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FILM REVIEW

Joël Akafou. *After the Crossing (Traverser)*. 2020. 77 minutes. French. VraiVraiFilms.

Migration to Europe, perhaps especially African migration, has accrued an increasingly powerful place in European mythology, crystalized by heart-sinking statistics of the drowned, the images of overburdened boats, and crowds storming the fences in Melilla. By contrast, Joël Akafou's profoundly human film about migration starts after the crossing, steering clear of these lurid and exoticizing aspects of the dangerous journey from Africa to Europe to focus on the everyday and intimate qualities of the symbolic violence that continues long after the initial border has been pierced.

After the Crossing is deeply enmeshed in migrant sociality and the negotiation of relations within an alienating European landscape. The story takes up when a group of young Ivoirian men joyfully welcomes the filmmaker to Italy. Their friendship is palpable, a trademark of Akafou's filmmaking, built upon genuine and enduring relationships. Akafou lives the life he films, following his characters with the intimacy of a roommate, filming even when they sleep. His focus is on Inza, a recent arrival living in a refugee center and looking for a way out. Akafou's camera is present when Inza breaks down during a video call with his family in Côte d'Ivoire, pointing his own phone camera away as he insists he isn't crying. We catch him when he lies to those who help him, and we have enough context to understand why he does so. Akafou never narrates, nor does he elicit testimony from his interlocutors—their thoughts and motivations emerge through their conversations with each other, never directed toward the camera.

Speaking to his mother at home, Inza longs to return—despite the flashy selfies he posts on Facebook, he clearly gets little pleasure from his time in Italy. His happiness comes instead from living with his migrant girlfriend Michelle and playing father to her daughter, who is often comforted in his arms. Relying on Michelle's hospitality he abandons the legality of the refugee camp, where people wait years for their paperwork to be cleared. After only three days, he loses the right to return to the shelter, and from that moment he must rely on others. He is reminded in every phone call home of his duty to remain in Europe, to send money home as he has promised, and so he strives onwards towards France, where he hopes to find prosperity.

The bridging between worlds that this film achieves is even richer if one combines it with Akafou's debut film, which centers on Inza when he was trying to make it as an internet scammer in Abidjan, known by the street name of "Bourgeois" or even "Haute Bourgeoisie Français". In *Vivre Riche* (living rich), Ivoirians siphon money from the wealthiest parts of the world in order to purchase new clothes, celebrate, and redistribute wealth to their families.

Bourgeois is the group leader, confidently guiding his team through Abidjan's streets as well as the intricacies of conning Europeans out of their money. His powers of persuasion are enough to convince his critical Christian family to accept the logic of the colonial debt: the riches he scams is simply the return of wealth taken from Africa by Europe to begin with.

But if in Abidjan Bourgeois mastered the art of the bluff, upon his arrival in Europe we see him struggling to control the narrative—without resources, without knowledge of the means to get through, without protection. His hopes are pinned upon another girlfriend, whom we learn saved him repeatedly from prisons in Libya during their voyage North, but when she realizes he is living with Michelle in Turin, she withdraws her support. A middle-aged Parisian woman promises him shelter, and he imagines a life of peace in her arms, but this too falls through. Family and love are often invoked with sincerity as friends, lovers, and adopted children become real sources of economic and emotional support, but they are just as easily betrayed in the face of opportunity or threat. Inza's best friend accuses him of instrumentalizing his amorous relations, but one might also argue he is making use of the human infrastructure that represents his sole handhold in a slippery world where a life of wealth surrounds him from behind an invisible barrier.

In snatches we learn of those who died en route, of being imprisoned without hope of liberation, of travelling in damaged zodiacs taking in water. But these traumas are recounted with laughter as anecdotes over the dinner table. The struggle is to have arrived in their imagined paradise only to find themselves socially unmoored and trapped in a refugee camp without any assurance of future stability. Disenchanted, Inza still dreams of crossing another border—in France he will be able to live in peace and comfort. He attempts to cross the mountains on foot in the winter, wearing a light coat and sneakers, only to return to Turin defeated. In the conclusion of the film, having achieved the crossing, he loiters outside the Gare du Nord while desperately reaching out to each of his contacts, even calling his kin in Abidjan for leads, only to arrive at nightfall without a response.

Seen from both sides of the border, the act of crossing over is typically understood as success. This film shows that as traumatic as the crossing may be, the helplessness, poverty, and often effective imprisonment of those who have arrived in Europe may be more devastating than the voyage, precisely because there is nowhere left to go. The frontier constructed by Europe not only blocks people's mobility, but also the ability to see the social connections that transcend it. The border is not only located between nations, but encountered in perpetuity on the inside, a distancing performed by institutions and people alike in the migrant experience.

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