

FILM REVIEW

Michael William Thomas dir. *Cine-Addis*. 2023. 39 minutes, Amharic with English Subtitle, Ethiopia. No price reported. The Screen Worlds Collective, available on Vimeo.

The documentary *Cine-Addis* can be viewed as a visual and dialogical account of the history of Ethiopian cinema, specifically Addis Ababa cinema, as the title suggests. It is directed by first-time director Michael W. Thomas and features a cinematic presentation on the state of Ethiopian cinema and film culture. The format of the film is not the typical documentary-style interview, but rather a conversation over coffee or tea with well-known Ethiopian actors, authors, directors, and a cinema house owner. Under the guidance of Azmari and his musical compositions, the documentary centered on a film week that is being held in one of Addis's oldest cinema houses, and it weaves that with the filmmakers' informal discussions.

Although he is one of the scholars of Ethiopian cinema, this is Thomas's first film. From his recent book, *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres* (2022), to his seminal work in *Cine-Ethiopia: The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa* (2018), of which he was also a co-editor, we can recall his engagement that examined the evolution of Ethiopian cinema. The mosaic of scholarly and journalistic writings, including his works, serves as a constant reminder that Ethiopian cinematic history is rich and has a century-long history in Addis, beginning with consumption and progressing to huge production. Nonetheless, the documentary focuses on a contemporary filmmaking practice.


The film begins with Azmari attempting to tune his radio. He ended up on a program that talks about film week. The camera then shows him departing, while the radio voice becomes inaudible. In a few minutes, the camera shows a famous Ethiopian long-distance runner, Haile Gebre Selassie, who owned the first private cinema in the digital era of Ethiopian film, and Tewodros Teshome, another pivotal figure in the film industry, commenting on the period when film production began to be abundant and abound. They discussed how the opening of Alem Cinema and the screening of Tewodros' film *Kezkaza Welafen* in Alem Cinema drew audiences into the movie theater. The camera then switches to Azmari, who is looking at an album full of filmmakers' photographs, which we get familiar with when the narration progresses. Thomas used this photo album-style document to introduce the filmmakers featured in the documentary as well as to segue to their film footage he uses in the documentary. These filmmakers' films are also screened in the Film Week schedule.

The documentary film, in the form of friendly conversations, allows filmmakers to discuss and debate critical and crucial topics about filmmaking and

filmmakers, such as the concept of gender, fame, film financing, distribution, film functions, spectator engagement, and recurring themes in their films. Among the raised ideas, the way the documentary juxtaposes women filmmakers' interactions among themselves with women's conversations with their male encounters is laudable. In one scene, we see only women. The camera shows us writer/director Alemtsehay Bekele, writer/director Beza Hailu, and actress/producer Bertukan Befkadu speak about the severing, linking, and balancing of the two most important things in life, their profession and their family as women among women in a natural environment, as Birtukan's son appears and talks to her ears as children do in everyday life during these filmmakers' conversation. In this scene, the camera focuses on them talking over coffee about the hardships and joys they find in work-life balance in a similar way women gather over coffee to talk about their problems and triumphs in the Ethiopian culture. In another scene, the camera shows Kidist Yilma, the most prolific filmmaker, who won many local awards and received acclaim, discussing her choice of themes and audience responses with her fellow male filmmakers in the café, not primarily as a woman but as a valued and accomplished filmmaker.

Television stations in Ethiopia have already broadcast several programs reflecting on the condition and history of its local film industry. This documentary, nonetheless, is an effort to make the conversation about Ethiopia cinema accessible to the global audience. At the same time, one should be aware that it represents just a small portion of Ethiopian cinema, specifically cinema in Addis. I couldn't help but witness the nonexistence of films and filmmakers of earlier periods from the documentary. These early films appear in the documentary in Azmari's lyrics when Azmari sings about how people considered cinema as a devil's work at the inception of the medium and recalls other celluloid films and film cultures. These lyrics later animate the short excerpts of the first Ethiopian black and white film, *Hirut Abatwa Manew/Hirut, Who Is the Father?* in the documentary. The omission of these films and filmmakers is also evident, as the filmmakers are neither featured in the documentary's filmmakers' discussion nor do their films take up a good deal of space to demonstrate the nuanced and long cinematic trajectory.

The documentary ends with the closing of the doors of the cinema house where the film week was held, opening another door for the audience to engage with ideas and suggestions to develop cinema in Ethiopia. With the camera zooming out at Azmari and his musical compositions, the documentary forwards potential discussion ideas with lyrics for further theoretical and practical engagements.

Eyerusalem Kassahun Ayele 
 Addis Ababa University
 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
eyerusalemkassahun6@gmail.com
[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.224](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.224)