

# The Revolution Has Been Televised

Fact, Fiction, and Spectacle in the 1970s and 1980s

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**T**he twentieth century is replete with examples of film intersecting with the processes of political revolution. From Sergei Eisenstein's epic restaging of the October revolution as an unequivocally popular upsurge to what Timothy Garton Ash called the real-time "telerevolutions" (1990, 90) that accompanied the collapse of communism, screens, large and small, have played critical roles in effecting, amplifying, and mythologizing radical ruptures in the status quo. The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 is rarely remembered for anything more than ushering in a violent Marxist military dictatorship, led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Derg ("committee") on whose hands the blood of many thousands of Ethiopians remains. Without forgetting the great darkness that clouds the years between 1974 and 1991, it is, nonetheless, important to examine the revolution as more than simply a tale of oppression and of late Cold War maneuvering. It is the contention of this chapter, and of my broader research into Ethiopian artistic practice in the 1970s and 1980s, that the creation, dissemination, and provocation of images was at the heart of the break with the imperial tradition and that moving images, in particular, both dealt a seminal blow to the waning authority of Emperor Haile Selassie and shaped the subsequent course of the revolution.

Those familiar with the events in Addis Ababa in 1974 will know that the name Jonathan Dimbleby is synonymous with the emperor's fall. Many who lived through it still revere him as the man who exposed the depths of neglect to which Haile Selassie had sunk; his name features in the wall text of the Red Terror Martyrs' Museum in Addis. On September 11, 1974, the Ethiopian public was shown an edited version of Dimbleby's 1973 television documentary about the devastating famine in Wollo. The emperor, too, reportedly watched the film, and as the hunger-ravaged bodies of his rural subjects filled the screen he became "lost in thought" (Kapuściński et al. 2006, 161). The following day a military delegation arrived at the palace to arrest him, and he was, infamously, driven to his imprisonment and eventual death in the back seat of a VW Beetle. The South African journalist Colin Legum, then based in Addis and writing for the UK's Sunday newspaper *The Observer*, described the scene in an article entitled "The Night They 'Hanged' Selassie" (Legum 1974). "Things were arranged rather better in Ethiopia this week," he wrote, "than when the Bolsheviks removed the last of the Tsars, or when the French Revolutionaries carried the last of the Bourbons to the guillotine." "In modern style," Legum continued, "the assassination took place on the television screens and the radio waves on the night before Selassie's dethronement . . . The whole nation had been invited to watch a TV spectacle in which the bones of feudal rule were exposed with ruthless professionalism."

This "TV spectacle" features in many of the histories of the Ethiopian revolution (for example, Keller 1991, 187; Ottaway and Ottaway 1978, 57; Kalb 2000, 144–145) but is usually afforded a sentence or two and portrayed as the curious final straw that broke the regime. Although some note, as did Bahru Zewde (2001), that the film that was shown was "a canny collage of royal feast and peasant famine [that] drove home the emperor's alleged callousness," it has not been extensively explored that what appeared on Ethiopian screens in September 1974 was radically different from what had been shown in the United Kingdom months earlier. Dimbleby's original film, made for Thames Television, was entitled *The Unknown Famine* and had not used any images of Haile Selassie. Dimbleby's voiceover had, in fact, informed its viewers that while the imperial government had "let things get out of control," they were now reaching out for help. When this film arrived in Addis, sent by Thames Television in accordance with the policy of sending copies of films back to the countries in which they were made, Dimbleby's more diplomatic tone was displaced and his footage reedited to include images of the emperor's indulgences, from lavish dinners to pampered pets. The new version, filled with jarring juxtaposition, was

retitled *The Hidden Hunger*. What began as an effort by a Western journalist to inform those outside Ethiopia of the country's desperate plight was transformed into a moving image indictment that asserted not just that the famine had been neglected but also that it had been willfully concealed.

In this chapter I put the critical role played by Dimbleby's doctored film into a broader history of cinema and television in the revolution's unfolding. I argue that the nature of its screening had significant implications for public participation in the change of regime. As Legum identified, its showcasing on the night of September 11, the night on which Ethiopians would normally have celebrated the New Year, was a clear act of political scenography, orchestrated for maximum impact. Images of the starving had been seeping into Addis Ababa for weeks and months prior to the final coup de grace, yet the glowing medium of the television screen and the collective act of viewing amplified the horror that was unfolding beyond the city limits, turning it into a spectacle that did not so much inform as dazzle the public. The following morning, when the officers arrived at the royal gates with their arrest warrant, the streets of Addis were momentarily subdued with shock (Girma 1996). The military officers who seized power recognized the importance of television to disseminate seemingly indisputable images that bolstered the case for both radical political change and their leadership of it. In the years that followed they utilized screens, large and small, to propagate a version of revolution that vindicated the military assumption of power, but also to threaten and cajole a population into submission. While it is a significant part of the story, the Derg's appropriation of the screen to their own ends does not account for the fuller history of film and television in the revolution, and in the process of healing and reconciliation that followed. Before Dimbleby's name was uttered on Churchill Boulevard there were those who wished to challenge the imperial regime, who believed that filmmakers and other artists had a responsibility to do more than encourage a viewing public to plug in, turn on, and cop out.

## Feudalism on Film

The buildup to the downfall of Haile Selassie began long before his final arrest in September 1974. While the attempted coup d'état made by the brothers Geremame and Brigadier-General Mengistu Neway in 1960 ultimately failed, it emboldened those who felt that the imperial regime was failing to modernize Ethiopia (Zewde

2001). The 1960s witnessed several major shifts, from rural rebellions to the rising of a rambunctious student movement that increasingly espoused the philosophies of Marx and Lenin. The latter, although centered on the campus of Haile Selassie I University in Addis, encompassed young Ethiopians studying throughout the country and, importantly, overseas. From the mid-1960s onward they took particular aim at hierarchies of landownership, claiming that Haile Selassie presided over a “feudal” system (Zewde 2014, 130; Hiwet 1975, 26). Students, both at home and abroad, began to rally behind a call for “Land to the Tiller.” A slogan borrowed (and translated to “Meret Larashu”) from other agrarian revolutions, they chanted it loudly during widespread demonstrations in 1965, after which it became a mainstay of the revolution’s vocabulary. It was not only the students that were directing attention toward the harsh realities of Ethiopia’s rural and urban poor; indeed artists, too, were bound up in the movement to make visible that which had been overlooked for so long. Writers such as Berhan Meskel Redda, playwrights such as Tsegaye Gebremedhin, and painters such as Gebre Kristos Desta used their work to highlight social deprivation and inequality. In 1963, foreshadowing the tragedy of a decade later, Gebre Kristos painted a poster (published in *Ethiopia Observer* in the same year) featuring a rendition of a skeletal body in his characteristically abstracted style to decry the prevalence of hunger. In the midst of this tumult, this rising clamor for change and for the exposure of social ills, a young student from Gondar, Haile Gerima, came to Addis to study drama. In 1967, he left Ethiopia to pursue further study in the United States, first in Chicago where he was awakened to the African American struggle for equality and justice, and then in Los Angeles, where he discovered the radical potential of cinema.

The year 1974 witnessed a protracted period of civil and military unrest, the start of what became known as the “creeping coup” (*Time* 1974). Teachers and taxi drivers took industrial action protesting proposed educational reforms and rising oil prices, respectively. Soldiers mutinied over pay and conditions, and in late February the government collapsed. The imperial regime limped on until the spectacular events of September, yet Haile Selassie’s authority was eroded day after day. In the summer between the resignation of Aklilu Habta-Wolde’s cabinet and the arrest of the emperor, Gerima returned to Ethiopia to hurriedly make a film that would expose and condemn the age-old feudal conditions of rural life. Although at the time he was working on his graduation film, *Bush Mama*, he delayed its completion in order, as a still-registered student, to be able to take UCLA equipment home with him to Gondar (Willeman 1978). In an interview with Paul Willeman in 1978, Gerima

described how critical the timing was. “A month earlier,” he said, “the bureaucrats of Haile Selassie would have stopped the film . . . a month later, after the military had consolidated their power, things would have been crippled as well.” In the same interview, he stated that because things were already erupting he opted not to make a film about the unfolding famine, news of which was seeping into Addis thanks to the efforts of the students and faculty at Haile Selassie I University. He chose, instead, to make a film that more broadly addressed the “political conditions” (Willeman 1978, 34) and that could resonate with struggles against oppression in the wider Third World (Davis 1975). This film was *Mirt Sost Shi Amet* or *Harvest: 3,000 Years*.

*Harvest: 3,000 Years* has been celebrated as a landmark contribution to both the development of African cinema and to the Third Cinema movement, a term coined by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino to bring together those who rejected the First (Hollywood) and Second (European) cinematic modes in favor of radical and confrontational work, particularly from the Third World (Gabriel 1982). UCLA became home to the Third Cinema Film Club to which Gerima belonged, alongside Teshome Gabriel, Charles Burnett, Ntongela Masilela, and others (Masilela 1993). It was in the company of these fellow filmmakers, each committed to a cinema that confronted stereotypes, revealed social injustice, and affronted oppressive, hegemonic culture, that Gerima was educated. This education, he later reflected, was a process of mental “decolonization” through which he rejected the Western “Cowboy and Indian” movies he had devoured in his local cinema as a child and started to “think about film as a way to engage our political world” (Willeman 1978, 32; Jackson 2010, 27).

In its depiction of the impoverished, cheated lot of a peasant family, the seeming insanity to which one community elder, Kebebe, had been driven, and the exploitative indulgences of a cruel landlord, Gerima’s film was closely aligned with criticisms that Ethiopia’s students had leveled against deleterious, hierarchical feudalism. In his 1982 study, Teshome Gabriel highlighted the film’s use of oral narrative traditions, in which Gerima as the son of a playwright was versed, to facilitate a dismantling of the authority of the feudal lord. Kebebe’s “madness,” a familiar trope, enabled him to speak uninhibited and to call out injustices that the system that had once enslaved him had sought to silence (1982, 92). Mbye Cham went further, arguing that the structure of the film was dialectical, with opposing forces engaged in conflict, yet ultimately hopeful, concluding with the human capacity for self-liberation (1982, 147). This, Cham reported, was not remotely surprising given

Gerima's commitment to Marxism. Through provocative montage and washed-out dream sequences, Gerima presented the viewer with searing visual metaphors of feudalism: human beings, for example, yoked like cattle to the traditional plough. Quoting Gerima in a 1978 interview, Cham highlighted his juxtaposition of shots of a bereaved peasant woman having her head shaved, a traditional act to signify mourning, with a subsequent close up of a bald head, soon revealed as belonging to the landlord. This, Gerima explained, was an effort to both draw attention to a repressive tradition and to analogize the inevitable "desert and death" of the feudal class. The woman's hair would regrow; the landlord's baldness only went one way (1982, 149).

In both examples Gerima deployed editing that resonated with Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's dialectical theory of montage. The latter sequence, in particular, invoked Eisenstein's "intellectual montage" in which the juxtaposition and subsequent comparison of shots released an "idea" (1977, 62). Eisenstein, of course, had theorized cinema as a critical tool for political awakening in which montage could jolt the viewing audience out of passivity. The formal qualities of *Harvest: 3,000 Years* evidenced an understanding of canny editing in the formulation of visual provocation, yet Gerima's vision of film's activist potential, outlined in 1986, also relied upon relationships between the storyteller (the filmmaker), the audience, and the activist (the critic). This "triangular cinema," as he dubbed it, required reciprocity between these actors in order to disrupt and critique dominant modes. In his model, the storyteller explored and experimented, and the audience watched and engaged but may remain confused, leaving the activist with the responsibility to "bridge the gap" and set a process of transformation in motion (Gerima 1989, 69). Although it would take on a far wider significance in the Third Cinema movement, the narrative and form of *Harvest: 3,000 Years* suggested that Gerima sought to facilitate political awakening for Ethiopians in the mid-1970s, a contribution to the movement against feudalism that was gathering pace.

It is painful, therefore, to hear Gerima say in 1978 that people in Ethiopia had not yet seen his film (Willeman 1978). At that time he was still trying to have it blown up to 35mm, since that was the format of theaters in Ethiopia. He inferred, however, that there may be other problems in showing it beyond the practical. By 1978 many thousands of people had been murdered in the Red Terror campaign, unleashed by Mengistu to quash any opposition. The period of debate and of postrevolution fervor had been violently brought to an end, and faith in a transition to civilian rule and genuinely popular uprising was evaporating. The rigorous environment

of discussion and critique that Gerima's "triangular cinema" required had been firmly extinguished. More recently Gerima has stated that the Derg, in fact, sought to claim *Harvest: 3,000 Years* as the "property" of the Ethiopian people (Rohrer 2010, C1), clearly recognizing its potential to contribute to a narrative of popular revolution. Gerima was not, of course, interested in propagandizing, especially for a version of revolution that obscured a military reality. He refused their attempt to assert jurisdiction over his work, reconciling to not making another film in Ethiopia until the regime had collapsed.

## Spectacles of Starvation

It was not, of course, Gerima's film of revelatory dream sequence and provocative juxtaposition that dealt a death blow to the imperial regime, but the doctored spectacle of Jonathan Dibley's. The irony was that while *Harvest: 3,000 Years* had hoped to contribute to domestic political awakening, it ended up, in places such as the 1976 London Film Festival, being more generically celebrated for its realist reportage of poverty (Willeman 1978). Dibley's documentary, by contrast, an actual piece of reportage that introduced British audiences to the now familiar trope of the starving Ethiopian, ended up having a specific and dramatic impact on political change in Addis. Dibley had come to Ethiopia in 1973 following tips by students in Europe about a devastating famine that was unfolding north of Addis. Having negotiated with Haile Selassie's government to film only in particular areas where the government's (minimal) efforts at relief were in evidence, he and his crew were carefully escorted throughout their trip. Haile Selassie's government had, in fact, actively discouraged domestic or foreign media attention, believing that the famine could be quietly contained and avoid becoming a major political incident in a climate of increasing social unrest (Keller 1991). Television was introduced to Ethiopians in 1964 and was, from its inception, considered a tool to bolster the image of the imperial regime (Seyoum 1979, 44); its earliest broadcasts featured footage of the annual celebrations of the emperor's coronation (Head 1974, 40). As news of the famine broke outside of Ethiopia, the Imperial Board of Telecommunications, under whose jurisdiction television programming came, did not turn domestic cameras onto the disaster. Footage of the emperor's lavish eightieth birthday in 1972 was fresh in many minds; it was these images alongside those of starvation that would constitute a devastating visual indictment.

Ten years before another famine would inspire Bob Geldof's "Live Aid," Dimbleby's original film was the first to put graphic, full-color, moving images of starving Africans into living rooms in the United Kingdom and beyond. His intention, apropos Marshall McLuhan's interconnected "global village," was to appeal for humanitarian compassion, to insist upon the need for action and aid. In its opening sequences, *The Unknown Famine* used a dramatic, long point-of-view shot with the camera travelling between two lines of desperately hungry people, the immediacy of this enabling viewers thousands of miles away to literally walk amid the dying. The urgency and disorientated "liveness" of the film were further underlined by the slippages in focus and occasional shaking of the camera. The information's rawness was complemented by a vérité style of shooting, for which there had been a growing appetite in British television since the mid-1960s (Sexton 2003). Filming the "global village" in this manner ensured that the starving African could, in McLuhan's words, "no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs" (McLuhan 1995, 150). Unsurprisingly, after it aired in the United Kingdom on October 18, 1973, *The Unknown Famine* prompted an outpouring of outrage, but also of donation to charities such as Oxfam and the Red Cross (Jansson, Harris, and Penrose 1990).

On account of close-up shots of dead children, relentless exposure of physical distress and, crucially, a lack of white aid workers who might serve as familiar intermediaries, Peter Gill (2010) insists that the rawness of Dimbleby's film would make it unfit for broadcast today. Despite, as previously mentioned, attempts at diverting attention away from the implicit political controversies and toward the humanitarian implications, the images that Dimbleby narrated spoke for themselves. Among those who saw the original documentary were Ethiopian students in London who were disgusted and arranged a fundraising event at Africa Center where they could both solicit charitable donations and hand out pamphlets, titled "Repression in Ethiopia," denouncing the imperial regime (Zewde 2014, 184). Ethiopian students back in Addis had already tried to counter the domestic media blackout on images of the starving by organizing an exhibition on the campus of Haile Selassie I University under the guise of presenting some geographic information about drought. In April 1973 three faculty members, Abraham Demoz, Alula Abate, and Getachew Haile, produced a report of a visit to famine-stricken areas (Zewde 2014, 183). The photographs that they took provided material for the exhibition, which was soon suppressed by university guards and police. Despite attempts to contain them, however, images of the starving had already started

to leak out of the university campus and began to circulate on flyers, along with stories of desperate people who had trekked from the countryside and were now being physically blocked from entering Addis by cordons at the city limits. Indeed, just as news of the famine was being silenced in Ethiopia's capital, so too were the famine victims being kept from its streets. At the School of Fine Arts, painting student Eshetu Tiruneh produced a mural for his graduating project in spring of 1974, which he titled "Victims of the Famine." The final work, depicting the exodus of famished peasants from a barren landscape, was based upon many sketches of starving men, women, and children he encountered at his mother's house at the city limits. He channeled his outrage at their neglect into a large realist painting on the wall of the art school, an institution founded in the 1950s that Haile Selassie had celebrated as a bastion of creative vision and of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

Students, faculty, and artists affronted the imperial regime's attempt to shield the disaster from view and to blind the public to the desperate reality. It was the shocking visual revelation of the famine, of the physical dereliction of Ethiopia's rural subjects that would seal Haile Selassie's fate. The days between the popular uprising in February 1974 and the final overthrow in September were dubbed the "days of the leaflet" in which diatribes circulated, alongside photographs from the field (Tareke 2009, 39). As I explore in my broader research, all of these efforts can be understood as part of a wider movement to peel back, to reveal, to reject an imperialist tradition of veiling information from public view. By allowing Dimbleby's crew access in 1973, albeit in a highly controlled manner, the regime pierced a hole in barriers that it had erected for the purposes of both physical and political containment. Having created such a hole, the imperial regime soon attempted to seal it up; Tafari Wossen, then employed by the Ministry of Information, reported being sent to London to stop the finished film from being shown. He could not prevent Thames Television from airing it (nor did he particularly want to) and, like many fellow Ethiopians, was deeply shocked by what he saw. He brought the film back to Addis, where it was to receive a radical reedit.

Who exactly did the reediting of Dimbleby's film back in Addis remains to be revealed. In his recent autobiography Mengistu apparently claimed to have been personally involved in the process, although Tafari Wossen struggled to believe such a claim could be accurate. By September 1974, Ethiopian television and radio had become repositories for a bevy of anti-imperial messages. Blair Thomson, a journalist based in Ethiopia during the final days of the emperor's rule, recalled communiqués being broadcast that mocked Haile Selassie's title of "Negus" (King)

by placing it into parentheses (Thomson 1975, 114). Songs about the coming of revolution, promoting the Derg's foundational slogan "Etyopya Tikdem" ("Ethiopia First"), and satire about the emperor's "authority" filled the airwaves. Leaflets circulated that put photographs of the starving next to images of Haile Selassie indulging his pets, particularly his late, much-mocked dog Lulu. These juxtapositions provided the precedent for the explosive media spectacle of September 11. On that night, American paleontologist Jon Kalb recalled that Ethiopian television showed images of "people starving, interspersed with scenes of the emperor feeding his dogs from a silver tray" (Kalb 2000, 145). *The Unknown Famine* had become *The Hidden Hunger*. Any ambiguity about blame was removed; Haile Selassie's long-cultivated image as the nation's benevolent patriarch was destroyed.

At the heart of the reedit and the spectacular way in which it was deployed was the presentation of an explosive dialectic, but one much more limited in scope to that which Gerima pursued a year earlier. While *Harvest: 3,000 Years* had sought to foster a deep political awakening, a realization that feudalism could not survive if the people rose up and threw off their yokes, *The Hidden Hunger* sought merely to indict, to make the unequivocal case for immediate regime change. Given both the circulation of famine photography and the familiar footage of Haile Selassie's gilded life, none of the images in *The Hidden Hunger* were themselves unfamiliar, but their jarring juxtaposition on glowing screens foreclosed any further debate. This was not Eisensteinian dialectical montage. Rather than jolt people out of passivity, *The Hidden Hunger* dazzled its audience into shock.

In contrast to *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, *The Hidden Hunger* was a spectacle, not a clarion call. Much like the spectacle as described by Jonathan Crary, by way of Guy Debord and Michel Foucault, it sought not to facilitate sight, to clarify vision but rather to isolate, separate, and disempower, to produce "docile subjects" (2001, 74). The theatricality of its deliverance synthesized the cacophony of critiques of Haile Selassie into a singular, authoritative "final word." On September 11 it was, in fact, as much the medium of delivery (television) as the content itself that sealed Haile Selassie's fate. In "inviting," in Legum's words, the population to view this indictment on screens in homes, bars, and other public places, the military regime ensured that the civilian population were not, ultimately, participants in the final fall; they were, instead, spectators to the military's revolution. In this sense a visual spectacle that did not invite a response precipitated the violent spectacle of power by which Mengistu would govern. Just as Legum argued that the television had functioned as a more efficient, bloodless guillotine in Addis in 1974, so Blair Thompson underscored

its power to execute when he stated that “the main weapon in the final stages of Ethiopia’s revolutionary process was not the gun, but the cathode tube” (Thomson 1975, 100). Conceiving of the television as a weapon, he foresaw its deployment in the service of dictatorship in the years to come.

### 3002 and Other Myths

The history of the struggle for power in the early years of the revolution is complex and still controversial. It involves rival student factions struggling against the military’s increasingly consolidated power, with one (Meison, the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement) ultimately agreeing to cooperate with the Derg in the hope of a transition to civilian rule and the other (EPRP, Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party) launching a campaign of violence to try to force the latter. The role of the student movements in the revolution remains a divisive topic. As Zewde (2014) states, the blame for the horror that the Derg ultimately unleashed in the name of Marxist-Leninism is too often laid at the feet of young activists who earnestly (if not in the best coordinated fashion) fought for social justice and saw their fight as part of a larger pan-African and global movement. The bloody Red Terror of 1977–78 extinguished the student movement (and any person suspected of being a counterrevolutionary), but it also put an end to the debates and seminar-like public space that characterized the immediate years after the emperor’s fall. Even Gerima, as mentioned above, felt that there might still be room for a genuinely popular revolution in that period. Among filmmakers he was not alone. The Ethiopian-Greek Michel Papatakis was one of those who continued to work in Addis, believing that film had a critical role to play in educating the population and inciting real political awakening.

Papatakis was encouraged to professionally pursue film by the emperor (Fantahun, 2014). He was given the opportunity to study cinematography in Moscow prior to the revolution and, unsurprisingly, returned to Ethiopia convinced that cinema was a political tool. He followed in the footsteps of great Soviet-educated Francophone African filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène and Souleymane Cissé, both of whose work was concerned with enlightening audiences and revealing political injustices (Woll 2004). Papatakis’s first film, *Gumma/Blood Money* (1974), made right at the end of the emperor’s rule and showcased just in time for Haile Selassie to see it, was the first full-length color film made in the Amharic language.

Presenting a young man who suffered under the Oromo informal reconciliatory justice system, *Gumma* was soon read as a meditation on the unhappy plight of the Ethiopian peasant (Tigabu 2014). After the revolution Papatakis produced two further films that remain largely unknown outside of Ethiopia: *Yalefew Shekimena Yemimetaw Guzo* or *The Past Burden and the Journey Ahead* (1975) and *Tiggil Dil, Dil Tiggil* or *Struggle Victory, Victory Struggle* (1978). Tafari Wossen assisted with production of these films, and the former, he recalled, included footage of the destruction of *chika bet* (traditional “mud”) housing by the imperial regime, as well as of gestures once read as imperial benevolence, such as the occasion on which the emperor threw bread to the starving from his car window during a drive to Debre Zeit (now also known as Bishoftu). In the post-revolution climate such imagery reinforced the narrative that the imperial regime was indulgent and neglectful. It also indicated an environment in which documentary images were being mined and repackaged to bolster key narratives. If before September 1974 the photographs of the starving were indisputable evidence of famine, after the revolution photographs and footage of royal paraphernalia indexed autocracy and neglect. In both cases the filmic and photographic were understood as making visible some objective truth that had long been concealed.

Like Gerima, Papatakis faced challenges with the Derg over control of his own work. *Tiggil Dil, Dil Tiggil*, a film that sought to chronicle the fight against the Somali thrust into the Ogaden region, was seized for its propagandist potential. Tafari Wossen reported that the Derg wished to retitle the film *Revolutionary Motherland or Death* after the threatening, nationalist slogan that circulated during the Ogaden war. The film’s popularity with the military was matched by enthusiasm from the Soviets who, in 1978, signed an agreement for “Friendship and Cultural Relations” (as part of a broader diplomatic accord). In that agreement, excerpted in the anti-Derg student publication *Combat*, there were explicit references to the need for “film shows, lectures and exhibitions” and for the exchange of literature, photography, and cinema to bolster relations between the two countries (*Combat* 1979.) Given that it was the Ogaden conflict that affirmed Soviet support, it is unsurprising that *Tiggil Dil, Dil Tiggil* was lauded at the 11th International Film Festival in Moscow in 1979. Papatakis and Gerima were both noted in a 1984 Soviet publication that celebrated the revolution’s tenth anniversary. In a review of the “Cultural Reforms” since the downfall of the emperor, Ethiopian cinematography was highlighted for its development, with both *Gumma* and *Harvest: 3,000 Years* cited as exemplary works of revolutionary cinema, each highlighting the impoverished life of the peasantry

(Nikolayeva 1986). Gerima had long distanced himself from Derg's fictionalization of popular revolution, yet his film and Papatakis's belonged to its history with or without their consent.

O. Nikolayeva's account in 1986 also revealed, however, a key slippage that was occurring between documentary and fiction. This line had already been blurred by both *Harvest: 3,000 Years* and *The Hidden Hunger*, the former employing rural peasants, filming as nonintrusively as possible, and encouraging them not to "perform" (Davis 1975, 18), and the latter actual documentary footage reconfigured to tell a particular story. Nikolayeva's account also referred to a "documentary" called *3002 Years* as one of the examples of the new cinema "devoted . . . to such topics as the overthrow of the imperial regime" (1986, 158). *3002: Wondimu's Memories* (its full title; Teferi Bizuayehu, 1976) was, in fact, not strictly a documentary but a drama mixed with some documentary footage to tell a tale in which the political awakening of Ethiopia's masses was attributed to the revelatory power of the television. The film, directed by Teferi Bizuayehu, one of the young filmmakers who benefitted from the Derg's encouragement of cinema, but who later fled Ethiopia in fear and disillusionment, was a key component of Ethiopia's entry for the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). Tafari Wossen served as its executive producer. *Sost Shi Hulet* or *3002* was set immediately after the revolution and told the tale of Wondimu, who is first seen celebrating the emperor's downfall in Revolution Square, "a placard in hand," the accompanying brochure explained, "[denouncing] life under the discredited oppressive feudal regime" (*FESTAC '77* 1977, 5). During the demonstration, Wondimu is shown having flashbacks to life in the Adolla Gold Mine, from which he is now liberated. In a clear reference to the spectacle of September 11, the film then shows Wondimu watching a television program "which flashes to the achievements of the revolution *vis à vis* the exotic pomp of the feudal regime." This "pretentious façade," the brochure continued, "was what the past regime attempted to hide behind in order to hide its inability to deal with long outstanding political, social and economic problems of the country." The revolution as revealed on the screen is thus shown to have "brought to light the miserable conditions that led to Wollo's 'Hidden Hunger'" (*FESTAC '77* 1977, 5) While there can be no doubt that Dimbleby's footage was a revelation to many and that there was clear truth in the accusation that Haile Selassie had neglected his poorest, rural subjects, *3002* revealed the seminal role that moving images had come to play to the narrative of the revolution. Wondimu was shown celebrating after the screening; the final blow against the regime was not carried out by him,

but on the small screen. *3002* was presented as factual; the manifold protests prior to September 11 were subsumed by a new narrative that insisted that the revolution had been televised.

## Re-veiling and Reconciliation

The screening of *3002* at FESTAC made clear two things. First, the revolution had, indeed, increased interest in domestic filmmaking such that a key part of Ethiopia's entry in the pan-African showcase was a work of cinema. Indicative of this growth, the Ethiopian Film Center was established as the hub of the industry. Second, however, it showed that this interest in film stemmed from the now official narrative of the revolution, with the television spectacle as the cornerstone of mass liberation. At one stage, perhaps, Haile Gerima and Michel Papatakis might have celebrated domestic cinema's seeming political germination; however *3002* veiled another reality. In 1977 the image of television as liberator being propagated in Lagos jarred with lived experiences in Addis. In February 1977 Mengistu gave his infamous speech in Revolution Square announcing the EPRP's "White Terror" assassinations of Derg members, saying that a "Red Terror" must destroy those who were undermining the revolution. He concluded by dramatically smashing vials of pigs' blood, viscerally foreshadowing the actual blood soon to stain Addis's streets. The television provided a key medium to shame "traitors." Tortured, bloody corpses, some pinned with slogans denouncing their "counter-revolutionary" activities, were screened nightly as a warning to the viewing public (Tiruneh 1993, 213). The desire to make an example of those protesting the military takeover of power led to the notorious incident on May Day 1977 when, following an EPRP youth rally, hundreds of young Ethiopians were gunned down. Their families were subsequently told that in order to claim the bodies, they must pay for the bullets that killed their children (Zewde 2009). At the same time that Wondimu's televisual liberation was being touted in West Africa, small screens were threatening and cajoling the population at home.

Bahru Zewde (2009, 29) identifies three phases of the Red Terror's development: the first being the EPRP's campaign, the second being the highly visible unleashing of "revolutionary" violence by Mengistu, and the third (after May Day 1977) in which people simply disappeared. In this latter, most terrifying phase, the government no longer felt the need to justify its actions, and the media spectacle of the second

phase was replaced with a much more sinister mode of secret executions and closed-door disappearances. Television no longer announced deaths or warned of the consequences of counterrevolutionary behavior; bodies were simply dumped in the streets or never seen again. This displacement of the extreme visibility of revolutionary violence, from television screens to behind closed doors, mirrors Michel Foucault's (1995) account of the retreat of the violent spectacle of punishment in the nineteenth century from public gallows and guillotines to locked prisons. In the former case, the public execution served, as did the nightly television spectacles, to underscore the dictatorial jurisdiction of the Derg. In removing such images from view, the Derg removed any performance of enacting justice and replaced the spectacle of violence with the spectacle of total power. The Red Terror revealed, of course, the extent to which the military had betrayed the public in their takeover of the revolution, and the pretense that the television had been a liberating medium was firmly undone. Soon screens were more often filled with footage of pomp and parades, of cadres touring factories and visiting socialist dignitaries; violence lingered, but out of sight. The cathode tube, which had facilitated the apotheosis of a long campaign to reveal concealed truths, ended up re-veiling the machinations of power with the borrowed aesthetics of Marxist-Leninism.

In March 2012 I visited Ethiopian Television (ETV), hoping to track down the edited version of Dimpleby's film. I met with Bekele Sime who informed me that I could not see *The Hidden Hunger* because ETV did not have a working projector to show it. I was, instead, shown a video from 1991 entitled *Negat Kifle And or Dawn Part One* for which Sime had been a producer. Made in the year that the Derg fell, this film aped the structure of *The Hidden Hunger*, utilizing footage of Derg rallies and images of Mengistu and his men in blue Mao jackets, and juxtaposing them with the shocking images from the 1984 famine. In one memorable sequence, the bubbling fountains in front of the Tigrachin monument were shown with Mengistu touring visiting dignitaries followed by a scene featuring an overstuffed buffet; the latter was then abruptly interrupted by a shot of a peasant's skeletal back before jolting back to footage of a parade with a picture of Mengistu aloft. The film, of course, highlighted the jarring concurrence of the 1984 tenth anniversary celebrations with the infamous famine that shocked the West. The former were a triumph of gaudy neon and mass choreography, assisted by cultural consultants sent from North Korea. The famine that was unfolding in the countryside as hammers and sickles flashed in the Ethiopian capital vastly eclipsed the 1973–74 famine in its death toll, but also in the manner in which the government willfully ignored the needs

of the people in favor of a late Cold War jolly. The enormous Tigrachin monument to Ethiopian-Cuban friendship was unveiled during these celebrations, and with no sense of irony, the sculptural frieze along its base that depicted the ascendancy of Mengistu also included depictions of starving peasants being ignored by the imperial regime. In 1991 Sime and his colleagues remade *The Hidden Hunger* as an indictment of Mengistu and the Derg, and as a clear reminder that the images that had filled Ethiopian television screens through the 1980s had masked a reality worse than that which had been revealed in 1974. Unlike the emperor, Mengistu was not arrested, however; he escaped to exile in Zimbabwe.

The role of the camera in addressing the aftermath of the Derg period has been significant and is deserving of greater attention than this chapter affords. Films such as *Imperfect Journey* (Haile Gerima, 1994), *Ye Wonz Maibel/Deluge* (Salem Mekuria, 1997), and *Teza/Morning Dew* (Haile Gerima, 2008) have played a critical role in accessing repressed memories but also in calling attention to the intensely mediated experience of revolution. In *Deluge* Salem Mekuria begins with a photograph of her late brother, Solomon, over which she addresses him directly. She tells him that she is sorry for their disagreements and that through her film she wants to understand “what happened and why.” The camera pans back to reveal that she is watching the photograph on a television. In the beginning sequences of her film she continues to talk to Solomon while the painfully familiar footage of Red Terror victims brandished with slogans appears on screen. *Deluge* explores the unresolved grief carried by those who lost children and family members in the years between 1974 and 1991, but it also stitches back together many foreign and domestic media images. It is an important meditation on the role of moving images in the radical change and violence that ensued. Mekuria re-creates sections of *The Hidden Hunger*, reusing both Selassie’s birthday footage and Dimbleby’s *Unknown Famine* to provide an initial explanation for why the imperial regime collapsed. Yet, underscoring the complexity of the situation, she adds the voice of her father who disagreed with the overthrow as a contrast to the youthful zeal of those chanting “Land to the Tiller.” *Deluge* confronts the spectacle of September 11, 1974, revealing that beneath the seemingly indisputable case for regime change there was division and anxiety.

From the outset *Deluge* is a self-conscious work of cinema. By including footage of herself in the editing suite, Mekuria asserts the autobiographical motivations for her project but also the subjectivity of montage. These images cut through the perception of television and of documentary film as both revealing and authoritative, the seeming objectivity of the camera crumbling as the subjective craft of

filmmaking is laid bare. As her voiceover insists, *Deluge* is not about presenting a definitive account of the revolution, but about revealing the complicated task of piecing together a history in fragments. The images of the post-production process provide an important visual metaphor for this, of course, but they resonate even more profoundly if we accept that the manipulation of film and television played an active role in the dark direction of Ethiopia's revolutionary change. In a 2002 interview Mekuria was asked to what extent her film sought to confront negative Western stereotypes about Africa, embodied, in particular, in the image of the starving Ethiopian (Ukadike 2002). She replied that it was part of the project, since she had experienced much of the revolution from outside, watching her country through American news outlets. *Deluge* called attention to the labor of editing to destabilize the accepted authority of television and of documentary film, but it also challenged the simplified, dialectical use of montage whereby two juxtaposed images led to a singular, indisputable conclusion. By putting shots of famine alongside shots of tumbling waterfalls and abundant rivers Mekuria confounded, rather than resolved, assumptions about hunger and poverty. In insisting on the need to think and not to assume, she sought to enervate domestic and foreign audiences rendered dangerously passive by the acceptance of the televisual and the documentary as objective truth.

Like Mekuria, Gerima also largely watched the revolution from the outside. His first response to the Derg's downfall was to return to Addis with Ryszard Kapuściński to examine the impact of the revolutionary period and expose the pain of those grieving, but also to question the motivations of the new government, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In his documentary *Imperfect Journey* (1994) the opposition from an EPRDF representative with which Gerima's skepticism at the post-1991 revolution is met punctures any assumptions that the new government of Meles Zenawi would liberate Ethiopians. Showing footage of grieving parents, of new memorials being unveiled, but also of the confiscating of photographs and the hijacking of certain memories, Gerima presented his audience with a collage of difficult contradictions. Like Mekuria, he refused to neatly package a picture of resolution, provoking his viewers to think beyond what was being presented, to question the EPRDF's program.

*Teza* (2008), Gerima's epic feature film telling the story of young doctor, Anberber, traumatized by both the brutality of the Derg and by racist violence experienced overseas, offers an even more complex picture of the revolutionary years. Jumping between a foggy, late revolution present and a past riddled with idealism and lost

dreams, Gerima presents a story familiar to those who enjoyed Haile Selassie-era scholarships overseas, grew critical of the seemingly feudal system, but then became disillusioned by the military's anti-intellectual, bloody version of revolution. *Teza* introduces another television audience to the narrative when Ethiopian students are shown in a bar in Germany watching and then cheering as Haile Selassie announces his intention to step aside. The sequence serves to underscore both the hope instilled in the students, but also the naïveté that the military would soon give way to civilian-led change. The contrast between the jubilation with which the televisual announcement is greeted and the tense welcome Anberber later receives in Addis underscores the gulf between perception and reality. Gerima has said that *Teza* cannot be compared to *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (Thomas 2013, 88), because in contrast to the budget and equipment of the former, the latter was a rough-edged work of what cinematographer Elliot Davis called "guerilla-type production efficiency" (1975, 19). If *Harvest: 3,000 Years* had a breathless urgency to it, *Teza* offers a more melancholic reflection; where *Harvest's* hope hinged upon liberating dream sequences, *Teza's* trauma erupts in nightmarish flashbacks. What *Teza* and *Imperfect Journey* both share with *Harvest*, however, is the resilient faith of Gerima in cinema's ability to spark participation rather than cultivate spectatorship.

## Conclusion

Though moving images, televisual and filmic, were central to the course of the Ethiopian revolution, their deployment by the Derg was anathema to Gerima's aspirations for a genuine cinema of liberation. The screening on September 11, and its subsequent mythologizing in *3002*, made clear that the justification for the military takeover hinged upon the mobilization of the television to spectacularly reveal that which students, faculty, and artists had been working to make visible for many months. The events of that night in which human suffering became dazzlingly visible set the tone for the coming years, whereby the Ethiopian public would be invited to watch, rather than genuinely participate in, radical change. The history of cinema and television through the revolutionary years is worthy of much closer attention, since, beyond the media spectacle of 1974, it was amid the revolutionary tumult that a domestic filmmaking scene was firmly established. Indeed, while screens large and small became the sites of both overwhelming and often oppressive images, it was the regime's very faith in the role of moving images to propagandize

and cajole that led to their encouragement of a burgeoning industry. As with so many of the eager cultural endeavors of the revolution, the most creative years were those between the fall of Haile Selassie and the violence of the Red Terror when some hope of civilian rule lingered. The arrival of the Soviets, in the wake of violence, brought investment and opportunities, but also censorship and ideological strictures. Nonetheless, from the fervent days of the creeping coup, through the spectacle of power and violence, to the painful process of reconciliation, the history of cinema and television in Ethiopia is an integral part not just of the context, but of the very process of revolution in the Horn of Africa.

### NOTES

During the preparation of this chapter, on June 10, 2016, the veteran Ethiopian journalist and filmmaker Tafari Wossen passed away. Conversations with him over email, in Addis Ababa, and in Washington D.C. significantly informed the research presented here. I am indebted to the time that he afforded me and the information that he imparted.

1. This mural, a photograph of which Eshetu Tiruneh still has in his collection, was later reproduced in oil on canvas and is now on display at the National Museum in Addis Ababa. Eshetu's painting became iconic in the earliest years of the revolution and was reproduced in a range of printed matter for mass consumption.

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