

The road leading migrants away from home can be a rocky one in a scene from *Today*

Moving Pictures

A series of new African films explores the pain of loss and migration.
Alexander Macbeth reports

In a continent with more than 10 million internally displaced people and refugees, it should come as no surprise that tales of migration filter through to Africa's arts. While men and women cross borders in search of better fortune, African filmmakers are increasingly charting their movements – and in the process reflecting on themes of loss, displacement and reconciliation.

Espoir Voyage, by Burkina Faso director Michel Zongo (who also features in the film) is a homage to Africa's oral tradition. It is a feature-length documentary telling the tale of families torn apart and tragic inter-African migration. Joanny left his family in Koudougou, Burkina Faso's third largest city, in 1978 to find work in neighbouring Ivory Coast. After 18 years of silence, a message reaches Joanny's family – via a friend Augustin – relating his death. Meanwhile, Joanny's younger brother, Zongo himself, decides to retrace his brother's steps, setting out on a bus in June 2011 to

discover what happened. "If this was a story set in Europe, I would have been able to find records and registers, but I didn't have the privilege of documents to consult," says Zongo. "The sources I had to work with were

scarce. Back home we would call this *radio cancan*: 'some guy said that another guy said a 'kind-of-thing,'" adds Zongo, talking at this year's Berlinale film festival in Germany.

The poignant absence of information available to Zongo gives *Espoir Voyage* an innocence. He is thrown into Ivorian territory controlled by rebel forces and a national

uprising in the north of the country – all part of travelling over 3,200 kilometres to trace a man who likely died in a place where, as one interviewee notes, "traces disappear".

As Zongo journeys from roadside canteens to plantations, his resilience and blind enthusiasm draw a mixture of incredulity and warmth from those he encounters. "I had two addresses before I set off," he says before correcting himself. "No, I had one address – Augustin's." Augustin left Koudougou with Joanny and is Zongo's only fixer in an Ivory Coast on the verge of civil war. "I was shocked when I arrived in the country," remembers Zongo. "For people from Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast is a country of dreams. People in Burkina Faso fantasise so much about life there that I knew the names of roads in the capital Abidjan before

I went there. But what I found was a country in chaos," he says. "Before

I found Augustin I was lost – I felt like the film could end any minute," he adds.

As his quest for information draws a range of blanks, Zongo heads west through a nervous and fragile Ivorian landscape. Along the way, he is regularly mistaken for a 'snooping journalist'. "Everything depended on finding Augustin," says Zongo. "All of my hopes rested on his shoulders."

At the beginning of the film Augustin's mother sends a video-recorded message to her son, invoking

him to send news and make contact. When Augustin is faced with his mother's anguish and despair, he must confront his own feelings of pride, regret and denial. Indeed the film's greatest asset is its ability to chart the loss and pain that migration can inflict on families. Empathising with the departed and the left behind, the film shows the disintegration of family networks in a world where the young leave and often never come home.

Zongo, a self-taught filmmaker, is a relatively new director – having grown up hanging round the film sets of the Burkinabe director Pierre Yaméogo. His first feature shows the promise of many more. Franco-Senegalese director Alain Gomis is more seasoned and returns with *Today*, starring American slam poet Saul Williams. It is the story of Satché, a young man who knows he is living the final day in his life and will soon migrate to another world. Despite the narrative being pervaded by death, *Today's* director insists the theme is not morbid. "The film is more about life," says the dreadlocked Gomis, whose previous films *Andalucia* and *L'Afrance* have established the director as a promising voice in Senegalese cinema. "The idea of the film is to try and co-habit

and flirt with the unknown without trying to understand it," he says.

The characters in Gomis' film seem liberated from restraint by the absence of consequence. "I think Satché has never been as free as when he is ridden of the idea of the future," says Gomis, whose film also competed at this year's Berlinale. Migrating from the burdens of hope and control, Satché is freed of expectation. "In these extraordinary circumstances, where only the present exists, time is abolished," he adds.

Williams portrays Satché's final journey through an eerie Dakar landscape, accompanied by the equally screen-dominant Senegalese actor Djolof Mbengue. *Today* is ultimately a cleverly timed film that explores the protocol of extraordinary affairs.

Perhaps the most powerful African tale of migration however at this year's Berlinale was *War Witch*, by Canadian Kim Nguyen. The film, ten years in the making, is inspired by the true story of a child soldier, Johnny Htoo, who led a guerilla group in Burma in the late 1990s with his twin brother Luther.

War Witch tells the story of a 12-year-old girl, Komona, who is forced to kill her parents and is then kidnapped by rebel

forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) after her village is captured and burnt. The rebel leader, Great Tiger, believes Komona has magic powers and forces the young girl to "love the gun as if it were her mother and father". *War Witch* is a harrowing drama. "It's the story of human resilience in an era of post-modernism," says Nguyen, who shot the film in the Congolese capital Kinshasa and other parts of DRC.

As Komona is persistently raped, beaten and abused, Magician – a fellow child soldier – becomes her only friend and hope. *War Witch* depicts a land shattered by the Western world's demand for coltan and other minerals, where corporations lurk in the shadows and weapons are fired with ease. While Nguyen imported over 100 Kalashnikov rifles into the country to make the film, it is rape as a weapon of war which is even more emphasised and that forces Komona to flee ever further from her unburied parents.

"I wanted to tell the story of one of the people we acknowledge least in the world, a woman soldier who is made pregnant by her commander," says Nguyen. "Often when these women return to their villages they become outcasts. It's terrible, but it's a fact," he says.

Unflinching and very human, Africa's representation on the screen this year is not to be missed.

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Michel Zongo's film explores how migration can destroy the fabric of family life

Alain Gomis now has three films behind him

