**Neoliberal Violence and Aesthetic Resistance**

**in Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006)**

*Bamako* (Mali/France/USA, 2006), by the Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako, is one of the few Sub-Saharan African narrative fiction films to address neoliberal attitudes towards Africa directly through discourse, rather than, as often the case, by means of allegory.1 Certainly it is the first African feature to locate the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at its very core, for it stages the unthinkable, putting both organisations on trial for their debt policies in Africa. The facts are well-known: for over three decades these institutions have forced governments to mortgage their economies to the West through imposed economic austerity measures and demands for excessively high interest payments. The so-called ‘structural adjustment programmes’ (appropriately nicknamed‘SAPs’) to ‘assist’ developing countries repay national debts have resulted in the dismantling of public resources and major cutbacks in state services, including the massive laying off of civil servants in the public sector and the suppression of state subsidies. Some countries have been forced to spend up to one third of their GNP to service such loans. This is the reality of global capital and unfettered neoliberal wealth transfer, aided and abetted by internal political factors and the corruption of new elites, and all arranged without any hint of democratic political debate or consent. In the new global order, Africans are now largely seen as inheritors of debts whose benefits they have never received. In the face of such iniquity, and in the absence of any political or juridical mechanisms to make the authors of such unjust economic policies accountable, *Bamako* mounts a trial presided over by African judges in the courtyard of a large mud house in the working-class quarter of Hamdallaye in Mali’s capital.

It’s the stuff of pure fantasy, of course, but played for real by Sissako with a range of professional actors and people playing themselves, including the former Minister of Culture for Mali, Aminata Traoré, who states that Africa is paradoxically the victim of its own riches and who exhorts her fellow Africans to take back ‘our assets’.Six main witnesses or plaintiffs for African civil society take to the stand and each express in French or Bambara the brutal toll and personal despair caused by predatory globalisation and the slow yet all-too-real violence of imposed debt. Among them is a school teacher, Samba Diakité, who has lost his job directly due to the SAPsand is now barely able to speak. Recent gestures like the promise made by the G8 leaders at Gleneagles in 2005 to eradicate debt are dismissed as a masquerade of caring to enhance their own reputations. Not surprisingly, the defendant itself, the World Bank, is not present in court. The film’s many dense political arguments and heated debates about global debt and ethical responsibility, reflecting how the economics of ‘rations’ (allocations of food, infrastructure, provisions, medical care, etc.) corresponds to the ‘rationalities’ around which the world is discursively organised, to employ Tejumola Olaniyan’s felicitous terms (see Olaniyan 2008)), are not, however, my immediate focus. Nor will I be looking at the wider issues raised by neoliberalism such as global consumption, corporate sovereignty, biopolitical divides, ecology, and sustainability, including, of course, of sub-Saharan African cinema itself which since the mid-1980s has suffered dramatically from the structuring absence of the state both in terms of production and exhibition.2 For *Bamako* is clearly more than a conceptual film and uncompromising critique of the hegemony of neoliberalism. It also asks us, with perhaps more urgency than any other contemporary film, to consider how geopolitical forces are transforming artistic forms and genres, and the role that economics plays in fashioning cultures of hybridity in what Achille Mbembe calls the new ‘postcolony’, now run according to an animist logic of hyper-capitalism where the distinctions between the world of humans and that of objects are erased, making everyone, to use Mbembe’s provocative colonial term, ‘*nègre*s’ (see Mbembe 2001 and 2013).

With its long pages of opening and closing credits, *Bamako* naturally exposes itself as a global commodity sponsored by a host of French and European public and private agencies and organisations, laying itself immediately open to the familiar charge made against ‘Afro-pean’ productions that by tackling geopolitical issues with the backing of European money they stand politically compromised. It was funded by Fonds Sud Cinéma and the ‘Plan Images Afrique’ programme (created by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1984 and 2004 respectively), Mali Images, ARTE, and Archipel 33 et Chinguitty Films, as well as by the American production company Louverture Films3Moreover, whilst deliberately avoiding the scenic panoramas, pastoral innocence, and untarnished tribal customs stereotypically ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ images of Africa often demanded by producers of African films, *Bamako*’s extreme emphasis on lengthy dialogue, together with its slow pace and rhythm, stretching out time and repeating scenes in circular fashion (hallmarks of African oral traditions of storytelling), correspond exactly to most western expectations of what a black African film ‘should be’. I wish to argue, however, that by putting both western and African film aesthetics and modes of spectatorship also on trial through formal strategies of *mise en scène* and montage, and by allowing an array of human elements and aesthetic questions to drift together graphically into its frame and intrude into the very law of the economic and geopolitical, *Bamako* also opens up new spaces and forms of spectatorial interest and pleasure, both visual and aural, not bound by current ideology. Indeed, it makes space for an affirmative aesthetics of violence directly counter to the material and symbolic violence and record of failure (political, economic, individual) it implacably relates. Such an ‘open’, free mode of cinematic viewing is not dictated by the need to read allegorically for political meaning – a demand that has marked, one might say cursed, African cinema since the early pioneering and politically engaged social realism of Ousmane Sembène when the need to provide a clear progressive postcolonial message (the idealising myths of nationhood, modernity, cultural revolution) was paramount. At the risk of gross simplification, beauty was invariably forced to carry the burden of the political, and for many filmmakers and critics working today beauty still remains highly suspicious, and at best distracting, if it does not fall squarely within the familiar bounds of ideological critique. I will suggest that if human interconnectedness is one of the governing ethico-political themes of *Bamako*, then the political itself is intricately connected with the concerns of beauty. Indeed, Sissako’s poetic investment in form offers a rare and radical instance of violent beauty in postcolonial art cinema – one that has not been fully recognised by critics of *Bamako*, even though it shares clear affinities with Sissako’s earlier, more intimate dramas about migration, exile and displacement such as La Vie sur terre/Life On Earth (1998) and *Heremakono/Waiting for Happiness* (2002) which also address the complex global flows between the North and the South and, in their nomadic elusiveness and lyrical attention to the materiality of everyday experience, demand new forms of critical and affective response.4 Might Sissako’s evolving aesthetic practice result in a new, broader definition of engagement? I will explore this question through close textual analysis of *Bamako,* but I begin first with a consideration of the film’s structural set-up.

**Court as Open Frame**

Filmed *in medias res* in the communal courtyard, the trial is presented self-reflexively in Brechtian fashion with four digital cameras, each perched on a tripod and visible in the other’s frame (a sound recordist also lets himself be visible on screen) **(see Fig. 1)**. The roving figure of photo-journalist Falaï ([Balla Habib Dembélé),](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0218234/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cl_t4) who is recording the event of the trial unofficially and waiting for a death to occur since his profession before being laid off was that of police videographer (death sells, as he remarks matter-of-factly), emphasises that the trial, conducted in French, is itself a borrowed form, conducted in accordance with French models of jurisprudence and replicating the structure of the former colonial power. As Dayna Oscherwitz notes, the imposition of western-style law has been central to the project of neoliberal expansion in the global South and advocated by the World Bank as a means of guaranteeing private property (Oscherwitz 2015, location 2221). The trial is policed here by a security man, Jean-Paul, who permits or denies access to the courtyard. Yet, as Oscherwitz also argues, the legal trial is both appropriated and subverted in *Bamako* by the Malians who take part: some speak out of turn, others testify when not authorised to do so or else remain silent. The mix of real people and professional actors (including members of Sissako’s own family) creates a live, theatrical space of fiction and documentary-style scenes and a rolling series of personal stories, vignettes and mini-narratives (what Sissako loosely calls ‘parables’): from the staged trial sequences and speeches conducted like reality TV episodes of courtroom drama to *cinéma-vérité* scenes of daily life such as religious prayers and domestic rituals (peeling potatoes, getting water from a central tap), moments of family drama, and a wedding procession being camcordered (described by the chief judge as a ‘social reality’). The ever-present daily tasks of weaving raw cotton and washing, dyeing and drying cloth are performed by a number of men and women, and an entire process of production is glimpsed in non-sequential parts. Myriad loose threads of narrative are drawn out intermittently and transversely, such as a young man in bed slowly dying from an illness for which he is not receiving proper treatment, and the unemployed and morosely depressed Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré), a human casualty of the global markets, attempting unsuccessfully to communicate with his estranged wife, the singer Melé (Aïssa Maïga). We are constantly on the move between and behind scenes, sliding between daily rituals, chance encounter, drama and melodrama, politics, ideology and comedy. In such concentrated, composite frames with multiple, seeping margins and the constant potential of the *hors-champ*, no one element or plane appears privileged, resulting in a shared, non-hierarchical cinematic space.

**INSERT FIGURE 1**

**INSERT CAPTION: Figure 1: filming the trial being filmed in the communal courtroom in the opening section of *Bamako* (courtesy of Artificial Eye).**

This sounds on paper a smooth and fluent process of inter-movement and continual ebb and flow in an expanded depth of field. Yet the experience of *Bamako* is more of perpetual tension and unease, for Sissako refuses to provide links between these parallel plot lines, producing links and correspondences that do not obey the straightforward logic of cause and effect. This ambivalence and instability is implicit, of course, in the continual slippage and misalignment between the different instances of ‘*cour*’, in French both courtyard and courtroom, as well as the symbolic system of the Court. The sheer density of human traffic passing through the cinematic frame makes it a restless site of interference and displacement, disturbance and intrusion, leading to some startling visual and oral juxtapositions. For example, the (real life) defence lawyer Roland Rappaport tries on a pair of sunglasses and demands the vendor prove they are genuine Gucci -- then, seconds later, now in sunglasses, he is spooked by a frisky goat on a lead in a two-shot; Chaka learns Hebrew (significantly repeating phrases about losing his wallet) because he believes an Israeli embassy will eventually open up in Bamako; a besuited, English-speaking pastor rouses his small congregation into performing feel-good, ‘locomotive’ gestures to God just as a train passes by in the background. Moreover, flights of narrative drift and abstract, tableau-like effects open up the frame to surprise and unpredictability and a multitude of contingent visual details. *Bamako* often appears meandering and dispersed, with shots of excessive duration skirting at times the limits of boredom. The same is true to a lesser extent with the multiple diegetic and non-diegetic layers of the soundtrack, for *Bamako* is a work of sonic composition built around the constant hum and murmur of the courtyard which functions as a kind of echo chamber, just as Melé’s bedroom serves as an antechamber where the judge and barristers get robed in the morning.

In short, the open frame of sound and image in *Bamako* creates in its profusion an escalating and tumultuous play of formal tensions and collisions in the *mise en sc*è*ne*, exacerbated by the discontinuous editing which is often abrasive and aggressive and opens up sudden, random gaps and glaring contrasts. We cut dry, for example, from long shots to close-ups, and there are abrupt cutaways of reactions to events (fixed frames of staring bystanders, a mother breastfeeding her baby, a sick child). A further level of formal destabilisation is created by the insertion of external, set-piece sequences shot on 16 mm, like fragments of a film *that could have been made*. These eclectic and heavily signposted episodes, including footage of Melé performing in a nightclub, a spoof film-within-a-film, and a flashback episode of migration, generate elliptical, disorienting shifts in space and time, style and function. In this *brassage* of interweaving forms, styles and genres, the notion of audience encompasses the audience at the trial, those outside listening on loud-speakers, the residents watching television one evening, as well as the spectator of *Bamako* itself. All appears in flux, ‘*en cours*’, in an endlessly various, multi-focal (and multilingual) space of cinematic exchange and transfer. Or better, a metapoetic *lieu de passage* that is less dialectical process (the film is at once too crowded and diffuse for that) than a continually fluctuating *coincidentia oppositorum*. All is both familiar and mutually estranged, public and private, micro and macro, collective and individual, self and other, centre and periphery, and all is brought together conflictually in the ruptures of montage. Hence, the dynamic set-up of *Bamako* is already a violent expression of cinematic form, and the disruption sets in motion an evolving nexus of aesthetic and political frictions and potential points of resistance.

**The Fabric of Montage**

One set-piece sequence of *Bamako* has justly attracted critical attention for its treatment of explosive physical violence. It is the five-minute film-within-a-film, a mock-African spaghetti Western entitled ‘Death in Timbuktu’ watched intradiegetically on national television in the courtyard and shot on location featuring (real) actors and filmmakers as cowboys in traditional Hollywood attire: the Hollywood actor/activist Danny Glover (co-founder and current CEO of Louverture Films), the directors Zeka Laplaine, Jean-Henri Roger and Elia Suleiman, producer Ferdinand Batsimba, and Sissako himself as ‘Dramane Sissako’. The gory excess of ‘Death in Timbuktu’, including the indiscriminate point-blank murder of a teacher surplus to requirements in the new economic order, raises questions of spectatorship and reception, for both adults and children laugh out loud at scenes of fellow Malians being slaughtered by foreign invaders. Indeed, in its faithful reproduction of the visual and editing codes of the Western, including establishing shots and reverse-shot manoeuvres, the anonymous, unclaimed ‘Death in Timbuktu’ (authorial credits are conspicuously lacking) exposes cinema’s role in perpetuating the endemic violence of the global economic and political system, to which we are increasingly desensitised, for the sake of entertainment.5

I want to examine, however, a no less remarkable episode which occurs just before and works instead aesthetically through violence precisely to challenge and counteract such representations of hegemonic violence. Close analysis will allow us to grasp fully the poetic reach of Sissako’s practice of montage in *Bamako*. It is constructed around the young Madou Keïta’s harrowing testimony of narrowly escaping death in a failed migration across the Sahara to Spain via Algeria. The courtyard falls silent as he speaks impassively to camera in medium close-up. We are transported into Madou’s imaginary and share intermittently his memory of events -- a rare subjective encounter in a film that studiously avoids subjective point-of-view, yet one kept purposively open and objective in what we might call a collective flashback (it’s not clear, for instance, whether the young man in a cap lagging behind the others is Madou or not). The eight-minute sequence is framed at the start by Saramba (Maimouna Hélène Diarra), who owns the dyeing enterprise, placing wet, newly dyed cloth on an overhead line (0:26:16), then at the end (0:32:34) by her haranguing one of the defence barristers with the words ‘Enough suffering!’, uttered three times in frustration at what she sees as his compete inability to understand Madou’s situation. Intercut in Madou’s testimony are assorted images of cloth drying, shots of the trial audience and onlookers, and Madou’s screen memory of the moment in the journey (conveyed elliptically in eight separate shots) when a Ghanaian woman dressed and identified as a boy was left to die in the desert (we hear the non-diegetic, plaintive strains of the song ‘Saa Magni’ (Death is terrible) by the Malian singer Oumou Sangare). Madou explains that of the thirty migrants who started out he knows of only ten who definitely survived, and, in response to questions, he declares emphatically that the state provided him with nothing. With his blank, destroyed gaze, Madou embodies the excluded, uneducated, and now utterly disposable neoliberal subject.

This both troubling and elaborate procession of sounds and images, at the centre of which lies a five-second still-frame shot of ochre-orange stained cloth hanging on the line, still moist from the dye and occupying the entire frame (0:28:40), demands to be interpreted. The rich mineral colour of the cloth being produced clearly stands in sharp contrast to the increasingly bleached images of desert expanse against which the migrants appear like small traces of blue or orange. Moreover, all those listening are dressed in different combinations of batik cloth -- a concrete display of the aesthetic richness of local industry and the micro-economics of the global South currently at risk of being eroded by the macro-economics of globalisation. The multicoloured and multi-patterned cloth, conveyed in saturated colour, implicitly negates the facelessness of global capital. As Rosalind Galt rightly suggests in her powerful argument for the radical aesthetic promise of ‘prettiness’ to counter the Eurocentrism of dominant film aesthetics, the wealth of detail and materiality of colour and pattern in the dyed cloth in *Bamako* and its striking pictorial compositions and sensuous qualities of cinematography, far from simply providing an ‘exotic’ distraction to the serious business of putting the World Bank on trial, directly undermine and resist neoliberal abstractions of the global economy (see Galt 2011, 28-29). In her reading, the film becomes exemplary of a cross-cultural encounter in world cinema where the ‘resonance’ of the decorative image can negotiate globality, in clear contradistinction to the luxurious scarlet robe trimmed with ermine worn by the judge. How such resonance meshes with the film’s formal violence is not explored by Galt, however. Jacqueline Maingard, meanwhile, proposes a more complete reading of the ochre-orange cloth hanging up to dry, arguing that it represents metaphorically Africa’s fragility (Maingard 2010, 398). Thus, when the image cuts to a close-up of the blood-red dye draining away in a warm froth, and we see and hear dirty water swirling into a small crevice in the ground, it is, she claims, Africa’s life-blood draining away (Maingard 2010, 401). In such a reading, the lines created by the scavenger beetles as they scramble haphazardly across the sand function as a metaphor for the hopeless wanderings of the migrants. Once they have passed through the frame, the wide-shot is held in counterpoint with the ochre cloth – a juxtaposition serving, according to Maingard, as a reminder of the broken connections created by global economic policies.

But does it? Should we read this collection of powerful images in such overdetermined and exclusively symbolic terms? Which is to say, must colour and beauty always perform allegorically in African cinema? The self-declared postmodernist of African film criticism, Kenneth Harrow, proposes a very different approach. In his provocative 2013 study entitled *Trash: African Cinema From Below*, which pursues the trope of trash and champions those films that render up subversive readings of the system of global consumerism, he strives impressively to avoid simply reducing the hanging sheet of cloth to a shocking metaphor of the Ghanaian woman’s despair and final moments, suggesting with reference to Jacques Rancière’s *Le Destin des images* (2003) that we are rather in the presence of an image that imposes an order of silence on the story – that is, an ‘ostensive image’ blessed with the power of its material presence, without signification, prior to its metamorphosis in the ‘red screen’ (Harrow 2013, 188-9). The screen of cloth becomes the site of a transformation when Saramba is seen crossing it horizontally from left to right (0:28:07), and when, a little later (02:30:13), the figures of at least three female dyers are reflected upside down under it in a large puddle **(see Fig. 2)**, we enter, in Harrow’s words, ‘another space beside the surface of the screen to its virtual reality’ (Harrow 2013, 189), with the red screen now passing directly into that of the yellow desert floor which fills the diegetic screen. Everything comes down for Harrow to an abstract relay of screens, with Madou’s screen memory serving, like the television screen for the embedded Western, as the foil for a present whose ‘metamorphic’ images are, to cite Harrow, ‘split between those projected onto the screen of the trial, and those of the lives of people (and animals) who live in or around’ (Harrow 2013, 190). This leads ultimately to what Harrow calls ‘a screen of another kind of passing or transformation, a dying screen with its cast-off images of discarded waste – runoff water, dead bodies, the site of death’ (Harrow 2013, 190-1).

**INSERT FIGURE 2**

**INSERT CAPTION: Figure 2: human figures reflected upside-down under newly dyed cloth hanging on the line in *Bamako* (courtesy of Artificial Eye).**

**INSERT FIGURE 3**

**INSERT CAPTION: Figure 3: the first of a two-shot sequence depicting a young man framed between differently coloured and patterned cloth in *Bamako* (courtesy of Artificial Eye).**

Yet is Harrow’s highly sophisticated (and paradoxically very neat and clean) reading of ‘trash’ as death and stasis, which enables him to talk of a new aesthetic regime reaching to a space beyond politics as we know it (a ‘meta-politics’ that would mark a revolution in the forms of the lived, sensory world), ultimately any more enlightening about this sequence than a routinely allegorical reading? For something is lacking in both readings, and it has to do with the materiality and plasticity of film itself. The ‘Red Cloth Scene’, as Harrow simplifies it, encapsulates Sissako’s method. Every tableau-like shot is at once different and unique, a set of variations on a theme, whether of colour or scale and volume (visual and aural), sound (diegetic or dubbed), visual axis and perspective, angle, focal length, movement, or the spatial configuration of figures both within the frame, off-frame, and skirting the sides. In the case of one young man listening intently, he peers out first between a white-patterned brown sheet on the left and a more mauve, minimalist, floral one on the right (0:27:42) **(see Fig. 3)**; then, four shots later, between the same mauve sheet (now on the left) and a more classically designed, multi-coloured decorative sheet on the right. It is as if our gaze were continually being shunted along in a procession of visual and aural forms, the paler pastel shades and colours (including of Madou’s shirt) contrasting with the brighter shades and hues. We are actively encouraged to trace the patterns, contours and textures of this formal patchwork, as fluid as the molten liquid dye and discharge which form on the ground a vivid mosaic of movements, shapes and inverted images. Similarly, the lines of migratory movement in the desert, which seem to extend naturally from those of the scurrying beetles, connect across frame with the clothing lines that criss-cross the courtyard. At one point we see human figures coming into view from behind a ridge of sand -- an almost abstract movement extended by a gentle pan that simultaneously opens up the desertscape – just as the doubled-up lines of cloth bisect the frame of the courtyard diagonally **(see Figs. 4 and 5)**. The result of such intricate formal manoeuvres and recalibrations in the film’s material fabric is a precise choreography and intensive play of colour and mobile forms throwing into powerful relief the rugosity of the ochre cloth – precisely not a smooth, abstract, single-coloured screen, but a wet, creased and mottled body of matter flush with indistinct shades and imperfect pigmentation.

**INSERT FIGURE 4**

**INSERT FIGURE 5**

**INSERT CAPTION: Figures 4 and 5: plays of scale, shape and movement across frame: a scavenger beetle scurrying away from the dying Ghanaian woman, juxtaposed with a line of migrants slowly coming into view in *Bamako* (courtesy of Artificial Eye).**

What Harrow overlooks because he fails to *see* it is precisely the grain and relief of the image and the viscosity of montage. For him, cinematic motion is above all narrative motion compelling us forward in order that the story be told and sense be stitched together; it is only when the image is slowed down to the level of a single, isolated frame that it holds our gaze. Yet such a reading profoundly misreads the violent beauty of the transformative process that is cinematic montage when poetically conceived – a beauty to be located, even here in the midst of desolation and abandonment, in the worn surface of the image and the sonorous, integrating rhythms of audiovisual composition that link together the multifarious elements in stark, often brutal and unforeseen ways in a spirit of mutual intrusion. The aesthetic connections made are also inherently emotional. We might speak here loosely of a Deleuzian economy of material and affective flow -- that is, of a cinema of the senses that resists congealment in symbolisation and undercuts any interpretative strategy that would seek to reduce or close off the textual process. For with its knowing inconsistencies and wilful lack of easy access and legibility (it can’t be *cashed out* allegorically), *Bamako* contests its own performability as a ‘meaningful’ African image and global product. Further, its aesthetics of process and channelled free-flow via the authorial hand of montage opposes the fake flow of neoliberal capital and its masquerade of mobility and transparency where nothing is truly shared, leading ultimately to the very blocking of human movement, most notably at the gates of Fortress Europe. For crucially in *Bamako*, the component parts of its newly forged aesthetic blend of audiovisual elements are rendered equally visible and present.

What we have, in short, is precisely not a cinema of ‘wax and gold’, to use Teshome Gabriel’s binary term to describe Sembène’s *Xala/The Curse* (1974) where, as in Ethiopian folk art, one has to prise open the wax (the ‘superficial meaning’ – in *Xala*’s case the evident satire) in order to unearth the embedded gold of ‘true meaning’ (its ideological message).6 In the dense, polyphonic, textual weave of *Bamako*, where the continuous displacement of elements inside and out ensures a non-essentialising and potentially all-encompassing set of interrelations, such a distinction is no longer valid. Like the humble hand-made cloth that envelops both the images and the figures within them, all is interwoven and inter-embedded though the inner and outer linings of montage. Form *is* the meaning here, and aesthetic abundance lies in the cinematic process itself, rather than in any golden sap (allegorical, political, or otherwise) that might be extracted.

**The Barter of the Aesthetic**

The ochre cloth scene reveals the fundamental value and ethical potential of the open frame and applied montage in *Bamako*. It generates as many changes and shifts as possible, often violently, in order to reorganise the cinematic field and disqualify the supposed *liquidity* of western aesthetics that would amass all forms of interest (allegorical, political, symbolic) to ensure ultimately a fully accountable linear narrative of cause and effect (projected implicitly here as an exemplary neoliberal cultural form). Indeed, *Bamako* demonstrates the advantages of working within a concrete, mobile frame – that is, an open, interpersonal frame generating new forms and connectivities -- rather than positing a fixed conceptual space or *ailleurs*, whether ideal or, as with Harrow, simply *trash*. By voiding narrative purpose and the need for violent spectacle, and by deactivating cinematic conventions like POV shots and subtitling (strategies that allow us in the case of the witness Zegué Bamba’s three-minute, impromptu, accusatory heartsong in his native dialect of Senufo to appreciate the granular intensity and affective power of his voice7), the film lays waste to the fatal, neocolonial paradigms of neoliberal thinking in Africa (the infinite regress of indebtedness implied in national debt, the intransigent, cynical narrative of global development, and so on). At the same time, by harnessing the metaphorics of movement, Sissako’s poetic method mints new modes and networks of human connectedness, association and exchange through a free-flowing, always provisional, latticework of montage grounded in division, difference and conflict. It’s a matter of transmutation, with metaphor (Latin *metaphorein*, carrying across) and metonymy deployed as aesthetic currency. The art of controlled formal aggression through montage, like the hard graft of making unique and exquisite cloth, is a thing of beauty in itself. In the image of its physical *cour* the entirety of *Bamako* thus becomes a marketplace (*agora*) and crucible for the creative recombination, substitution and transformation of thoughts, affects and sensations.

It’s not therefore just that Sissako exposes and undermines the corruption of imperialist culture and cultural forms, including cinema (specifically the Western), for *Bamako* cannot be reduced to merely a late instance of Third Cinema and its aesthetics of ‘poverty’.8 The film’s perpetually fecund and resourceful creative enterprise, resulting in new forms of dialogue and communication between images and sounds incorporating memory, trauma, the everyday, fiction, song and colour (among many others), resists and deflects the barter (*la monnaie*) of globalisation, i.e. the moral bankruptcy of the IMF and World Bank with their perverted idea of the free market and organisational modes of dispersal and discontinuity, federalism and flexibility premised on infrastructural collapse. The imposed fractures and fissures of the social fabric, identified by Chaka himself as the worst after-effect of the SAPs, are counterbalanced by the freely created, overlapping folds and fabrics of cinematic form. I am not, of course, suggesting for a moment by this that an ethico-aesthetic economy of nomadic flow can somehow circumvent or sublimate the abstractifying global economy and the homogenising and atomising logic of capital, nor that the permanently evolving set of formal adjustments in montage triumphantly transumes and rectifies the structural adjustment programmes of the IMF. I am proposing, however, that by working through such political complexities aesthetically and creating loose, moving, organic chains of mutual human and aesthetic relations in montage, such that textual material may be shared out and reclaimed collectively in line with longstanding African communitarian values, *Bamako* supersedes formally the toxic binary of debtor and creditor and the strategy of the multinationals merely to distribute scarcity for profit. The revelation here that the world is not fixed in its current state, together with the liberating promise of endless aesthetic possibilities, nullifies the chimera of neoliberal self-realisation that leads to uninhibited exploitation and the uneven distribution of privileges. By positively encouraging aesthetic speculation (in contradistinction to the speculative flows of capital), the film invalidates all reductive intellectual approaches that would seek to impose rigid, closed systems of thinking, political or theoretical. Indeed, Sissako seems almost to be goading and pre-empting the viewer into attempting allegorical formulations and judgements which go against the aesthetic mobililty and consciousness he is elaborating. Maingard writes, for example, that the ‘Death in Timbuktu’ sequence ‘acts as a bloody allegory of the court’s proceedings’ and ‘metaphorically illustrates its testimonies, especially in the plotline’ (Maingard 2013, 109). I would argue rather that Sissako inserts such a hypertrophy of death precisely to alert us to the shortcomings of any allegorical reading that flattens out the visual and political. Sissako is far more subtle an artist than Maingard gives him credit for when she concludes that his work on sound and image ‘punches home the existential depths of his social message’ (Maingard 2013, 111).

**Aesthetic Rift**

Such a premium on material process and aesthetic friction is confirmed in *Bamako*’s closing stages, when Chaka’s sudden death brings the trial to a halt and postpones indefinitely any final verdict on the World Bank (as if, of course, there could ever be one, although the prosecution has just declared that the ultimate goal of the World Bank should be ‘community service for all humanity for all eternity’). Chaka is playing at night with his sick young daughter Ina (01:41:20). The long take is interrupted by a close-up of Melé’s tearful, piercing rendition of the song she performed so joyfully at the beginning club (actually ‘Naam’ by the Ghanaian singer Christy Azuma). The two unfolding scenes are intercut as if in parallel editing, emphasising in this case the cut of the couple’s irreconcilable separation, exacerbated, if not directly caused, by Chaka’s forced unemployment. Melé had earlier announced she was leaving for Dakar and Chaka insisted that Ina stay with him. Her tears now indicate that the emotions she had so tightly repressed are finally flooding out – an eruption of grief heightened in the editing by the photograph visible above the bed of the two on their wedding day. Soon her image disappears, however, followed by her song. All we now see and hear in fixed medium close-up is Ina sleeping and a fan whirring away. Suddenly what sounds like a gunshot rips through the aural frame (01:44:36). A split-second later the scene cuts raw to a twilight image of Chaka falling down by the roadside and a car screeching to a halt in the shadows in far-shot **(see Fig. 6)**. The formal gap created by this slight *décalage* of sound and image produces another space of disarticulation and uncertainty in the film. Could the sound have been simply the tyres of the car exploding (the driver immediately gets out of his car to inspect them), and thus merely a coincidence with the image of Chaka falling unexpectedly to the ground? In which case can we be sure he has killed himself? And if he has, is it with the gun that went strangely missing during the trial? As we ponder these possibilities, twilight passes almost instantly into dawn, and a dog (the same dog glimpsed by Chaka in the opening prologue-like sequence sleeping in the telephone kiosk as he strolled in his prayer robe past construction workers on high scaffolding silhouetted in the half-light of dawn) sniffs his body lying by the roadside like human waste before then moving on.

**INSERT FIGURE 6**

**INSERT CAPTION: Figure 6: the moment of Chaka’s fall as a car screeches to a halt in the far distance in *Bamako* (courtesy of Artificial Eye).**

Such delicately ‘imperfect’ synchrony of sound and vision highlights the event of montage and, in this case, the violence of the cut, but in such a way as once again to refuse any pretence of seamlessness, still less narrative closure or cathartic climax. Instead, as in the dyed ochre cloth sequence, it opens up the frame to interpretation and multiple readings. For we notice here the proliferation of small, often inexplicable human and non-human details which might otherwise appear wasteful and inefficient, even squandering. In fact, the unsettling and provocative ironic repetition here of the same languorous, moody, Western-style theme music used earlier for the ‘Death in Timbuktu’ sequence suggests that everything might potentially be reclaimed in an audiovisual poetics of remixing. For despite *Bamako*’s constant centrifugal pull, everything proves integral and forms part of a self-sustaining, aesthetic whole -- an elegant and vibrant economy of means where all can be cycled and recycled.

It is now, however, that the most important rift in the film finally takes place – one that takes a supremely cinematic form and was always latent. It is the opposition between two very different aesthetic approaches to image-making: that of Sissako paying his final respects to Chaka as a tragic character who understood to his own cost the enormity of the global situation, and whose death now leaves a void in the community; and that of Falaï who befriended Chaka throughout (they joked together and Chaka confided in him that there was nothing better than death), yet who now finally has a death to record. Within moments of the death scene, Chaka’s body is brought in and placed in front the judges’ table, draped in a radiant, dark blue and white striped cloth previously seen hanging up to dry. With the ‘Death in Timbuktu’ theme still audible, Sissako honours Chaka’s memory with a gentle, documentary-like forward tracking shot past the line of devastated mourners in one corner of the compound, allowing us to observe their religious rituals and chanting (the men are now separate from the women, and Aïssata Tall Sall, now dressed in conventional clothing, personally comforts Melé). An overhead wide shot of the central space -- the default deep-focus image of the courtyard -- captures the intense crisscrossing of people, clothing lines, mats and garments. Sissako is insisting again here with the striated open frame that everything remains interconnected and aesthetically potent, even -- and perhaps especially -- during heightened moments of communal emotion such as this when all Africans come together as one, including the judges and lawyers **(see Fig. 7)**.

In what becomes a graphic face-off between two different types of cinema, Falaï is captured head-on in the centre of the fame with his camcorder (01:47:09) as he positions himself for the best view. He zooms in first towards the dead body on the funeral stretcher as if attempting to peer under the cloth, before then rising up jerkily to capture almost obscene close-ups of some of the grieving faces in a manner recalling the ‘Death in Timbuktu’ episode. Falaï is now cashing in by giving what the authorities (and media) require: standard, generic, unedited footage of human drama. Yet by recording anonymously in a flat, linear, monochrome fashion with no sound, he becomes all but invisible. Such lack of collective perspective or affect corresponds to the uniformity of the system which Falaï now duly serves (we recall, too, that in ‘Death in Timbuktu’ the cowboy thugs impose silence in their shoot-out which claims a Malian mother in full song). The bleached, pale, sepia images drained of colour and blind to the beauty of composition are impoverished both emotionally and aesthetically, at once alienating and exploitative rather than empathetic. As Falaï’s hand-held camera records the pallbearers transporting Chaka’s body towards the open sandy-brown gate of the compound through which they slowly file out, Sissako inserts one last 35 mm colour panorama of the courtyard (01:48:24), a mish-mash of lines and colours heading off in all directions **(see Fig. 8)**. We cut to Falaï’s tracking of the sick young man (Souleymane Diagouraga) making his painful way alone to the gate -- as if Falaï were capitalising here on a highly marketable concatenation of death and disease (**see Fig. 8)**.9 Yet his camcorder does not follow the man thorough the gate and remains suspended, shaking, in front of it, unsure what to do next for the sake of the story. This is decidedly not a liminal or threshold shot, but rather a creative failure to meet the challenge of the moment. It is, to put it crudely, sub-Sissako, and as spectators we are now suddenly left again in critical limbo, hanging.

**INSERT FIGURE 7**

**INSERT CAPTION: Figure 7: Sissako’s overhead, deep-focus view of the central courtyard with Falaï in the foreground moving past the mourners towards Chaka’s body in *Bamako* (courtesy of Artificial Eye).**

**INSERT FIGURE 8**

**INSERT CAPTION: Falaï’s camcorder footage of the ill man as he makes his way slowly through the courtyard gate in *Bamako* (courtesy of Artificial Eye).**

Yet although this is the last printed image of *Bamako*, it is not the film’s final word and the matter of form is not yet over. Falaï’s mercenary camera remains paralysed inside the gate for five long seconds before the printed image cuts to black, over which is inscribed, in small white typewritten letters, and still in silence, a quote attributed to Aimé Césaire: ‘l’oreille collée au sol, j’entendis passer demain’.10 This line of verse is the conclusion to Césaire’s 1941 poem of revolutionary universalism, ‘Les pur-sang’ (‘The Thoroughbreds’), originally published in 1941 and subsequently collected in *Les Armes miraculeuses* (1946*)*. Its inclusion here naturally raises questions about the transmission of culture and (pan-)African futurity. Yet arriving as it does immediately after Chaka’s death and presented totally out of context (it is notable that ‘*demain*’ is not capitalised here, as in the original published version), the line appears typically ambivalent, even ironic, and it places the emphasis back again on the individual spectator as witness and interpreter. Is the statement retrospective and nostalgic, or anticipatory and proleptic? That is, does it signify listening actively and productively to the unstoppable forces of change and progress, or rather being merely a passive witness to events that have already passed by and over which one has no influence or bearing? The extreme aesthetic and affective engagement demanded of the viewer by *Bamako* would incline us to the first reading of agency, and certainly, if we turn to the poem itself, we are greeted with images of the postcolonial subject (the ‘I’) growing symbiotically with the raw energy of nature like a plant. This is the emergence -- the spiritual surge and prosperity -- of a new thinking and politicised human being whose time has now come. In a moment of shared cultural legacy, as casual and yet significant as the moment just before when Chaka transported the electric fan used throughout the trial to Ina’s bedside to keep her comfortable (his last affirmative gesture), Sissako plugs into, and ‘borrows’, the power of Césaire’s verse, thereby ensuring the film ends with a still live memory of unstoppable, organic, intergenerational, human flow -- one directly opposed to the uncontrolled flow of capital and *laissez-faire* economics ruthlessly based on credit and loan, interest and debt, bankruptcy and bail-out.

It might seem nostalgic and regressive to return here to Césaire at the height of *négritude* and organic black wholeness (Sembène, we recall, vigorously rejected what he called ‘negro-essentialism’ as a deliberate obfuscation of contemporary realities). However, for all the reasons given, *Bamako* precisely denies aesthetic recourse to any fixed and totalising universal vision. There can be no escape to a timeless safe haven of priceless, ‘authentic’ beauty, as once attempted, for example, by the ‘return to the source’ (‘*calabash*’) African cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, in large part an artistic counter-reaction to the sudden financial and economic uncertainties of that period (films like Souleymane Cissé’s extraordinary *Yeelen/Brightness* (1987) employing classic *griot* tropes and evoking an eternal, rural Arica and notions of authentic cultural identity).11 Simply to oppose a ‘pure’ and untouched (pre-modern) African society to these evils would be regressive and absurd, and result in yet another overarching and false binary. Similarly, the days of Fanon-style revolution and emancipation through violence may be long over (Jean-Paul advises Samba to keep to himself his recurring dream of finding heads of African leaders in a large bag), but Sissako is certainly not advocating here vague claims for African reparation or compensation. The market economy and free enterprise can, after all, be a force for the common good if conducted in a fair, mutual and respectful fashion. Indeed, the key message of Traoré, who underlines the complicity of all in the prevailing system, including Africans, is precisely to generate new, fresh money in order to invest in jobs and infrastructure.

Thus, Césaire’s role at the end of *Bamako* is rather as a call to action -- that is, to attend fully to the present and approach the future proactively. The film inserts itself with Césaire into a larger pan-African tradition of postcolonial critique where notions of debt simply don’t hold -- mutual obligations and duties as an artist, certainly, but not debts. However, unlike a trial that is supposed to establish the truth and would fix it in time, the ending of *Bamako* leaves us not with a conclusive image but with yet more open questions -- about justice and agency, as well as aesthetic form and format. After Falaï’s aesthetic impotence and muteness, the inscription on screen constitutes in itself a resounding, deafening, act of authorial expression that reverberates and re-opens the cinematic space for further aesthetic-affective reflection, mediation and interpretation.

**The Aesthetic Subject: A Space of Resistance**

The defining aesthetic tensions and perturbations of form in *Bamako* constitute, as we have seen, its real political and ethical critique. The film not only unmasks the often invisible and slow, structural violence of the neoliberal condition, but also places such disfiguring violence squarely within the domain of beauty and suggests it can be offset and remoulded through various kinds of aesthetic counter-formation. That is, *Bamako* trades formally in violence in order to find the right balance and means of resistance to the underlying neocolonial condition of violence. The cinematic frame becomes a contested, often agonistic space -- a virtual battleground for the aesthetic. Put differently, the aesthetic fabric is part of the social fabric, and to create a cinematic space of, and for, the aesthetic subject, rather than simply for political discourse, is to open up vital spaces of opacity and resistance to the values of the prevailing system in the absence of any legal redress. Indeed, generating one’s one spaces of resistance, as Zegué does with his searing chant out of turn that interrupts the trial, and which Sissako performs in kind by defiantly declining to subtitle Zegué’s words, may be viewed as Bourdieusian acts of resistance to the increasing encroachments of globalisation. The film dares to suggest, in fact, that there could be new, necessarily impure forms and formations of aesthetic beauty in the endlessly fertile present tense of montage which, in its multiple rhythms, can juxtapose and bring together still more elements, always to be traversed and negotiated speculatively, even troped on like the very capital of Césaire’s ‘Demain’.

By encouraging aesthetic questions to intrude freely and graphically into the field of the economic and political, *Bamako*’s ethico-political act of cultural resistance and infiltration not only offers new projections of cross-cultural liminality and transnationalism, with opacity as the very sign of radical, cosmopolitan openness, but also lays the grounds for a possible new West African film aesthetics. For what is ultimately at stake in its politics of form and violent beauty is rethinking, and reinvesting in, notions of the aesthetic as process and montage – that is, the sensory collaboration with form -- as a means of regaining agency and engaging as critically informed citizens of the world in critical dialogue and dissent, presented here as a creative form of thinking predicated on an acute recognition of the inescapable reality of immanent violence. At the risk of gross universalising, one might surely argue that Sissako is asserting Africa’s right both to beauty *and* to violence (on its own terms). Certainly, the affirmation here of such aesthetic forms and spaces provides a useful working definition of the democratic project, and it may help to redeem the individual spaces relegated by the neoliberal system which demands, as witness Georges Keïta so forcefully puts it, ‘the rape of my own imagination and of the little space I would call my own’. Further, if the development of a common humanity that engages collective responsibility for globalisation is not to remain a pipe dream, our very conceptions of art and beauty will need to expand and be transformed in the heat of aesthetic production and exchange.

Such an intensively aesthetic register of political engagement is very different from those attributed thus far to Sissako’s work, whether Akin Adesokan’s idea of an emerging aesthetic of an engaged and probing expatriation,12 or Aboubakar Sanogo’s notion of a ‘prospective engagement’ due to Sissako’s ‘induction of the space of the imaginary’ which situates the present social and historical reality in relation to some futurity or virtuality (Sanogo 2015, 147**-**8). For *Bamako* does more than simply gesture to a vague, utopian tomorrow, and Sissako is precisely not drawing on Césaire as a purely prospective, transcendent form to imagine a future Africa emerging from the hard work and vision of its children like Ina. Rather, he is laying down a challenge to the viewer to cross the threshold of form in the immediate present and to invest imaginatively in the bountiful potential of montage and the cinematic process. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remarks with regard to the purely symbolic trial that the entire film may be a figuration of why political protest and resistance against transnational agencies like multinationals misfires (Spivak 2012, 478). I would go further and say that *Bamako* dramatises the very limits of the political (conventionally defined) as a path to progressive change if not integrated within a creative, aesthetic project that is also fully committed, formally as well as affectively and intersubjectively. The filmThis crucial fact -- that political and judicial speeches and protest against neoliberalism are not enough, however heartfelt and eloquent – is demonstrated in the very place where the ‘Bamako Appeal’, the anti-globalisation document developed by the Polycentric World Social Forum, took place in January 2006.13

Sissako’s achievement in *Bamako* becomes even more momentous if we consider that, now over a decade on, Francophone West African cinema ultimately stands at a watershed moment as it starts belatedly to confront the digital revolution. For while its predominant and most prised mode remains that of the *auteur* (until very recently the major bi-annual Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) steadfastly refused to screen films made on video), the cheap, popular, genre-bound video films coming hot off the production line of Nollywood promote aspirational narratives of fluid, upwardly mobile identities through the acquisition of money and social status in what is arguably a cultural extension of the neocolonial project, or what one might call the civilising mission of globalisation. Filmed on both 16 mm and DV, *Bamako* demonstrates by example that if directors are not simply to go down the video route of what John McCall calls Nollywood’s ‘sprawling marketplace of representations’ (see McCall 2007), which thrives on difference but usually uncritically, they will need to experiment in new and dynamic aesthetic ways that both challenge the social, cultural and political presuppositions of the global economy and, as Rancière puts it, analyse the forms of circulation of social and commercial imagery and the operations interpreting this imagery.14 Sissako shows very powerfully that we must always see and hear, and hear and look again, more alertly, more poetically, for our critical response is impoverished if we do not *see* the aesthetic in its entirety. To invoke a proverb of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and Southern Benin: ‘Anyone who sees beauty and does not look at it will soon be poor’.

**Filmography**

*Bamako*, 2006, Abderrahmane Sissako, Mali/France/USA.

*Franc* (*Le*), 1994, Djibril Diop Mambety, Senegal/France.

*Guelwaar*, 1992, Ousmane Sembène, Senegal/France/Germany/UK.

*Heremakono/Waiting for Happiness*, 2002, Abderrahmane Sissako, France/Mauritania.

*Homme qui crie* *(Un*)/*A Screaming Man*, 2010, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, France/Belgium/Chad.

*Hyènes/Hyenas*, 1992, Djibril Diop Mambety, Senegal/France.

*Retour d’un aventurier (Le)*, 1966, Moustapha Allasane, France.

La Vie sur terre/Life On Earth, 1998, Abderrahmane Sissako, Mali/France/Mauritania. *Xala/The Curse*, 1974, Ousmane Sembène, Senegal.

**Notes**

1. Examples of this trend include Djibril Diop Mambety’s *Hyènes/Hyenas* (1992), a biting satire on human greed, materialism and consumer culture where Linguère Ramatou ‘as rich as the World Bank’ exacts murderous revenge; his later short *Le Franc* (1994), made in response to the devaluation of the West African CFA franc by fifty per cent, about a young man in debt who wins the lottery yet is unable to claim the money; Ousmane Sembène’s *Guelwaar* (1992), a film about local religious conflict but which also explores the relationship between Africa and western aid; and, more recently, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun’s *Un homme qui crie/A Screaming Man* (2010), where neoliberal globalisation in the form of a luxury hotel in N’Djamena under Chinese management triggers a tragic competition for work between father and son.

2. See Sanogo 2015 for a timely account of the endemic structural problems related to the existence and growth of auteurist cinema on the African continent, and Genova 2013 for a general introduction to the economic development of cinema in West Africa.

3. See Barlet 2000, 225-30, for a compact account of the common trials and tribulations of funding and production faced by African filmmakers, brought up-to-date specifically with regard to French funding and its continuing ambivalences in Barlet 2012.

4. I have explored elsewhere the mysteries of the voice and language in Sissako’s work in the general context of a gradual progression in West African Francophone cinema from a politics of language to a new plurivocal aesthetics of sound – one that foregrounds language less as a ‘natural’ vehicle of communication and political change than as an aesthetic object of mystery and wonder. This move from ideological struggle to what I call ‘aesthetic shudder’ marks a decisive shift in focus suggestive of a new, post-postcolonial cinema. See Williams 2016.

5. Oscherwitz underlines how Sissako disrupts through strategies of ‘anti-cinema’ the tenets both of neoliberalism and neoliberal/neocolonial aesthetics in the specific form of the Western genre, emblematic of cultural imperialism and oppression in Africa. See Oscherwitz 2015. For [Saër Maty Bâ,](http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Contributor,a=M/view-Contact-Page,id=20757/)  the sequence, in the very act of exposing Hollywood’s predominance of African screens (small and big), ‘resignifies’ on the Western genre and inserts an extra playful space within *Bamako*’s condemnation of the IMF and World Bank (Bâ 2010, 43-44). I will be arguing rather differently that *Bamako* resists in its entirety the ideological violence of filmic form precisely by creating alternative and pre-eminently cinematic spaces of resistance. It is worth pointing out finally that ‘Death in Timbuktu’ refers intertextually to Moustapha Alassane’s 1966 short, *Le Retour d’un aventurier*, an African-style Western shot in colour in Niger that specifically critiques African mimicry (a group of male buddies quickly spread panic throughout their village by donning cowboy uniform).

6. See Gabriel 1982.

7. Zegué’s lament about crop failure, an example of the slow violence of environmental degradation, is only much later paraphrased by the barrister for the prosecution, Aïssata Tall Sall, playing herself (she is also a key member of the Senegalese Socialist Party). See Durham 2008, Saxton 2009, Levine 2012, and Spivak 2012 for important studies of this key episode.

8. Rachel Gabara notes that while Sissako’s stylistic openness and lack of resolution create an ambiguity characteristic of European art cinema, he also replaces art cinema’s investigation of individual psychological reality with explorations of individuals in their historical and political context, thus reclaiming a first-person voice for Third Cinema. See Gabara 2010, 329-31.

9. Maingard is a little off the mark when she posits that these final shots ‘create a deeply existential quality in the form of the interior point-of-view of this young man’ (Maingard 2013, 105), since Sissako short-circuits all standard filmic moves to identification. Indeed, the sequence unfolds precisely as a manifest, albeit unspoken, drama, of self-differentiation on Sissako’s part in terms of cinematic method and style, rather than merely, as Anjali Prabhu has suggested, as a potential opportunity for authorial self-implication (see Prabhu 2014, 230).

10. ‘my ear against the ground, I heard tomorrow pass’.

11. Matthias De Groof makes the crucial point that negritude is not the same as *calabash* cinema, nor necessarily essentialist, but rather ‘particularistic’ (De Groof 2015, 253). For Césaire, he rightly argues, any universalism is based on particularism.

12. See Adesokan 2010. We note that Sissako has, in fact, recently relocated to Nouakchott in the country of his birth, Mauritania.

13. *Bamako* was once screened within the walls of the World Bank in 2007, and Sissako even had a conversation with bank officials about the future of World Bank policy, although there is no evidence of this producing any potential effects on its operational strategy.

14. See Rancière 2003.

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