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Poster of *Comme un Aimant* Courtesy of Mars Films

African Film With a French Twist

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While most Americans last month were focused on the Oscars - in which no black people were nominated in any major category - another event celebrated black films and filmmakers. Held in the West African capital city of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, the Festival of Pan-African Cinema is the continent's largest film festival. The feature films and documentaries shown this year (the festival's 17th) hailed from throughout Africa and the African Diaspora, but the movies attracting the most praise and controversy were Franco-African productions - movies that examine the complex and unsettling relationships between Europe and its former colonies through issues of migration, cultural differences and clashing political interests.

The top award of the biennial festival went to French-Moroccan director Ali Zauoa, for a film about Moroccan street children told through the voices of the youngsters. Ousmane Sembene, the great Senegalese writer and director, won praise for his *Faat Kine*, a movie that pays homage to modern African women and challenges patriarchal traditions. (Sembene - considered the master of African film - no longer competes but shows up with a new film at every Pan-African Festival; *Faat Kine* is currently showing at New York's Film Forum.)

The film attracting the most attention, though, was *Lumumba*, a dramatic biography of the late Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba. Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck brings passion and sensitivity - thanks in large part to a solid performance by the Cameroonian actor Eriq Ebouaney - to both Lumumba's brief tenure as prime minister and his assassination, a murder engineered, most likely, by Belgium and the United States. *Lumumba* has provoked much discussion, particularly in the wake of Congo president

Laurent Kabila's assassination, coming exactly 40 years after Lumumba's murder. The movie will be featured in Harlem's upcoming African Film Festival (April 20-29 at The Schomburg Center), as will filmmakers Peck and Sembene, participating in a panel discussion that's sure to be a hot ticket.

Two highly touted films examining the predicament of minorities in France and that country's evolving racial landscape are currently showing in New York. A full house packed the theatre at the Museum of Modern Art last week to see director Abdel Kechiche present his critically acclaimed first film, *La Faute à Voltaire (It's Voltaire's Fault)*. The movie stars Elodie Bouchez (from *The Dream Life of Angels*), and describes an African immigrant's struggle to survive in an increasingly xenophobic society. The lead character, Jallel, a North African *sans papiers* (undocumented immigrant), is played with great charm by Sami Bouajila (whom American viewers may recall from *The Siege*, where he played a volatile Arabic professor-qua-suicide bomber: the kind of parts North Africans can usually expect in American cinema). Much of the movie's appeal comes from its vision of Jallel's camaraderie with fellow struggling immigrants and disenfranchised French folk (street hawkers, eccentrics), and his run-ins with the authorities of this purportedly liberal, humane and borderless society. A poor but cultured refugee (he recites classical poetry), Jallel tries to stay on the right side of the law as he navigates the margins of French society, but still finds himself enduring stints in detention and mental institutions. Critics may wonder at Jallel's relationship with Lucie - a chain-smoking nymphomaniac mental patient - but the movie's view of complex relationships is one way it powerfully conveys the uncertainty and alienation facing people of color in France. Its soundtrack, showcasing different genres of North African music, provides an exquisite backdrop to the story.

Also showing in New York is *The Magnet (Comme un Aimant)*, directed by Akhenaton, of the famous French rap group IAM, and Kamel Saleh. This hip hop film traces the lives of eight young men of North African descent, chronicling their struggle to survive in an impoverished quarter of Marseilles, France's ethnically diverse southern port city. In the span of a few days, the young men - Sauveur (Akhenaton), Cauette (Kamel) and company - drift from one hustle to another. From petty theft to plots masterminded by mobsters, the young men eke out a living, inflate their egos and return to meet at the neighborhood bench ("the Magnet") - until the scams go awry. In the ensuing mayhem, two of the friends are gunned down, others arrested and Cauette contemplates setting his beloved Marseilles ablaze.

The situation of African immigrants in France is lamentable. Shunned by the establishment, confined to housing projects and hounded by the police and right-wing groups, "les beurs" and "les blacks" (as North African and sub-Saharan immigrants are called) suffer from racism, cultural alienation, poverty and violence. *The Magnet* exposes the dead-end nature of life in Sauveur's "hood," but tells a potentially gripping tale with little warmth or humor, primarily because its characters lack depth.

The Magnet's setting and subject are reminiscent of another, far better, French hip hop film. *La Haine (Hate)*, a 1995 release directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, tracked the lives of three friends - one black, one Jewish, one "beur" - for a day. Though criticized for painting an exaggerated picture of the *banlieue* (the suburban French ghetto) and for imitating the American coming of age story *Boyz N The Hood*, *La Haine* offered an astute study of the characters, their different cultural backgrounds and tensions, and the hybrid (hip hop) culture of resistance that bound them together. With the exception of a few (curse) words in Arabic, *The Magnet* does very little with

its characters' cultural heritage.

The soundtrack of *The Magnet*, on the other hand, deserves all the accolades it's received. Promoted as "French Rap Meets American Soul in New York," the album has been nominated for best original soundtrack in a French film competition. Evoking a vintage Harlem and characters like Dolemite, Superfly and Shaft more than the film's blundering French delinquents, the record is still a delight to listen to, featuring cuts by Isaac Hayes, former Manhattan Gerald Alston, former Temptation Dennis Edwards, The Dells, Millie Jackson and other 70s stars doing soul grooves, in addition to hip hop and gospel numbers.

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