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

critiques, but also media's potential to construct a polyvocal response to dictatorial ideology.

The plot of Bekolo's film hinges upon the president's sudden disappearance: before elections the leader simply disappears after thirty years in power. Cultural pundits, the media, and the general population wonder what has happened to him. A reporter for the fictional television channel "Canal D" (*D* for democracy?) named Jo Wood'ou goes off to search for him. The ensuing mockumentary forms the bulk of the film. Wood'ou becomes our default narrator, even though his voice is interspersed with the voices of others. As in the opening sequence, Bekolo jumps frequently between disparate contexts, voices, and conversations (between prisoners, with the president's deceased wife, on television with rappers, with the president's staff, to name a few), which amalgamate like so many small screens, each reflecting different points of view that conjoin to form a polyvalent filmic body. The quick-paced movement between these perspectives brings up the question of how, in an environment in which the media is so ubiquitous, the president could simply disappear.

Wood'ou exclaims that the president has been present for his entire life: he was "toujours le president" when Wood'ou was born and after he grew up. His image was developed through television; it was thus, in the reporter's words, "hypnotic." At the same time, it was unchanging; the president and his policies have not grown with the country, and they are out of step. This issue manifests itself throughout the film in terms of generational conflict. At one point Bekolo stages an interview between the "disappearing" president and a young rapper who suggests that the government should provide youths with financial support after the completion of their studies and promote the burgeoning black market industries which, unlike the static institutional structures, provide opportunities to a frustrated younger generation. His suggestions, however, appear to have little impact upon the intractable president.

The contrast between a political elite that refuses to relinquish its stranglehold on power and a dynamic youthful population manifests itself not only through dialogue but also through Bekolo's energetic cinematic language. The film ricochets between various perspectives and styles, moving lithely from gritty faux-cinema verité to humorous self-reflexive stagings of the film's own medial nature. Just as the multiple interviews disavow a singular narrative, so too do the many inserts, split-screens, shots of city life, and rapid cuts provide a means of expression for a pluralistic society. Rather than condemning the pervasive mediatization of culture as a corroborating force in political repression, it asks how cinema can be galvanized to foster dissonant dialogue. The filmmaker embraces the explosion of television and media culture in contemporary Cameroon and mines it to create a cinematic aesthetic that is critical but open ended.

In the film's narrative, the disappearance of the president engenders the opportunity for a new media language that both addresses and engages the audience and allows it to act as both producer and receiver. In this way

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2014.124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bekolo accomplishes two goals: he reengages with the ideological critiques that undergirded much of early African cinema, and he carries out his own critical project by deploying elements of popular media culture in a manner that does not disavow, but rather engages, commercial media's style.

Sasha Rossman
University of California Berkeley
Berkeley, California
arossman@gmx.net

doi:10.1017/asr.2014.124

Mama Keita, director. *L'Absence.* 2009. 164 minutes. French and Wolof. France, Guinea, Senegal. Kinterfilm. 2009. No price reported.

If one had to chose one scene to capture the heart of Mama Keita's *L'Absence,* it could be the one in which Adama, the leading character, is lost in the middle of Dakar with only Euro banknotes. He needs Francs CFA. Time is running out for him to find his mute sister, to get her out of the underground life of prostitution. A man who is a dwarf offers him help but disappears suddenly in the backyard of a street shop with the money. Adama wanders around asking whether anyone saw him. A man stops by and asks sarcastically, "Since when do you give your money to a stranger?" This is how Adama, this young scientist from the Senegalese diaspora, realizes brutally, in the midst of a manhunt, that money cannot buy help, even in "Africa."

For once, exile is not viewed through the optic of the desire to leave, through the hope for a better life abroad. In Mama Keita's movie exile only appears when its ends: when one returns. Adama was a promising young student. With the kind support of professors, he got a grant to study in France. The promises were fulfilled: he led a successful professional life, rising to a top position in the scientific academia. Was it this success that kept him away, during long and silent years, from his home country of Senegal?

Keita reveals very little about Adama. What matters is not his tragic family background, the loss of a mother in childbirth. It is his inability to return, to recreate a family bond that was never clearly broken but left an open wound, barely hidden in this voluntary exile. *L'Absence* is what we could call a psychological drama cast as a thriller. Adama has returned, but he is held back by his past demons. Over the years he had comforted himself by sending money to his relatives, easily convinced that it was enough to maintain "a family." However, he is not a particularly likeable character. Although we know little about him, his acts reveal a selfish, irresponsible, blinded man. As the film goes on and the tension increases, he is little more than a pathetic man running after, or maybe against, the absence that separated him from his family. Yet the drama suggests that nothing can wipe out absence, be it his own or another's.