfect form, film is social commentary.”\(^{396}\) Mehari suggests that being a filmmaker, or a storyteller, is a privilege; however, with that privilege “also comes in with a great deal of responsibility and that responsibility is to be able to show a different point of view than what people are used to.”\(^{397}\)

Mehari’s drive to make *Difret* is in sync with the ideology of African cinema: “the objective of filmmaking is undertaken with a serious political responsibility to educate audiences about Africa’s problems and to raise awareness about social, cultural, economic, and political dilemmas that Africans face.”\(^{398}\) However, intention to present an alternative view and to educate viewers does not necessarily foster an increase in awareness or a shift in perspective amongst spectators. This brings the discussion to the final question posed in this thesis: Is *Difret* successful in decreasing African illiteracy and/or altering the way people in the West perceive Africa and the African experience?

African Illiteracy

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\(^{395}\) Saito, “Interview: Meaza Ashenafi and Zeresenay Mehari on Making a Difference with *Difret.*”

\(^{396}\) “One-on-One with the Director of *Difret*” (video), Afrofusion TV, April 11, 2014, accessed February 1, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWO7I3TkPM.

\(^{397}\) Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.

\(^{398}\) Harrow, 26.
As it pertains to this investigation, African illiteracy refers to a general lack of understanding of Africa (its histories, political economies, geographies, nationalities, religions, cultures, etc.), the complexity of the African experience, and the unique challenges that each nation faces. Critical information regarding viewer profile data and initial points of reference were either not provided or insufficient for an accurate analysis. Therefore, I was not able to accurately measure the film’s impact on African literacy in the surveyed sample of viewers. However, available data supports the notion that the film may have increased African literacy in some viewers.

*Educating viewers about Africa and the African experience.* Evidence suggests that the film may have introduced viewers to telefa or made them aware of the practice of abduction for marriage for the first time. This is supported by the written response from one audience member at the Harvard University screening of *Difret.* When asked to name something shown in the film that was a surprise, she wrote, “Abduction for marriage. I guess I never knew that women and girls were forced into marriage through kidnapping. Shocking!”399 Another viewer’s response to the film articulates that the film was educational stating, “[…] But I was educated about a culture and a land that I knew very little about before this movie. It was shocking to see that this abduction and rape/violence against young girls was a tradition leading to ‘marriage’.”400

When asked what was shown in the film that was surprising another viewer wrote, “The existence of abduction for marriage. The richness and greenness of Ethiopia. I had

399 Table 1, Respondent no. 2.

400 Table 2, Respondent no. 4.
an impression of a dry and barren land." This response suggests that the film made this viewer aware of telefa as well as provided information about Ethiopia’s geographical characteristics that challenged previous conceptions. This assertion is supported further by another audience member’s response. When asked in the survey to describe elements shown in the film that challenged any previously held ideas of Africa one viewer noted, “urban areas are cosmopolitan and very developed, urban areas are not poverty striken (sic).”

Provided a deeper understanding of the Ethiopian context. Additional evidence suggests that the film educated viewers about telefa and provided a deeper understanding of the Ethiopian context. In response to what elements of the film were surprising one audience member wrote, “That abduction is something that occurs in Ethiopia/Africa. Women are empowered and making huge changes in society and traditional values.” Another viewer was surprised that there were female lawyers. Both responses suggest that the film may have informed viewers that women are in positions of authority in Ethiopia.

Data supports that the film may have provided Western viewers who have some level of personal connection to Africa or Africans with a deeper understanding of the Ethiopian culture. This claim is supported by an online viewer’s response to the film, “Although I have known Ethiopian people, I have never had a bird's eye view into a part

401 Table 1, Respondent no. 6.
402 Table 1, Respondent no. 4.
403 Table 1, Respondent no. 4.
404 Table 1, Respondent no. 5.
of the culture that I never knew existed.”

Further support is found in two viewers’ responses provided in the post-screening questionnaire conducted at Harvard. One audience member states, “Being exposed to life in Africa first-hand has made me quite aware that people's perceptions are often inaccurate. However, even I was made more aware of what life is really like in Africa.”

Another viewer states, “I have an adopted child from Ethiopia and I have been there on two occasions. I often have wondered if the law is upheld and also what laws exist to protect women.”

Perception of Africa/Africans

Without important viewer profile information and an understanding of each viewer’s initial point of reference, it was difficult to ascertain whether the film altered how Western audiences see Africa and the African experience. However, evidence suggests that the film may have shifted perceptions in some viewers; there is also data that support the notion that the film did not alter the way viewers see Africa or Africans. Further, viewer commentary reveals that perceptions of the film may have been determined by components external to the film’s imagery.

Presentation of telefa and viewers’ perceptions. Mehari sought to show telefa as a societal issue and that men who practice the tradition “aren’t just monsters who act out this barbaric act, they are people who truly believe in this tradition and it is what they know and have been taught is right.”

Three varying responses to the presentation of
telefa in *Difret* support the notion that perceptions of the tradition, and the men who uphold it, differ amongst spectators.

As Mehari explained to the audience at the Athena Film Festival that while shooting the abduction scene in *Difret*, the local men in the village were involved, showing the actors and crew how abductions properly take place, Melissa Silverstein interrupts the director’s sentence with, “So, they showed you how they abduct girls? Oh my gosh!” Mehari replied to her saying, “You have to understand that in their context, in their traditional context, it is not something that is bad. It is part of life. And so it is part of who they are.” Silverstein’s response suggests that not only did she perceive their behavior as wrong, her shock in the men’s willingness to provide insight into abductions suggests that she still did not recognize that the men who uphold this tradition do not perceive themselves as evil doers.

Erin Sharoni’s response to Mehari’s representation of telefa shows a different perspective. While interviewing Mehari and Mandefro, Sharoni invokes her own commentary regarding the scene in *Difret* in which the village community members gather in customary court to discuss Hirut’s fate. Here, she states:

> You also showed the pain of the village elders, this little clique of men who gather around a tree, incredibly, trying to debate what the fate of this girl and her family is in this rural village. What I found really striking was that you were able to allow us to empathize, or at least to understand, in a way, where these men were coming from, that in their minds they’re not really barbarians, right, even though we see them as that. For them this is a tradition and they must uphold it and justice must be served.411

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409 “2015 Athena Film Festival Q&A. Film: *Difret*” (video).

410 Ibid.

411 Mandefro and Mehari, EVOLVER Show.
This commentary reveals that, unlike Silverstein, Sharoni grasped the understanding that the men who practice telefa do not view themselves as monsters, rather they are men upholding a longstanding tradition. However, her statement, “in their minds they’re not really barbarians, right, even though we see them as that,” suggests that her perception of them as being barbaric remains intact.

Finally, Mehari suggests that in some viewers, the film fostered a degree of empathy for the men who uphold telefa. He explains, “there are multiple people who came up to us after seeing the film saying, ‘I thought this was a story about another horrible thing about Africa and what happens to women.’ And at the end of the film they come out sympathetic to the men because they don't know better.”

Sources reviewed in this study do not provide evidence to support Mehari’s claim that viewers felt sympathy for the men. However, a response provided at the screening of Difret at Harvard University provides an alternative perspective of the men who uphold the tradition of telefa from those held by Sharoni and Silverstein. When asked to describe elements of the film that were surprising, one viewer replied, “the village council meeting was a surprise to me and the peaceful way it was conducted.” This response suggests that the film introduced to the audience a perspective of the men as possibly being peaceful practitioners of tradition, not merely maniacal barbarians.

Perceptions of a divide between Africa and the West. Mehari expresses his aspiration for the film to reveal, “Ethiopian men are not any different than men in Afghanistan or in the U.S. or anywhere else. The thing that differentiates them is the tradition that they follow.

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412 Watson, “Advocates Hope a Movie Can Make the Difference in Ending Child Marriage.”

413 Table 1, Respondent no. 3.
I needed to show people that it is because of the traditions that they behave that way.\textsuperscript{414} This statement evokes that perhaps the director hoped \textit{Difret} may allow for an awareness amongst Western viewers of the possibility that each person watching the film could easily be a perpetrator of telefa, had they been born into a cultural context that taught it to be right.

However, viewers’ responses reveal that the film may not have contributed to bridging the gap between “the self” and “the Other” that Mehari possibly sought to accomplish. In one comment, a viewer refers to the abductors as “scumbags” and continues to describe \textit{Difret} as having “unsettling images along with a controversial plot that shows how much our culture in America is different (than) in Africa.”\textsuperscript{415} Another viewer states, the film “will make you cringe with unbelief (sic) over the cruelty of humans in a certain part of the planet.”\textsuperscript{416} Both of these comments suggest these viewers relegate violence to certain cultures and geographies and that perhaps the film widened the space that exists between the West and Africa within the minds of many people situated in a Western cultural context.

\textit{Perceptions influenced by multiple components.} Viewers responses to \textit{Difret} also indicate that audience perceptions are shaped by factors that lie beyond the imagery presented onscreen. A response shared online defends this claim; for one viewer, the film’s imagery and story content were compelling and even provoked independent research about the legal case and subject matter presented in the film. However, an examination of the

\textsuperscript{414} Stein, “Heroic \textit{Difret} Wins Sundance Audience Award.”

\textsuperscript{415} Table 3, Respondent no. 1.

\textsuperscript{416} Table 2, Respondent no. 1.
character’s lives and filmmaking process revealed the complex dynamic and legal battle between Bekele and the *Difret* filmmakers. The viewer explains how this discovery altered their ideas about the entire film stating, “while I loved the film when I first watched it, I could never bring myself to watch it again, knowing how Aberash was treated in the making.” This statement is compelling because it exemplifies the notion that the meaning of any image is created through a lens that encompasses innumerable factors.

417 Table 2, Respondent no. 2.
Chapter VII

Conclusion

The results of this case-study show that Difret both challenges and supports Eurocentric/Western mediations of Africa and Africans. In “African Blood, Hollywood’s Diamonds,” Maryellen Higgens asserts, “the question of whether Hollywood ‘Africa films’ are ultimately viewed as repetitions, reinforcements, or subversions of the colonial archive is not, in the end, determined by the films themselves, but by how we interpret them.”418 This notion can be applied to African films about Africa as well. Whether Difret challenges the single story of Africa is not determined only by the image created; it is determined by whether audiences perceive it as doing so.

This study further illustrates that perceptions of Difret differ amongst audience members. These varying discernments are influenced by all nine components that comprise the field of vision surrounding the film as well as individual viewers’ identities, experiences, and cultural points of reference. Thus, a myriad of factors come into play during the meaning-making process. Consequently, it is imperative for filmmakers to pay close attention to this notion when considering how a film is going to be understood; if a filmmaker’s intention is to challenge Eurocentric representations and alter perceptions, it is not enough to create a film that counter-presents images produced by Western industries.

418 Higgens, Kindle, 10.
Meaning will always vary depending upon the spectator. However, it could be impossible to control the connotation that each individual viewer formulates, since seeing is a unique process, specific to individuals. Therefore, as much attention ought to be paid to creating a critical audience as there is to creating images that challenge the single story of Africa.

Where to go from Here

In his essay, “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation,” Chinua Achebe asserts the need to remember:

African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The role of the writer is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.419

As shared in the introductory chapter, author Chimamanda Adichie asserts, “stories can rob a people of its dignity, but stories can also be used to restore that dignity.”420 By sharing narratives that counter the single story of Africa and delivering alternative images to those provided by Eurocentric representations, film can restore the self-respect lost by millions of Africans during colonialism and through Western cultural hegemony since.

However, to shift from a viewpoint of the world that is Eurocentric to a vision that is polycentric and multicultural, it is imperative to challenge filmic mediations that have


420 TED: Global 2009 “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story” video.
created and perpetuated damaging stereotypes of Africa. As this study shows, challenging the single story of Africa and Africans is the responsibility of both filmmakers and spectators to foster “ways of seeing” that bring about a type of vision of the world that is ‘truly engaged and issues forth social practices that ‘take to heart’ what is seen.’" Both African and Hollywood filmmakers must create counter images, while spectators must critically produce meaning of those images. Further, critical viewers must learn to recognize the mechanisms of power that allow for the creation of filmic misrepresentations of Africa as well as the embedded structures of violence that support the subjugation and appropriation of billions of people around the world.

African Cinema

Olivier Barlet proclaims, “It is true that the image is no longer the absolute weapon of the West. An intruder has come and upset the rules of the game.” He continues to explain that African films are intruders. By challenging the dominant “imagery of the white man out to conquer the globe” African cinema has begun to decolonize the minds of people within the continent and abroad.

Third and early African cinemas emerged out of complete opposition to Hollywood, seeking to position themselves entirely outside of Western cinema and contradict it in every way. But as the theory of dialectics ensures, the meeting of these opposing ideologies inherently gave rise to a synthesis, a new African cinema, a type of

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423 Ibid., 18.
424 Ibid., 17.
filmmaking that is neither Hollywood nor its antithetic Third Cinema. Contemporary African cinema is a genre of hybridity where two identities are in constant dialogue with one another. For Chadian filmmaker Mahamet-Saleh Haroun, African cinema ought to be one that “acknowledges and mediates on the Western influences inherent in cinema at the same time as it attempts to separate itself.”425 As his film *Bye-Bye Africa* suggests, contemporary African cinema is less of a revolutionary Third Cinema, than a cinema of a Third Space, “characterized by an aesthetic of the in between.”426

In the current age of globalization, cultural borders are blurred and crossed constantly. There exists no definitive line of demarcation between two cultures, as they always coexist and are in perpetual negotiation. Ken Harrow notes that the “greatest shibboleth” in relation to African studies is the existence of an “authentic African culture.”427 Likewise, the “African genre” is not homogenous and Barlet insists that labeling a film as a product of the “African genre” is a burden to African cinema, “which struggles more than the rest to escape the relation to the Other.”428 Thus, African cinema must find a way to exist and interact with the dominant cinemas of the West. Barlet contends that African filmmakers must “affirm themselves as singular artists who are not the sum-total of all Africans.”429 He continues to remark that though African filmmakers do not inherently possess a superior vision of Africa, their perspective is invaluable.430

425 Oscherwitz, Kindle, 256.

426 Ibid.

427 Harrow, 115.


429 Ibid., 33.

430 Ibid.
By addressing humanity, in all its dimensions, African cinema can help audiences around the globe understand the world better and build “confidence in our capacity to develop new possibilities.”

Hollywood

None can deny the might and power of Hollywood and its influence on how people around the globe perceive the world. Therefore, it does matter what Hollywood films say about the nature of humanity and civilization especially when the images produced influence international interventions and policies. While historically this dominant industry has marginalized Africa and Africans, it is also possible that Hollywood can produce images that contradict what has been created in the past.

Kristin Skare Orgeret argues that in order to improve representations of Africa in Hollywood films, there is a need for film producers with African knowledge, or a high level of African literacy. Ricardo Guthrie suggests that “Hollywood tells stories that are full of the richness and complexities of African liberation and independence” as well as those that connect audiences to the “myriad of African nations with specific politics and distinct cultures.” He continues to suggest that Hollywood tells stories that embrace Africa’s connection to the globe and “our collective ‘Afro-Diasporic’ consciousness.” An “Afro-diasporic consciousness” implies an awareness that every human shares a history of “Africa’s destiny that was stolen and subverted through

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431 Ibid., 318.
432 Orgeret, 505.
433 Guthrie, Kindle, 119.
434 Ibid.
slavery, colonialism and postcolonial consequences. Fostering such an awareness in film, means placing Africans at the center of the storyline, not as simply binaristic heroes or villains, but as complex human beings.

Guthrie suggests this will ultimately reverse the “heart of darkness” trope and reveal that Africa does not possess an “evil lurking within, held in check by civilization” and that inherently there is “no essential badness to humanity but the human capacity for making choices.” Finally, Guthrie brings to light the possibility that:

Perhaps producers and audiences will, together, exorcise Hollywood’s heart of darkness, and insist on stories that acknowledge humanity’s Afro-Diasporic heritage; stories that rely on extroverted histories exceeding narrow, localized, or patriotic interests; and stories recognizing human beings with fully articulated identities that are complex and that extend static racial boundaries. And ultimately, film audiences can learn to reject films based on guilt-tripping or racist projection of the evil within.

Spectators

Shohat and Stam remind us that “neither text nor spectator is a static, preconstituted entity; spectators shape and are shaped by the cinematic experience within an endless dialogical process.” Barlet asserts, “a work of art is never finished in the sense that it always leaves a void, something missing for the spectator to complete him/herself.” He continues to acknowledge that what is at stake in filmmaking is to make the spectator a producer of meaning rather than a consumer of meaning.

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435 Ibid., 120.
436 Ibid.
437 Ibid., 122.
438 Shohat and Stam, Kindle.
439 Barlet, Contemporary African Cinema, Kindle, 41.
440 Ibid., 271.
For a spectator to produce meaning that challenges the single story of Africa, it is imperative to understand the history of cinematic representations of Africa and Africans and the racist ideologies that Western cinematic industries rest upon. This awareness may allow spectators to become critical viewers of the images placed before them and reject representations that entrench and disempower marginalized peoples. Further, Guthrie suggest audiences “learn to cultivate their ‘Afro-Diasporic’ consciousness.”

Concluding Thoughts

In *Art and Upheaval*, William Cleveland explains:

> It would not be unreasonable to argue that art has little potency in the face of violence and repression. But evidence to the contrary comes from some of our century’s most brutal despots. Historically, those intent on eliminating opposition and suppressing popular dissent have made a priority of quickly eliminating creators and thinkers from their midsts.  

He poses the questions: why, then, are artists so universally feared by dictatorial authorities and, “can the arts mitigate fear or change our perceptions of ‘the enemy?’” Barlet contends that art is “a stimulating, questioning force, a site of construction of one’s relation to the self, one’s environment, and the world, capable of defusing conflicts by restoring an intercultural dialogue and opening paths to new solidarities.” One could go as far to say that often it is art alone that can restore or initiate a dialogue between

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441 Guthrie, Kindle, 120.


443 Ibid., 4.

clashing discourses. Barlet brings to light that even in disagreements as seemingly standstill as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, “art opens little windows” of hope.\textsuperscript{445}

As Marx asserts, all existence is the product of contradiction. Dialectics is the law of the harmony and permeation of opposites. Contradiction is the foundation of movement, change and development. Barlet contends that it is art’s task to address man’s contradictions.\textsuperscript{446} Cleveland acknowledges that throughout history, mankind has always used creative forces to challenge destructive powers.\textsuperscript{447} He continues to declare:

In the face of destruction, we are impelled to create. Upheaval begets both crises and opportunity… In the face of the unfathomable, the senseless, the cruel, the devastating, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of making meaning… Some would say that this is our great hope in a time of unprecedented global crises, that the only way out of the death spiral we have imposed on our planet will be the creation of a new, countervailing creation dance.\textsuperscript{448}

By initiating a dialogue between opponents, art can confront destructive forces and move humanity forward.

\textsuperscript{445} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{446} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{447} Cleveland, 7.

\textsuperscript{448} Ibid., 9.
## Appendix

Table 1. Harvard Screening: Audience Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>What Challenged Previously held Ideas</th>
<th>What Elements Were Surprising</th>
<th>Related Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I witnessed women standing up for their rights and being heard in the end.</td>
<td>They won the case. I was waiting for the girl to be murdered.</td>
<td>I have an adopted child from Ethiopia and I have been there on two occasion. I often have wondered in the law is upheld and also what laws exist to protect women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The level of determination a lot of Africans have in working toward what is right</td>
<td>Abduction for marriage. I guess I never knew that women and girls were forced into marriage through kidnapping—Shocking!</td>
<td>Being exposed to life in Africa first hand has made me quite aware that often people’s perceptions are often inaccurate. However, even I was made more aware of what life is really like in Africa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>The council meeting was a surprise to me and the peaceful way it was conducted.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Urban areas are cosmopolitan and very developed, urban areas are not poverty striken (sic).</td>
<td>Women are empowered and making huge changes in society and traditional values. That abduction is something that occurs in Ethiopia/Africa.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female lawyers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Immigrants from Africa act very entitled when they come here (some, anyway)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The existence of abduction for marriage. The richness and greenness of Ethiopia. I had an impression of a dry and barren land</td>
<td>A great and courageous story of confrontation against the patriarchal society of Ethiopia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table presents viewers’ responses to the post-screening survey conducted at Harvard University.
Table 2. Viewer Responses to *Difret*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>This movie makes you cringe with unbelief (sic) over the cruelty of humans in a certain part of the planet, as we follow the (true) story. Very well told, and scary, even to the end. Brave women portrayed and played well.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I’m so torn about this film. It was beautiful, insightful and shined a bright light on horrific violations of human rights. It took me on an emotional journey and I came away amazed at the unbelievable strength of not only the young girl and her lawyer, but all the women and men who fought against the rampant barbarism hiding behind ‘tradition’. I was moved to do more research on the issue presented and found out that Director Angelina Jolie never spoke to the real young woman, Aberash Bekele, depicted in her film. Aberash was never consulted, never gave permission for her story to be told, and had no idea the film was even being made. She had to go to go to court to even receive compensation, and said she felt she’d been abducted again. Such a remarkable young woman, and it breaks my heart. So, while I loved the film when I first watched it, I could never bring myself to watch it again, knowing how Aberash was treated in the making.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Although I have known Ethiopian people, I have never had a bird’s eye view into a part of the culture that I never knew existed… Hooray to all the brave women portrayed in this meaningful film, their stories will be an example of what can be accomplished by Ethiopian women. God bless you all.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I was horrified, scared, and amazed by this movie and the courage of the young girl and particularly the woman lawyers who represented her despite the forceful aggressive actions of the police and the prosecutor in a country which is so behind the times in terms of women’s rights. At times the camera techniques and editing was not to my liking—long long shots, fadeouts to black at key moments, scenes that were not explained (at the end of the movie is she returning to her village to face possible death again or to the orphanage? What was the fate of her younger sister? Why did she run away and how did Meaza find her? But I was educated about a culture and a land that I knew very little about before this movie. It was shocking to see that this abduction and rape/violence against young girls was a tradition leading to ‘marriage' that was little more than becoming a sex/domestic slave to a much older man. Sickening.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows the responses to *Difret* shared by viewers online at Netflix.com.
Table 3. Viewer Responses to *Difret*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I saw this film for my acting class and we’re going to meet the filmmakers next week, so I thought I’d share my views on it. As far as the story goes, it's extremely predictable. I'm not going spoil anything, but let's just say that if you watch a lot of movies, you can see the ending from a mile away. With that being said, I did enjoy this movie and I can see how some may be turned off by it. There are unsettling images along with a controversial plot that shows how much our culture in America is different in Africa. The characters were fresh and not clichéd. As for those scumbag abductors, I'd love to see the tables turned on them because I guarantee that they wouldn't like it one bit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The name Angelina Jolie on the poster draw my interest on this one. She was executive producer of this excellent Amharic movie. I appreciate her side of contribution to lift the world cinema. Some of the stories go unheard, because they are happening in the remote places of the earth, far from the modern cities and countries. Newspapers, media might fail to report them in a long-range, because it is less interested in the other side of the world, but movies like this ensures the outreach […] I thought it was a tale about some westerners who comes to help the little girl, or maybe adopt her, kind of stuffs. But it was purely a uni-national, uni-racial, its society and flawed judicial system which might give you a shock. After opening 30 minutes, I was pleased to have picked it to watch and ended highly satisfied when it ended. The conclusion was very emotional, especially the lines Hirut said was reflected what she went through and might going repeat for other girls. This is highly recommended by me. This film needs viewers, to learn what's really happening out there. Especially in a male dominated society, how the children and women are coping to stand on their own feet. Because of the brave attempt by the brave women, the changes have come and building a better future for the next generation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows the responses to *Difret* shared by viewers online on IMDB.com.
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https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/truthaid/difret


