FILM REVIEWS

FEATURE FILMS

Editor's note: Given the importance of a new film by Jean-Pierre Bekolo, *ASR* is publishing two reviews of the film, highlighting different strategies employed in the film and demonstrating its capacity to evoke radically different readings.

Jean-Pierre Bekolo, director. *Le Président*. 2013. 64 minutes. French, with English subtitles. Cameroon. 64 minutes. Weltfilm and Jean-Pierre Bekolo Sarl, in association with Canal + Afrique. $500.00.

A beleaguered president, Aladji, in power for forty-two years, embarks surreptitiously with his bodyguard and chauffeur on an indeterminate road trip on the eve of a crucial election, kindling a swirl of questions, speculations, political scheming, and initiatives to reappraise his legacy. As Jo Wood'ou, a witty television reporter, the media, the public, and even political prisoners work to piece things together, we see a chaotic urban milieu and hear rumors from an opposition party member, disillusioned youth, and women concerned about infants disappearing from nursery schools. Meanwhile, the president's retinue, halted by a fork in the road, drifts into a transcendental, dreamlike meeting with his deceased wife, Jeanne, who admonishes him, as do the female vice president, an elderly political prisoner, a constitutional expert, and the rapper Valsero. Ultimately, Aladji is consigned to oblivion and the vice president, presenting a prescient manifesto, assumes power.

With this film steeped in subtleties, Bekolo proposes renewed modes of political commitment for African cinema through his notion of "applied fiction," a conceptual, political, and aesthetic framework of representation which casts the imagination in critical and reflexive relationships with material realities, exploring their dynamic interplay and novel dimensions. Here Bekolo amalgamates genres—spy, sci-fi, occult, mystery, comedy, melodrama, documentary, travel, psychological thriller, and video installation art—to formulate a metaphoric visual economy grounded in a phantasmal milieu.

The supernatural is evoked in the film as an expressive and interpretive grid to engage the fraught realities and spectral trajectories of the nation and, arguably, to set out tenets in which the material and metaphysical

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2014.123 Published online by Cambridge University Press

worlds are coexisting realms. Hence, apart from stylized scenes in gray tones of an unidentified funeral cortege, we see Aladji and Jeanne in a canoe resplendently crossing a river evocative of the mythical boundary between earthly and numinous worlds. This radical representational framework, juxtaposing forms, belief systems, and subject matter, creates an intricate narrative web in which the personal, familial, cultural, national, conceptual, and existential coalesce.

In this cautionary tale about mortality, power, and delusions of grandeur, Aladji, an enigmatic, melancholic, paternalistic, paranoiac, and nomadic figure, casts a ghostly shadow over the nation. Afflicted and alienated from the nation, he is ironically immured like his political prisoners. He even suspects his chauffeur of being an assassin, musing, "Et tu, Brute?" Significantly, these intertextual and historical references to Shakespeare and Julius Caesar conflate Aladji's feelings of treachery with his betrayal of the nation. Thus Aladji's journey, rather than a quest for redemption, is a metaphor of a leader and nation adrift.

Aladji's encounter with Jeanne, a loving but an admonitory persona, conflates domestic drama with the uncanny, presenting a space in which a repressed past, the anxieties and unconscious desires it engenders, and the prospects of accounting for his foibles might emerge. Although she has no children, Jeanne's identity is, remarkably, neither subsumed to Aladji's nor defined by her childless status. Similarly, the vice president does not just articulate political reform; her prioritization of the nation over self and ambition, away from restrictive cultural codes and patriarchal structures, appreciably underscores the film's concern with progressive gender politics and African women as courageous agents of change.

In a similar vein, Wood'ou's citizen journalism, sardonic humor, and challenging questions and comments foster alternative narratives of the nation. The rumors and opinions he espouses derive from the interplay of the government's secretiveness, befuddling social realities open to multifarious interpretations, and the disillusioned and anxious public's attempts at establishing its own hermeneutic system of meaning construction. Hence the proliferating media corps in the film—like C-TV, Canal D, Info-TV, Tomorrow-TV, Any-TV—which, while satirical, significantly position society in relation to digital cultures and new technologies, indicating their creative and subversive potentials for advancing social movements and political activism.

With remarkable success, music, including vestiges of a globalized hip-hop culture, is crucial to the film's narrative, artistic, and aesthetic trajectories. Valsero's music is not merely imbued with subversive tones; its populist style, critical disposition, and social consciousness, drawn from the quotidian incongruities of society, underscore the relationship between art and activism. Aladji's forum with Valsero, at the latter's ostensible invitation, is reflexive of the rapper's popular song "Lettre au Président" (Letter to the President) and album title, *Politiquement Instable* (Politically Unstable), which appear conspicuously on a graffiti-styled background banner.

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2014.123 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The latter accentuates the disjuncture between the president and citizenry, and the potentials of cultural production in fostering new subjectivities.

Overall, *Le Président* is a richly rhetorical narrative about nation, citizenship, resistance, and hope. Unsurprisingly, the film's takes on protracted incumbencies of African leadership, with parallels to the Cameroonian president Paul Biya, provoked the government's censorial wrath and ban. While the vice president's manifesto marks a climax of sorts, the advent of a belated process of reform, *Le Président's* open ending underscores Bekolo's reluctance to inaugurate triumphal celebrations like the commemorative monuments of the nation's fiftieth independence anniversary in its opening scenes.

Jude G. Akudinobi
University of California
Santa Barbara, California
akudinob@blackstudies.ucsb.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2014.123

Jean-Pierre Bekolo, director. *Le President.* 2013. 64 minutes. In French, with English subtitles. Cameroon, Weltfilm, and Jean-Pierre Bekolo Sarl, in association with Canal + Afrique. $500.00.

Jean-Pierre Bekolo's fourth feature film, *Le President*, opens with a sequence in which a row of inserts gradually appears layered across an abstract background. The inserts are small screens, reminiscent of televisions. Across these screens flicker images of streets in Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé. The cameras move the viewer in close to the cacophony of moving traffic, pedestrians, and bustling urban life. Another insert then appears atop the row of smaller screens. In this rectangle we see a man wearing sunglasses inside an office in a high-rise overlooking the city. This brief sequence without dialogue introduces the themes of Bekolo's humorous, yet pointed, political critique: an atrophied political class is out of step with and (literally) detached from a young, dynamic population and with the multifaceted roles of media and mediation in contemporary Cameroon.

Bekolo's film garnered attention upon its release because it was inevitably censored by Cameroon's government. The "president" who appears in the insert wearing sunglasses is only nominally fictional; he in fact closely resembles Paul Biya, the octogenarian who has governed the state since 1982. A film made by Richard Djimili about the same subject (*139 . . . The Last Predators*, 2013) had previously led to the filmmaker's kidnapping and torture, corroborating in chilling fashion precisely the critiques that Djimili's and Bekolo's films make. Yet beyond drawing attention to the lack of freedom of expression under Biya's authoritarian regime, *Le President* presents an exciting and sophisticated deployment of the filmic medium to reflect not only the imbrication of the media and the political system that Bekolo