Waiting for (African) Cinema: Jean-Pierre Bekolo's Quest

Vlad Dima

Abstract: Throughout his career, Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Bekolo has been searching for cinema; not *African* cinema, just Cinema. In order to explain properly this claim, the essay will first consider Bekolo's work within the context of the ever-ongoing conversation regarding the framing and aesthetics of African and Third Cinemas. Second, for a closer perspective on what will be termed "neurotic cinema," the essay will key on Bekolo's latest effort, *Naked Reality* (2016), a purposely unfinished work that echoes absurdist theater, mimics frantic contemporary thought, and proposes that cinema should not yield finalized products because that may go against its very nature.

Résumé: Tout au long de sa carrière, le réalisateur camerounais Jean-Pierre Bekolo recherche le cinéma ; pas le cinéma africain, seulement le cinéma. Afin d'expliquer correctement cette affirmation, l'essai va d'abord examiner le travail de Bekolo dans le contexte d'une conversation toujours en cours concernant le cadrage et l'esthétique de L 'Afrique et du Troisième Cinémas. Deuxièmement, pour une perspective plus proche de ce qu'on appellera « cinéma névrotique », l'essai portera sur le dernier effort de Bekolo, Réalité Nue (2016), une œuvre volontairement inachevée qui reprend le théâtre de l'absurde, imite la pensée contemporaine frénétique et propose que le cinéma ne doit pas donner un produit finis parce que cela peut aller à l'encontre de sa nature.

Keywords: Africa; cinema; Bekolo; aesthetics; Third Cinema

African Studies Review, Volume 62, Number 1 (March 2019), pp. 49–66

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doi:10.1017/asr.2017.153

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.153 Published online by Cambridge University Press

When answering a question in an interview with Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike about the state of African cinema, Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Obama Bekolo declared in his typical inflammatory and bombastic fashion that "…I feel there is no cinema. There are African films, but I do not know if there is cinema in it" (2002:223). While the personal declarations of polemic artists should always be taken with a grain of salt, these particular words do point to a general truth about the filmmaker's career. He has been, a few formulaic productions notwithstanding, on a quest to push the cinematic boundaries of representation forward. In other words, he has been searching for Cinema; not *African* cinema, just Cinema. In order to make sense of what that actually means, this essay will first consider Jean-Pierre Bekolo's overall career within the context of the ever-ongoing conversation regarding the framing and aesthetics of African and Third Cinemas. Second, for a closer perspective on what will be termed "neurotic cinema," the essay will key on Bekolo's latest effort, *Naked Reality* (2016), a purposely unfinished work that echoes the absurdist theater of the sixties, mimics frantic contemporary thought, and proposes that cinema should not yield finalized products because that may go against its very nature.

Bekolo's Oeuvre

Born in 1966 in Cameroon, Jean-Pierre Obama Bekolo can be considered one of the most intriguing contemporary directors of our time. Bekolo provides the world with an aesthetic bridge of sorts between the old guard—the pioneers of (West) African cinema, Ousmane Sembène, Djibril-Diop Mambety, Safi Faye (all from Senegal), and Souleymane Cissé (Mali)—and a new, talented class of filmmakers—Abderrahmane Sissako (Mali), Moussa Touré (Senegal), and Mahamat Saleh Haroun (Chad), among others. Because of his eclectic array of skills and interests, Bekolo's personal style is hard to delineate. His filmmaking is often idiosyncratic; it exhibits biting humor through a reliance on satire, refuses didacticism, and openly advocates for artistic freedom. According to David Murphy and Patrick Williams, for Bekolo "cinema is expression rather than education" (2007:197), which has led the two authors to the use of the word "exceptionalism" to describe Bekolo's work.

The narrative and aesthetic flexibility of Bekolo's exceptionalism is, of course, not unique to cinema from Africa. For example, the French New Wave, and particularly Jean-Luc Godard, also stressed the importance of stylization, pastiche, and meta-filmmaking. While this observation may seem like an attempt to move the conversation toward postmodernism (the word "pastiche" is Fredric Jameson's marker of postmodernism), this analysis will resist that temptation, because applying the postmodern label to Bekolo demands a lengthy explanation. On the one hand, Clyde Taylor deemed the application of the term "postmodernism" to African contexts and cultures as "absurd" (2000:136), because these cultures were excluded from the theoretical framework of the postmodern and because

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.153 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they were violently denied participation in modernism in the first place. On the other hand, several theorists have engaged with the issue of post-modernity in African cinema, and specifically in Bekolo's films: Jonathan Haynes calls the filmmaker's style a "post-modern visual assault" (1999:29), and Kenneth Harrow has an excellent chapter on *Aristotle's Plot* and post-modernism from an African point of view in *Postcolonial African Cinema* (2007:140–162). It is perhaps the latter's observation on the effort to rewrite European notions in African and Bekolonian terms that is most relevant to this discussion on Bekolo's overall quest.

In spite of his penchant for favoring free-flowing expression over structure and cinematic rules, Bekolo's formal training was originally in editing, having studied in Paris at the *Institut National Audiovisuel* as part of the last promotion of Christian Metz, a renowned structuralist. His narrative construction often pays homage to the structuralism of the seventies, and yet it can also come across as purposely opaque, which hints more towards post-structuralism. Researchers of African cinema have construed the tension between these two narrative tendencies as an attempt to create a new kind of African cinematic language. But Bekolo transgresses geographical and aesthetic borders. His cinema is not just "African," or postcolonial, or experimental, or narrative. At times, it can be all those things, which essentially means that his cinema may be pulled in too many directions. Bekolo's cinema, therefore, could be considered a neurotic kind of cinema that constantly searches for itself, for what it is, and for what it can accomplish.

The condition of "neurosis" develops when certain unconscious desires try to emerge from the unconscious but fail, leading to an internal conflict. Manifestations of neurosis include obsessions (like having to touch something repeatedly), being hysterical (developing a physical impediment without being sick), or phobic (having unreasonable fears of things, situations, or animals). Moreover, one of the defining activities in neuroses is negation (i.e., denial or transgression). It is the combination of these elements—internal narrative conflicts, thematic obsessions, genre and style transgressions—that defines Bekolo's neurotic cinema. Furthermore, this neuroticism is underlined diegetically by obsessive returns, either narrative or aesthetic. By escaping rigid categorization and by entering the domain of hybridization, Bekolo's cinema may actually render African cinema an immense service: it may prove key in putting to rest the unnecessary theoretical quest to frame and "explain" African cinema as African.

To begin, one should immediately point to the most obvious example of hybridization: among Bekolo's own admitted influences, Djibril Diop Mambety and Spike Lee—two cross-Atlantic aesthetic pillars who helped shape his early career—stand out.[1] In the case of the former, Bekolo even made a very short documentary, *Grandmother's Grammar* (1996), in which he carries on a conversation with the revered Senegalese filmmaker in a bar. Bekolo often ventures into the genre of the documentary. As another example, he has made an insightful tour de force, *Les Choses et les Mots de Mudimbe* (Mudimbe's Order of Things, 2015), which clocks in at over four hours, on

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the renowned Congolese philosopher. He has also filmed tongue-in-cheek documentaries, such as *A la recherche d'Obama perdu* (Looking for the Lost Obama, 2015), in which he looks into the conspiracy theory that President Obama has distant roots in a remote Cameroonian village, where everyone shares a physical trait—larger ears—with the commander in chief. (As evident in the director's full name, "Obama" is a popular name in Cameroon). His latest film, *The President* (2013), flirts with the subgenre of the mockumentary, and was banned in Cameroon for its incisive satire about African leaders who cling too long to power. The film imagines the disappearance of the thirty-one-year president of Cameroon, Paul Biya, though without directly naming him. It is worth noting that the political commentary of this film in particular, and others in general, may in fact function as a mask for constant inquiry into the state of cinema, its role, and its narrative capabilities, as opposed to the other way around. Here is what Bekolo had to say about this matter in a 2012 interview with *Slate Afrique*: "It is the first time that a movie has to remove a President. Cinema always arrives afterwards [for example] to tell us about the Arab Spring. Where was it before? Cinema must anticipate, open new doors and make the revolutions. I do not want to tell people what happened, but I want to inspire those who will make something happen" (Diao 2012). It is thanks to this kind of unorthodox thinking that Bekolo's cinema forcefully pushes the boundaries of cinematic meaning and representation.

In spite of his prodigious output in the documentary genre, Bekolo is best known internationally for three feature-length films, *Quartier Mozart* (1992), *Aristotle's Plot* (1996), and *Les Saignantes* (2005). In the first, he presents a complex version of the urban space of Cameroon's capital, Yaounde, by relying on quasi hip-hop storytelling to talk about gender, power, and politics. Stylistically, the film is indebted to the aforementioned Spike Lee, as well as to Jim Jarmusch, according to Williams and Murphy (2007:188). The film, which focuses on a young girl who is magically transformed into a kind of Casanova nicknamed "My Guy," blends fantasy and farce, employs bold colors and fast-paced editing, and often breaks the fourth wall. The second film emerges quite naturally from the last characteristic of the first, as it is essentially a meta-film, a meditation on "African film." In its turn, *Aristotle's Plot* perhaps offered the inspiration for *Naked Reality,* because this is the moment when Bekolo begins to wonder diegetically about what would become of a film free of rigid categories and rules. At the denouement of *Aristotle's Plot,* all the characters die in a classic Hollywood shoot-'em-up ending.[2] The twist is that they are brought back to life for an "alternate" ending, so the film here becomes a surreal farce in which reality and fiction become indistinguishable. The result is both hilarious and revealing in terms of narrative possibilities.

Finally, *Les Saignantes* is a sci-fi film that follows two women and their struggle with authority in a future Cameroon, combining themes such as power, corruption, mysticism, and vampirism.[3] This last theme mainly functions at a metaphorical level, naturally: the powerful men who lead the

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country suck it dry.[4] The women try to balance out the power by using magic as well as their bodies to steal from or even kill these men. Aesthetically, the film is shot entirely at night, with a Beta-cam that gives it a grainy texture, suggesting that film itself takes on a material quality. The externality of film that is born here will turn hyperbolic in *Naked Reality*, as will be demonstrated shortly. Moreover, in *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo makes use of several material inter-titles that feature rhetorical questions addressed to the audience (for example, "How to make a film that anticipates [a sci-fi], in a country with no future?"). This reflexive gesture also foreshadows the extra-filmic world of *Naked Reality*. In summary, it would seem that Bekolo's latest film results from previous artistic efforts and flirtations with the malleability of cinema. It may indeed represent the natural end product of an entire career spent on a quest for cinematic truth.

Third Cinema, African Cinema, and Bekolo

This section intends to contextualize Bekolo's cinema within the usual, wider categories of international cinema, but crucially, it also attempts to extricate Bekolo from any reductive parameters. Ultimately, the goals here are, first, to index the extant theoretical preoccupations with African cinema, and second, to propose that (and explain why) there is no longer a need to search for categories and labels. In order for this proposal to make a compelling impact, it is first necessary to return to the original African theorists, Teshome Gabriel and Manthia Diawara, in order to validate our current conversations on the connections between authenticity, African cinema, and Third Cinema. By the same token, it is also crucial to revisit the relatively familiar history of Third Cinema, a cinema that, like Bekolo's neurotic cinema, has thrived on internal conflict and aesthetic transgressions.

The famous manifesto by Fernando Getino and Octavio Solanas, *Towards a Third Cinema* (1968), refused to offer a recipe, a common aesthetics of Third Cinema, though it did classify most films adhering to Third Cinema in an attempt to make political statements in relation to the filmmakers' respective countries. Furthermore, Third Cinema categorizes films mostly made in Third World countries, and it is mainly understood as an opposition to both Western cultures and Western forms.[5] In the introduction to the volume titled *Questions of Third Cinema* (1989), Paul Willemen explains Third Cinema as an ideological project, meaning it is a body of films adhering to certain political and aesthetic programs, regardless of whether or not they are produced by Third World filmmakers; the body of films fuses "a number of European, Soviet and Latin American ideas about cultural practice into a new, more powerful (in the sense that it was able to conceptualise the connections between more areas of socio-cultural life than contemporary European aesthetic ideologies) programme for the political practice of cinema" (Willemen 1989:5). One such example is *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), a film made by Gillo Pontecorvo, who is Italian and thus not from the Third World. However, the political aspect of the film

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focuses on postcolonial conflict, which tends to be associated with Third Cinema.[6] That one may occasionally set aside social and geographical limits when speaking of Third Cinema does not negate the fact that it is a cinema that contains strong national and regional components, which is clearly the case with Bekolo's *The President*, for example. Another tendency exhibited by Third Cinema is the recurrence of certain themes, including, according to Mbye Cham, conflicts between cultures, challenges posed by postcolonial life, disillusionment with political independence, declining quality of life, political instability and corruption, rethinking gender and gender roles and expectations, and the need to rewrite African history from an African point of view (1996:4). Against this thematic backdrop of Third Cinema, Bekolo's cinema appears to be a fit. However, narrative parameters only partially explain adherence to Third Cinema. Perhaps an even more important factor to consider is the aesthetics of the cinematic products themselves.

Inquiries into Third Cinema's form and style have generally led to copious comparisons with auteur cinemas such as the French New Wave, which in turn have led to a longstanding debate over authenticity: is African cinema an "authentic" cinema? Initially, all of African film had to fight against demeaning representations of the continent by the West, but has that tendency evolved into a particular, specific style that belongs only to Africans? It is difficult to say with certainty, even though renowned Africanist Manthia Diawara originally spoke with verve about narratives that "define their Africanness within dominant cinematic forms" (1992:165). Diawara has since nuanced his approach and thus has moved away from the reductive term "Africanness:" "I do not believe that there is such a thing as an authentic African film language … (T)here are variations, and even contradictions, among film languages and ideologies, which are attributable to the prevailing political cultures in each region, the differences in the modes of production and distribution, and the particularities of regional cultures" (2000:81). Recent writings on African cinema invalidate attempts to classify or label African cinema as authentic (Tcheuyap 2011; Harrow 2015). Most compellingly, Harrow's *Postcolonial African Cinema* dismisses the validity of the notion of authenticity.[7] It is in an inconspicuous endnote that Harrow's central point about authenticity emerges most clearly:

> The bullet that renders all arguments over authenticity pointless is that there is no site where one can stand from which to evaluate the authentic. If one is authentic, the only knowledge one could have of it would come from standing outside of oneself and reflexively observing one's authentic being. That model of the divided subject, fundamental to all poststructuralist thinking, deauthenticates any attempts to assert the presence of the authentic, what Derrida terms the "metaphysics of presence." Butler (1990) carries this argument further in her claims that subject identities are performed, that the metaphysics of presence or substance rests conventionally on patriarchal, or, in fact, phallocentric assumptions that function like ideology, i.e. that naturalize, or authenticate, what retains and sustains existing systems of power. (2007:239)

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In summary, misrecognition and confusion about personal and ideological identities eliminate the possibility of a fruitful dialogue on authenticity.

It may now be worth taking a step back and elaborating on the initial role played by Teshome Gabriel and Manthia Diawara in framing African cinema. To begin, Gabriel searched to establish a film theory of Third Cinema, something that was sorely lacking in the early 1980s and that continued to be ignored during the next decades. Even some twenty years later, Anthony R. Guneratne, for example, still calls attention to influential film critics' "denying the grandeur to Third Cinema theory" (2003:4). According to Gabriel, there are three main tendencies that define this cinema, and he develops them directly from the three (homonymous) genealogical stages of third world culture in Frantz Fanon's work (Channan 1997:7). The first one is called "unqualified assimilation," which is characterized by an attempt to imitate Hollywood film. A second tendency is called "the remembrance phase," characterized by more aggressive attitudes that reject "the ways of the past." A third stage is liberation, the "combative phase," when film becomes an "ideological tool" that deals with themes of resistance (1989:31–35). According to Michael Channan, this phase "is third cinema proper" (1997:7), which may also be characterized by a "process of becoming" (Channan 1997:8). What is revealed in these three categories is that an understanding of Third Cinema must be negotiated at the intersection of memory, identity, history, and hybridity—all fluid concepts that also happen to be key concepts of postcolonial theory.

Teshome Gabriel is quite open to the idea of hybridity when he dissects the tendencies of Third Cinema, an idea that Guneratne echoes in his work and even takes a step further to suggest that there is hybridity not only within Third Cinema, but also between the three major categories of cinema: "interactions between varying forms of cinema within national industries [are] diverse enough to sustain coexisting forms of First, Second and Third Cinema" (2003:20).[8] Moreover, Guneratne warns of the essentialism that blights the breakdown of the three cinemas: "the seemingly hermetic division of cinemas into those represented by big-budget commercial films (First Cinema), independent, *auteur* films (Second Cinema) and films made by militant collectives (Third Cinema), led to various misinterpretations such as the automatic assumption that First Cinema was necessarily a cinema of entertainment, the Second one of intellect and interiority, and the Third one of political radicalism" (2003:10). Therefore, one has to consider the possibility that Hollywood-style entertainment plays a role in Bekolo's films (for example, in the aforementioned ending of *Aristotle's Plot*); or, perhaps, that the political commentary and the general thematic trends of Third Cinema are secondary to the aesthetic quest of the director.

To some extent Manthia Diawara's original three trends in Third Cinema position themselves in opposition to the ideas of hybridity from above. Diawara looks at the history of African cinema, not from the point of view of a clear political opposition between the West and Africa, but rather

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as cause and effect—specific regimes creating specific practices and products (1996:141–164). His categories are called "social realism," "colonial confrontation" (which loosely matches Gabriel's "combative phase"), and "return to the source." Unlike Gabriel's understanding of African cinema, which is more in line with Willemen's internationalizing concept, Diawara's appears to be more rigid and ignores the possible overlap between categories. But the categories cannot possibly be clear-cut, and there is a lot of common ground between the last two, "colonial confrontation" and "return to the source." The last one appears to be the richest and most important; it is not as polemical as the first two, and it supports the creation of a distinctive African film language (1996:160). Manthia Diawara also notes particular technical trends in the camera movement in African film, trends that present a challenge to established Western forms by "… deemphasizing the psychologically based shot/reverse-shot and close-ups of Western cinema, and by valorizing long shots and long takes, which through their 'natural' feel are destined to describe the characters' relationships to each other and to time and space" (1996:165). His observations have value in identifying a particular type of modus operandi in a few African films, but ultimately amount to an untenable essentialist argument that embraces global divisions. Diawara's claim is in the same vein as Gabriel's earlier essentialist argument (1989:45), which proposes similar opposing conventions by pointing out, for example, the contrast between Western formal devices such as eye-level perspective and the "deliberate choice" in the postcolonial world to use high and low angles in order to underline "dominance and power relations between the oppressed and the oppressing classes" (1989: Table 2, 46).

As mentioned above, Kenneth Harrow has very recently tackled Diawara's evolution on the matter in an essay for the *African Studies Review* journal titled "Manthia Diawara's Waves and the Problem of the 'Authentic'" (2015). Harrow traces Diawara's impact on critical commentary on African cinema from the initial key categories that enabled "reductive readings of films" (2015:14) to the three more encompassing and flexible "waves" Diawara proposes in his 2010 book, *African Film. New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics*: Arte, La Guilde des Cinéastes, and New Popular African Cinema (2015:17). Harrow supplements Diawara's declaration that Bekolo fits within the second wave of the Guild (2010:120) by pointing out that the match hinges on the director's penchant for experimentation: "What is La Guilde, after all, except those for whom filmmaking is an art learned from the masters, with the new apprentices now free to experiment on their own?" (2015:19). In these continuous efforts to frame African cinema, Harrow may be most useful in his proposal that a new "Other" has emerged in the field, and it is African cinema itself. Harrow arrives at his intriguing thesis by way of Diawara and what he, Harrow, perceives as incomplete:

> For Diawara to Africanize this cinema, it is necessary for him to account for the work of subject formation, of subjectification, that it performs. Diawara wants to accomplish this by returning to an African specificity—in cultural,

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> aesthetic, and cinematographic terms. In other words, he has to go back to a past constructed largely around Sembène …. But he skirts the hard work of accounting for Africanness and African subjectivity when evoking its authenticity in terms of such content as music and dance, national colors, traditional sayings, and so on. And in this, he is no more successful than Teshome Gabriel (1982) in his earlier efforts to apply formulae …. (2015:22)

From this thought, Harrow enters into a conversation about the formation of the subject (*assujetissement*) and, having eliminated the earlier two "Others" in Hollywood and in auteur cinema, arrives at the conclusion that it is the first generation of African filmmakers, the pioneers of African cinema, who constitute the current embodiment of the Other in African cinema: "We might as well name this African cinema Other 'the Specter of Sembène'" (2015:26). Bekolo does not really experience this issue, especially not with concern to Sembène. He does, however, have to deal with the Specter of Mambety, another representative of that first generation of African directors, and someone who aesthetically opposed the grandfather of African cinema, Sembène. Yet, Bekolo surpasses Mambety by hyperbolizing both the political bend and the level of experimentation of his films.

Another recently written essay, Alexie Tcheuyap's "African Cinema(s)," makes several interesting observations when retackling the question of defining African Cinema, though it ultimately does not offer a definitive answer: "How can we then define African cinema? There is likely no straightforward answer. What is clear, though, is that no single conceptualization is sufficient" (2011:24). Rhetorically then, one may have to ask, why is there a need for any conceptualization at all? If theories of "authenticity" have been debunked, why insist on finding ways to explain African cinema as a coherent movement, as an aesthetic school, or as a concept? And does not the very act of attaching the adjective "African" to the noun "cinema" offer the most glaring example of minimization? Tcheuyap makes a very pertinent observation about this problem: "Most African films are first of all 'African,' but rarely comedies, crime films, melodrama, tragedies, westerns, or musicals, for example. It is significant that the post-1990 directors seem to experiment more with new genre cinema" (2011:21). Tcheuyap directly references Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* as an example of a film moving toward the new genre cinema. But this new genre cinema seems to be defined, in fact, by the impossibility of classification under a recognizable genre. Therefore, genre is also insufficient in one's attempts to categorize, and perhaps Bekolo rewrites genre according only to himself. A second apt observation by Tcheuyap has to do with the fact that contemporary directors have experienced colonialism differently than the pioneer generation of African filmmakers did. Moving away from the cultural nationalism and political agenda that may have defined the early age of African cinema has allowed for the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers who express themselves more in terms of globalism. For example, Senegalese director Joseph

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Gai Ramaka sees himself as "a global human being and not in relation to a nation," one who belongs to "no cinema organization, or structure, African or non-African" (Tcheuyap 2011:19). Similarly, here is Bekolo again in the aforementioned interview with Ukadike, rejecting his belonging specifically to African cinema: "I don't know about African Cinema. I never studied it, and it's not my field" (2002:220).

In light of these new findings (Tcheuyap also calls for updating a "dated system" in his book, *Postnationalist African Cinemas*, 2011:235), perhaps it would be more fruitful to consider Bekolo's cinema as simply running counter to all categories of cinema—including African cinema itself—simultaneously. According to Paul Willemen, "One of the main differences between Third Cinema and the European notion of counter-cinema is this awareness of the historical variability of the necessary aesthetic strategies to be adopted …. (T)he notion of counter-cinema tends to conjure up a prescriptive aesthetics to do the opposite of what dominant cinema does" (1989:7). But Bekolo's films never settle on just one mode; they could be considered part of the Third Cinema mode, but they also offer a mixture of Russian formalism, auteurism, French documentarian realism, and even Hollywood panache. All these elements lead us back once again to the possibility that Bekolo, like his luminary predecessor Mambety, presents himself as a master of hybridity. In their poignant analysis of *Aristotle's Plot* as a film that speaks to the "far more complex genealogy of African cinema than has often been assumed by critics" (2007:203), Williams and Murphy arrive at the following conclusion:

> Is this Bekolo's conception of African cinema: the hybrid marriage of urban and rural, old and new, modern and traditional? Intriguingly, there is an ox's skull attached to the sign over the entrance in what may be a visual reference to the skull attached to the handlebars of Mory's motorbike in Mambety's *Touki Bouki* …. As Bekolo's African cinematic "father" Mambety might be seen to offer a model of hybridity that allows a way out of the impasse constituted by the strict opposition between a "heritage Africa" and a simplistic imitation of the West …. (2007:203)

The defining trait behind the concept of hybridity invalidates the idea that there could be a fixed genre for Bekolo, even one that recognizes his essential idiosyncrasy. Kenneth Harrow's *Trash: African Cinema From Below* (2013) systematically engages with the need to move away from "conventional cinema readings of dominant western forms of commercial or of auteur cinema" (2013:3) and to embrace instead theories of hybridity as developed "from below" (i.e., in and about the global South). Progressing from his 2007 book to *Trash*, Harrow's rhetoric amps up considerably. It evolves from exploring the "erasable differences between western and African filmmaking" (2007:105) and challenging the boundaries of *mégotage* to "validating those people, those cultural artifacts, considered trash by dominant political and aesthetic discourses" (2013:3).[9] Harrow's train of

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thought finally culminates with proposing to open "the glance that falls on African cinema to the possibilities of reversals in conventional estimates of value" (2013:282). Bekolo seems to marry a well-defined perspective "from below" with conventional norms, auteurist tendencies, and experimentation, all of which force us to re-estimate the value of (African) cinema.

The end result of this short incursion into the various definitions or attempts to define what African cinema is remains, of course, vague. Third cinema partially explains African cinema, and Bekolonian cinema tangentially affects and reshapes both. Crucially, Bekolonian cinema accomplishes this feat as both an insider (because it is ontologically African and it can be politically associated with Third Cinema) and an outsider (as a rewriting of the European postmodern and auteurism). The very fact that it is impossible to arrive at an adequate definition for African cinema should be a clear indication of the futility of such exercises. However, there is also an inescapability factor—a neurosis, as it were—attached to these notions of African and Third cinemas on which Africanists have relied for decades, and from which we should perhaps distance ourselves. Whatever categories and definitions one can muster that are capable of conceptualizing African cinema, of making it "comprehensible" to a Western academic audience, are necessarily incomplete. The danger here, specifically, is that placing a unique voice like Bekolo's within parameters actually does it a disservice—it combines with other voices in wider categories and actually drowns it.

In order to avoid this outcome, the section will end with two proposals: African cinema is just cinema, and Bekolo's cinema is one possible embodiment of contemporary thought. The first is explained perfectly by the narrator from *Aristotle's Plot*:

> What don't we got? …. What is an initiation ceremony? Crisis, confrontation, climax, and resolution. Sound. Story. Images, narration. Rhythm. Is there anything in this, in cinema, that is not African? …. Fantasy, myth, we got. Walt Disney, we got. Sex, action, violence, we got. Comedian, music, we got. Aristotle, catharsis, and cola nut, we got. What don't we got? Why don't we got an African Hollywood? Probably because we don't want to produce our cinema outside of life. Because when it is out of life, it is dead. (Harrow 2007:162)

The second possibility that places Bekolo's cinema outside all categories stems from the following observation by Alain Badiou:

> … I would say that cinema is a metaphor for *contemporary* thought. I've always been convinced that tragedy was a metaphor for Greek thought and it may very well be that the cinema is playing the same role for the contemporary world: a thinking that's grasped in the mobility of its reflections, a thinking that absorbs human presence in something that exceeds it, that takes it over and projects it all at once. A representation of the world in which human presence is affirmed over against an extremely powerful exteriority. (2013:17, original emphasis)

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Bekolo's *Naked Reality* is not a manifestation of just African contemporary thought, but of *universal* contemporary thought. This is a film indeed capable of both absorbing and reflecting the human presence, a quality that unveils what cinema can and might become.

Naked Reality

"I know I crossed boundaries," says the main character of *Naked Reality*, in a confirmation of the director's own quest to push the boundaries of representation and find innovative ways to tell a story. It does seem unlikely that a film could get more experimental than what Jean-Pierre Bekolo accomplishes with his latest offering. To reiterate, this film is presented to the world as an unfinished product. Everyone is invited to contribute their craft, their ideas, their fantasy to this concept film on a website designed especially for collaborative purposes (http://nakedreality-thefilm.com/). From the mere fact of leaving the product unfinished, Bekolo enters unchartered territory that separates him not only from his African peers, but from all filmmakers. In other words, the discussion shifts here completely towards (just) cinema.

Naked Reality is undoubtedly the most difficult film to understand in Bekolo's filmography, perhaps because accessibility is really not the point here. Shot in black and white, the hour-long film follows a vague plot: the main character, Wanita, is on a search for her identity. As is often the case in Bekolo's work, the character's personal identity is but the smallest manifestation of an identity struggle for an entire people and represents the identity struggle of the film itself, which in this case is literally trying to form itself in front of our very eyes. This is an "afrofuturistic/sci-fi" film, as the website describes it, taking place a hundred and fifty years into the future when the human race is plagued by a terrible virus, ironically called "bad luck." The main character seemingly travels back and forth between the present and the future, and also carries on conversations with ancestors as well as with alternate selves, like Wanita Bis, who wants to be a television star. But the ultimate goal of the film is a philosophical and aesthetic exploration of the dividing line between fiction and reality, which is perhaps Bekolo's lifelong artistic interest. Among the director's memorable lines on the topic, consider the following: "We shouldn't just be making movies, we should be changing reality" (Bekolo & Burt 2008:108).

The film relies on a few visual tricks that support the material split between reality and fiction. The black and white scheme produces a stylized atmosphere that, through sharp contrasts, aggressively suggests a setting in the future. The use of black and white certainly brings to mind experimentation, but at a material level, it also points to a lack (through the implicit lack of color). And this is a film that is indeed missing various parts. The dualism at work here is made even more evident by the directorial choice of the superimposition. Unlike the dissolve—a transition effect used to link up two shots that overlap for a quick second—the superimpositions in this film last irregularly long (by classical cinema conventions). The exaggerated

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length of the superimposed shots stretches the common cinematic norms, thereby challenging normative narratives. Two concurrent actions take place on screen, or conversely, the film nestles in its very break, in the seemingly never-ending dissolve. Either way, cinema itself is being hyperbolized. It has already been suggested above that Bekolo runs counter to all cinematic categories; in the hyperbolic, repeated superimposition, the film runs counter even to itself—two dueling images struggling to overcome one another, and instead, settling for a dialogue. This practice brings back to mind two defining traits of the neurotic cinema: internal conflict and repetition.

Another repeated shot in this film is a low angle shot that travels under the trees. It returns several times to provide the characters with a kind of visual base on which to build another scene. There are also several shots upside down and a few edited through a negative filter—the reverse of the initial reality. Characters also speak to each other as they peek from behind a curtain, shot through a grainy filter. This shot (see Figure 1) renders the surface of film more visible; it gives it an externality, à la Badiou. The head materializing from behind a surface brings to mind images of birth; this is perhaps less about the character's rebirth and more about the cinematic act that is taking shape. A certain kind of cinema is being born here. Moreover, these shots do evoke the film's peeking from behind the proverbial curtain of filmmaking (i.e., revealing the cinematic apparatus), as well as the ubiquitous green screen used in contemporary, mainstream cinema to manufacture realities that do not exist in the original diegetic space of the film.

Reality is clearly under question throughout the film, but perhaps the key scene that exemplifies this struggle with reality occurs at the very end as Wanita carries on a dialogue with Madiba, a Wise Man who may be just a figment of her imagination (see Figure 2). Madiba asks Wanita where she thinks she finds herself. Her answer, "I don't know," eventually morphs into "I have no

Figure 1. Grainy filter; courtesy of Jean-Pierre Bekolo

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.153 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 2. Madiba and Wanita; hyperbolic superimposition; courtesy of Jean-Pierre Bekolo

idea" and finally into "I don't care." She then specifies, "I care about reality," at which point Bekolo cuts to another angle of the two characters and the last word, reality, is spoken out again, almost as if it were an echo. This is an actual doubling of the word which clearly points to the double representation of reality in the film. The Wise Man repeats the word himself and then goes into a soliloquy about the nature of reality. According to him, reality is first a prism because it is ever changing. By extrapolation, this very film is a form of reality, as it too is ever changing. Then Madiba looks into the camera, an image superimposed on the often-used traveling shot under the trees, which offers the audience another doubling moment (i.e., two moving images that co-exist).

Eventually, Madiba arrives at his final definition of reality: "When you look in that mirror, reality stares back at you reminding you of the world that you want to be in; reality is a sordid reminder of the world that you're in now." The metaphor of the mirror as screen is unsubtle, as two realities emerge—that of the screen, the desirable one, and that which is around us, the undesirable one. The presence of the mirror returns us to Badiou's idea about contemporary cinema: this particular film therefore presents itself as a projecting surface (like the Lacanian mirror) for the various, possible subjectivities of the character and of the spectators, and as an absorbing surface, since spectators contribute to filling out the empty shell of this "film." In other words, Bekolo manages to establish a two-way relationship between screen and audience.

The reference to the mirror also reminds us of an earlier moment when Wanita watches herself on a screen to the right of the frame (see Figure 3). The two Wanitas speak simultaneously, and initially, they say the exact same words, though there is a slight delay between the "real" Wanita to the left of the screen, our character, and the doubly removed, "fictional" Wanita to the right. These are two possible realities chasing each other, trying

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Figure 3. Two Wanitas; reflection and absorption; courtesy of Jean-Pierre Bekolo

to catch up with one another but always just slightly out of sync, which is the perfect metaphor for the relationship between cinema and reality: they can never perfectly overlap nor supplant one another. Finally, the two questions Wanita asks herself in this moment—"Who are you, why are you here"—are initial hints towards the ending, when we (sort of) get an answer.

It is difficult to place these bizarre characters within any of the cinematic traditions explained earlier in this essay. However, Wanita's uncertainty about where she finds herself and her subsequent aloof attitude could be explained as typical traits of the absurdist, Beckettian characters, who are always lost, always torn from reality, and in constant miscommunication. Theorist Serge Doubrovski claims that, like the existentialists, the absurdist writers make use of "une langue admirablement logique pour traduire l'illogique," while he also concedes that they had to invent a language of the absurd (2006:34).[10] The theater of the absurd attempted to express the impossibility of communication, which was evident in the relationship between the characters on stage, but also in the unseen relationship between author, play, and audience. Bekolo's latest film continues in that vein but also adds the impossibility of representation, of being able to show on screen what is "real." Bekolo, too, has had to try to forge a new language of the absurd, one that could possibly match the neurotic process of contemporary thought. Moreover, this particular cinematic product also seems to be waiting for something to happen, just as Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon wait for "Godot"—a stand-in for a nebulous *something*.[11] That "something" likely refers to the end: the characters, alongside the audience, just wait for the end of the play, but also for their own end, or the end of existence (like all of us).

The allusion to Beckett is hardly gratuitous, given the film's overall tone and theatrical setup. In most scenes, the characters appear to be on minimalist

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or even empty theater stages. No set is finished: again, the concept-film invites people to finalize the work of the director, to enter an artistic dialogue that would eventually yield a project that is closer to done, but never quite so. Therefore, the main idea behind this experiment seems to be that there is no end of the road, that there is no final film. Film just tries to be. So, if Beckett's world points to a breakdown in communication and cynically reminds us of the futility of existence, Bekolo's world attempts to heal communication, to break barriers, and to mesh the worlds of fiction and reality. This amounts to the ultimate breakdown of the fourth wall. Yes, characters can look into the camera and address the audience (the theater of the absurd did so repeatedly) and yet, the actual physical space between the audience and the screen has always remained virgin territory. How might a spectator from the audience alter the physical reality of the film on screen? It would appear that Bekolo has found a groundbreaking answer by giving the spectators the chance to reach inside the film they are watching and change its reality. As a result, the director amends the definition of cinema itself.

Moreover, Bekolo inserts himself into the film, but does not say anything, essentially becoming a spectator. Although in *Aristotle's Plot*, he had actually played a speaking part (the bartender), clearly the latest cameo is hardly regular. From the right of the frame, directorial headphones on, he simply observes Wanita pass through a door into another naked reality of sorts—or, as the film stands right now, a door to nowhere (see Figure 4). His hands are in his pockets, suggesting passivity, but that is hardly the case. He touches the film from within, and the audience can join him, if they so choose. In this manner, Bekolo moves us towards rethinking Cinema in terms of the haptic. Of our three primary senses—visual, auditory, kinesthetic—the last one has generally been neglected when it comes to

Figure 4. Bekolo cameo; courtesy of Jean-Pierre Bekolo

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.153 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experiencing film. However, it is through emphasizing the kinesthetic that we will find ourselves a step closer to cinematic truth and to fulfilling cinema's potential: virtual (naked) reality cinema.

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Notes

1. According to Williams and Murphy, "many critics have identified Bekolo as the cinematic heir to Djibril Diop Mambety, sub-Saharan Africa's other leading maverick filmmaker" (2007:189).
2. These characters are named after real or fictitious action stars—Van Damme, Nikita, Schwarzenegger, Bruce Lee—igniting a conversation about African spectatorship and the influence of Hollywood. Williams and Murphy point to a "tension between the African filmmaker and the African audience" (2007:201).
3. For "Les Saignantes": This is a difficult title to translate because in French it serves as a noun (preceded by the definite article "les") and as an adjective (the "rare" in rare steak, for example). "Those Who Bleed" may be the closest literal translation, in which "those" refers to women. I thus venture to offer "The Bloodettes" as an appropriate translation.
4. Yet, there are plenty of examples that support a literal vampiric presence: the "bad guy" drinks red wine whose texture resembles blood from an extra-large glass; the entire action of the film takes place at night; finally, the main characters tell the audience in voice-over that "we were already dead."
5. Third Cinema and Third World Cinema are not interchangeable terms. The former suggests a more political cinema geared toward countering the ideology of the first two cinemas (Hollywood and auteur), while the latter is much wider, covers more thematic elements, and has geographical parameters.
6. For a classic example that fits the ideology of the manifesto more clearly, see Fernando Solanas' *Hour of the Furnaces* (1968).
7. See the preface, as well as pages 117–119.
8. This basically amounts to a theory of global aesthetics; for more see Akin Adesokan's *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics* (2011), especially pp. 13–19.
9. For mégotage: This is Sembène's playful term for "putting together [bricolage] a film on the cheap like a cigarette pieced together [montage] using butts [mégot]" (Harrow 2007:238, note 5).
10. For "une langue admirablement logique pour traduire l'illogique": A language admirably logical to translate the illogical (my translation).
11. "Godot" has been thought to refer to God, though Beckett himself denied such a link, saying that if he had meant "God" he would have written God.

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