

# BOOK REVIEW

**Michael W. Thomas. *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres*.** London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 261 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$103.50. Hardback. ISBN: 9781350227408.

*Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres* is a timely addition to the growing scholarship on cinema in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. But what makes Michael W. Thomas's book unique is the way it examines *fiker* (love) in Amharic films, a theme and concept that informs the book and which is the foundation of the author's cinematic experience in Ethiopia. Refreshingly, Thomas traces *fiker* in Amharic films through archival sources (primarily newspapers and magazines) and the oral data he has collected since 2014 (twenty-one formal and semi-structured interviews). Utilizing informal and formal conversations with the people he met in and around the cinema in Addis Ababa, Thomas argues that *fiker* is deeply embedded in Ethiopia's cultural expressions—such as music, literature, theatre and film. Although love appears to him as a universal concept and the centerpiece of “our shared humanity across our differences” (6), Thomas maintains that Ethiopian films have embraced *fiker* as a major theme and narrative strand, denoting its centrality and popular appeal in locally produced films. Amharic film genres, he contends, “are dominated by the concept of *fiker*” (14, 88, 216). Thomas laments that Hollywood's romantic comedies and dramas, which privilege romantic and sexual desires, have influenced our modern expectations of love in films. To Thomas, Ethiopian films are constrained by these expectations, with the only difference being that they are “highly conditioned by the cultural context within which [the films are] produced and consumed” (7). *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres* is an ambitious book whose goal is to open up new opportunities and avenues of exploration into the experiences of Ethiopian cinema and film genres.

The book is organized around three parts which capture the breadth and depth of popular Ethiopian cinema. It consists of nine chapters, a rich but lengthy introduction, and a conclusion. Throughout the first part, Thomas provides a beautiful historical overview of cinemagoing in Ethiopia (Ch. 1) and film production (Ch. 2), stitching together a narrative that

stretches the reader's imagination from the turn of the twentieth century—when cinema first entered Ethiopia “through the modernizing aspirations of Emperor Menelik II” (34)—to the present. The book's second part ties together four chapters that crystallize *fiker* through specific films such as *Yefiker film* (love film), with Chapters Three, Four, and Five underscoring its centrality and revealing how love as a theme has captivated Ethiopian film producers and consumers. Chapter Six takes a slight detour to lament the absence of *fiker* in family films. Building on the book's last three chapters, the final part pays homage to the promotion (Ch. 7), production (Ch. 8), and perception of Amharic film genres (Ch. 9). Revealingly, Ethiopia “lacks a formal distribution sector” (181)—which has confounded promotion—and it continues to struggle in production for lack of fully-equipped production facilities and trained technical crews (74). Little wonder, then, that Ethiopians consider locally produced films as “rubbish,” with most local films being “of a very low production value and the narrative ... driven by dialogue” (2, 4).


Perhaps the book's strength resides in the rich oral data, especially the data from Ethiopian film consumers that constitute the book's final chapter. Films are made for audiences, and any conversation about the cinema industry must also consider the voices of the viewers. Significantly, Thomas provides an impressive treasure trove of forty-one images that augment our understanding of Ethiopia's film industry. The use of visual literacy is essential to studying the recent past, for which photographs and maps are important sources of information. The book cuts across multiple disciplines, including film studies, media studies, African history, and history. It is ideal for graduate and upper-level undergraduate students in these disciplines, including those considering oral interviews as a research methodology.

But the book is not without fault. Thomas fails to discuss the intersection of politics and cinema production, especially the censorship of films that offended the sensibility of the ruling class and conservative constituents. Censorship is mentioned in passing, in eight pages, yet it remains the centerpiece of the conflict between film producers and consumers on the one hand and government bureaucrats on the other across the continent. One wishes for a guide through the multiple censorship ordinances to better understand their impact on film production and consumption. Because most of the films examined in this book have constructed *fiker* through a heterosexual lens, it would have been intellectually stimulating to learn whether this construction is (or is not) dictated by censorship ordinances that forbid homosexuality in cinema in most African countries.

In a narrow sense, *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres* captures the contours of film production and consumption in Ethiopia and highlights the concept of love (*fiker*) that informs production. Broadly conceived, however, the book exhorts us to consider cinema as a powerful

technological tool that “occupies a complex and unsettled position within [our] social and cultural imagination” (216).

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