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## **Resistant representations? Genre and Gender in Francophone African Film**

### Abstract

This article analyses the ways in which contemporary Francophone African film interrogates concepts of identity and representation through its inflections of elements of film genre, particularly genre-linked presentations of gender. The article examines in detail Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005) and Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (2006) as case studies, focusing on how the films' reformulations of gender and genre reflects on the nature of representation in postcolonial cultural contexts. To explore how these inflections of genre and their reflection on representation may be politically resistant, the argument brings into dialogue theories of film genre as a relational concept (Stam, Neale, Bordwell and Thompson) and gender identity theory, drawn from the work of Spivak and Irigaray. In combination with detailed readings of the two films, this approach leads to two broader conclusions: firstly, that the strategic deployment of gender constructions within re-articulations of genre coordinates can constitute a form of aesthetic resistance; and secondly that insights from postcolonial theory and gender theory can inform the analysis of film genre in non-Western contexts and elucidate the signification of film genre in contexts defined by networks of cultural appropriation, adaptation and exchange.

### Key words:

African film. Film genre. Gender. Strategic essentialism. Representation. Aesthetics.

With the rise of academic interest in transnational and global cinema, scholars have begun to pay attention specifically to how film genre signifies across borders. A number of approaches have emerged. One approach, which focuses on cultural synergies between filmmakers and audiences, is instanced in David Desser's work on *film noir* in transnational contexts. Desser's arguments foreground how important the film audience's mastery of webs of intertextual cinematic reference is to the successful adaptation of film genres across cultural borders (Desser 2003: 527). A counter position is outlined by Michelle Cho, for whom audiences can be entirely unconscious of a director's intertexts and yet films still signify effectively transnationally. In line with Rey Chow's view of cinema as cultural translation, and of cultural translation as transactional (Chow, 1995: 191), Cho makes the case that global genre films draw their coherence from the specific cultural contexts of their reception, arguing for the 'crucial consideration of the transnational and translational aspects of genre cinema' (Cho, 2015: 68). Thus, while Desser's work emphasises the importance of

epistemological overlap between filmmaker and audience, Cho highlights the extent to which genre cinema signifies along circuits that escape the director's knowledge. What these two approaches share, however, is the view that whether or not the cultural transfer of cinema genre is articulated through networks of intertextual references specific to a director's originating cultures (Desser), or through networks specific to its audience's host or adopted cultures (Cho), the importance of local cultural contexts and hierarchies, of circuits of market distribution and exchange, and of the local affective currencies of globally-shared products in shaping the contours of transnational genre films, is paramount.

This is a robust convergence. Nonetheless, these approaches to transnational genre films have important blind spots. Most problematically, emitting and receiving cultures in transnational cultural exchange emerge from these approaches as internally homogenous. Little attention is given to the ways in which genres are encountered through cultural grounds that consist themselves of multiple discursive flows and legacies; palimpsests in which pre-colonial, colonial, postcolonial, national, transnational, regional, local and global perspectives overlap and dialogue. Yet it is precisely across these cultural contexts that some of the most complex inflections of film genre take place (Ashcroft, 2012; Ayakoroma, 2014; Yoo 2012). In this connection therefore, a third approach in the form of Akinwumi Adesokan's work on postcolonial genre could offer an important alternative perspective, directly addressing the transnational mobilities of film and textual genres. Interpreting genre as 'the formal, material and institutional procedures through which art is created and does its work', Adesokan recognises that postcolonial studies has not found adequate theoretical tools to work with genre, being 'torn [...] between conventional notions of the category [...] and the political weight of artistic works by writers in, but not of, Europe' (Adesokan 2011: 3; 153). To remedy this, Adesokan emphasises how the specific material, commercial and developmental constraints of the postcolonial global artist, more than cultural hierarchies or audience epistemologies, sets the limits and shapes of genres in postcolonial contexts.

This approach too risks shortcomings, for it does not address how genres interact and shift over time and place, nor does it acknowledge how postcolonial cultural products recombine and reconfigure archetypal genre elements. Although not articulating an essentialised view of genres as responding to a located set of dispositions and maintaining the shape moulded by these even when received by audiences elsewhere, Adesokan is still more interested in the means of production and the producer than in the structures of works themselves. This perspective proposes cultural products as stable entities that express political crises displaced into the aesthetic realm; genres emerge as

stably located in works themselves, rather than in networks of signification forged between works, audiences, cultures, directors and industries. Further, Adesokan attributes value to stylistic choices according to whether the solutions they propose to a specific political nexus are judged appropriate (Adesokan 2011: 129). Thus, while Adesokan does directly address genre in transnational contexts, his approach suffers from understandings of the ‘authentic’ or ‘correct’ in cinema criticism that rely on essentialised value judgements and elides the triangulation of meaning production that occurs between audience, filmmaker, actors, and technicians; and between the works and debates of current filmmakers and their predecessors and contemporaries. Therefore, while recognising the value of assessing whether messages communicated through film are politically adequate to a specific social or political task, and the value of mapping how closely signification is linked to filmmakers or audience’s epistemologies in transnational contexts, this article will argue differently.

Presentations of gender and genre in recent Francophone African films explore identity construction in ways that reflect deeply on the meaning of representation. In *Les Saignantes* (Jean-Pierre Bekolo, 2005) and *Bamako* (Abderahmane Sissako, 2006), gender and genre interact in especially telling ways, their configuration problematising with political intent notions of identity and authenticity, essentialism and mimicry. Bekolo’s *Les Saignantes* and Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako* are analysed below as two rich works that provide exemplary insights into the ways that screen representations of gender categories and coordinates interact with genre film characteristics to interrogate the nature of aesthetic representation. My argument will emphasise the value of exploring how films’ interactions with the codified elements of aesthetic representation in genre film as instanced by representations of gender, can chart genre re-combinations and adaptations across borders in ways that highlight the complexities of postcolonial, transnational cultural encounters through film. Secondly, my argument will posit that conceptual discussions around identity, authenticity and recognition that are a shared concern of film genre studies, gender studies and postcolonial studies can help illuminate the significations of genre film in transnational, globalised circuits of cultural production, thus suggesting a new critical approach to transnational genre film.

### **Genre, Power and Identity: Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s *Les Saignantes* (2005)**

The Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo has consistently innovated in his films’ reflections on the nature of representation, essentialism and mimicry. His first feature film *Quartier Mozart* (1992) updated a folk tale to explore gender swapping and phallocracy; his second film, *Le Complot d’Aristote* (1996,) reflected profoundly on the meaning of representation and satirises the notion of

authentically African film. Bekolo's third feature film, *Les Saignantes* (2005) follows in this vein of interrogating the meaning of aesthetic representation; it also significantly questions gender and genre coordinates. A future-focused movie that crosses multiple genre fields, from science-fiction, fantasy, horror, to political satire, thriller and erotica, the film's innovative combination and inflection of genres forms a fundamental part of the film's interrogation of norms of power and identity. A significant part of this interrogation is mediated by specific presentations of gender as these relate both to societal expectations and to representations characteristic of specific film genre codes.

Set in 2025 in the capital of Cameroon, Yaoundé, the film's action centres on the vectors of power of the Mevungu. In a West African context, the Mevungu is a Beti ritual of female empowerment and community cleansing, focused on the stimulation of the clitoris by older women. *Les Saignantes* mobilises the Mevungu ritual centrally in its narrative, to comment on the limits of political and aesthetic representation in a dystopian future postcolonial state. The film follows two female protagonists, Majolie and Chouchou, in their pursuit of revenge on the corrupt politics of Cameroonian patriarchy, as instanced in particular through oppressions of the human body and the corrupt scheming of political elites. The power that Majolie and Chouchou wield is sexual. With intertextual echoes of Sony Labou Tansi's political satire *La Vie et demie* (1979), Majolie and Chouchou are possessed of supra-human attributes. Here, the clichéd horror-film nexus of sex and death that frames the genre's 'one-sex world' (Clover 2002: 16) is turned to female advantage through an inversion of the genre's expected gender hierarchies: far from it being the women who are terrorised before being expunged by men from the narrative, it is Majolie and Chouchou who mete out annihilation to men in power. They achieve this firstly through the sexual encounter and secondly through the destructive power of the Mevungu principle.

The film opens with an extended gymnastic, prosthetic sexual encounter between Majolie and a high-ranking government member, the Secrétaire Général du Conseil Civil [General Secretary of the Civil Council] (the SGCC). This sexual encounter leaves the SGCC dead and begins the film's narration of a moral death at the heart of Cameroonian society and politics. The protagonists' gender and genre transgressing acts leave them exposed to Cameroonian patriarchy's wrath. However, Bekolo's individually weak female protagonists are protected from male power by the group power of the Mevungu principle: for Chouchou and Majolie are urged on, counselled, protected, and held to account by the older female Mevungu initiates. In the film, the Mevungu is framed as a female power principle located in the group's knowledge and practice (Diabate 2012: 166-181), but instanced by the individual and joint actions of Majolie and Chouchou. Bekolo's vision of the near

future thus foregrounds the power of the Mevungu as the vector for a politically-aware praxis mediated through the sexuality and actions of two young women protagonists, Majolie and Chouchou.

The question of agency emerges as key to the representation of gender. While the young women act out their settling of scores with men as individuals, their ability to act with success in fact an expression of the power of the Mevungu and the will of its initiates. Thus, the film's conception of gender and genre surpasses a simple inversion of the gendered hierarchies of power that structure the horror genre. Instead, *Les Saignantes* posits a new structuring principle for this narrative world. This is a principle based on a vision of moral judgement and reckoning that coincides with, but is not limited to, the acts of the female characters. However, within diegesis of the film, this restructuring of the homogenous 'one sex' principle of power is dangerous for Majolie and Chouchou. Their choices are exposed both to the disapproval of the powerful older women who mobilise the power of the Mevungu through them; and to the repressive apparatus of the patriarchal state which mobilises against them. It is particularly striking that in *Les Saignantes*, no durable triumph of the female principle over male corruption is screened. While the original power of the Mevungu ritual was one that aimed at rectifying society, here the protagonists' praxis, even when doubled by the power of the Mevungu, only enables the two female protagonists to usurp the phallic in their sexual and social practices for finite ends. By the close of the film, the restructuring of gendered power does not lead to the constitution of any wider alliances instancing any substantially different order of gender and power.

That this decision to portray a failure in the re-ordering of gendered power is a conscious one on Bekolo's part can be inferred from the knowing inflections of genre identities that the film narrative also instances. From the outset, the film overtly mobilises the abject aesthetic of future-focused horror movies such as the zombie apocalypse narrative, portraying the city of Yaoundé visually as enveloped in a permanent cloak of murky night-time. Bekolo's *mise en scène* foregrounds swirling fog, deep shadows and muted pools of artificial illumination that emphasise the weakness of man-made light against the engulfing moral and political darkness. The film's action takes place in the 'terrible places' (Clover 2002: 30) that are characteristic of contemporary horror film, places which grip the peripheries of the urban centres of postcolonial global capitalism. This dingy, apocalyptic aesthetics of the *mise-en-scène* bring the troubling margins to the centre, signalling strongly towards the dystopian visions of film noir, sci-fi, pornography and horror.

Further, there is a significant presence of the abject remnant on screen: for example, the SGCC's corpse which is butchered into packageable pieces that Majolie and Chouchou carry around in fashion-shopping bags; the projectile vomit that spews from the corpse when the drunken Chouchou attacks it; or the detached scrotal sac of the corpse with which the protagonists have a game of kick-about. I read this emphasis on horrific remainders as indicating the irrepressible traces of traumatic past events and allegorises the traumatic historical remainders which coexist in the multi-layered reality of the postcolonial state. These abject remainders from the past combine with the film's highlighting of the prospective and the non-mimetic, that is, its highlighting of the future through its setting and the magical through the reference to the Mevungu. It is amplified, however, through a significant emphasis central to noir, sci-fi, pornography and horror genres, in the foregrounding of the monstrous and the prosthetic. Thus, the SCCG's severed head is sewn onto a different dead body, and displayed at the wake; a mechanical apparatus of straps and pulleys allows Majolie to carry out the extravagant sexual gyrations and phallic gesturing of the sexual *position du tir* [shooting position] that kills the elderly SCCG in the opening scenes.

In these examples, the narrative regime of an indexical mimeticism, where events within the film narrative that have happened previously cannot be effaced and resurface in troubling abject remnants, is brought into contiguity with a narrative regime of the non-mimetic, envisioned through the future setting, its prosthetic devices and monstrously reconstituted corpses. Linda Williams argues that the use of horror and other excessive genres such as pornography is a form of cultural problem-solving that mounts a challenge to 'standard' conceptions of narrative (Williams 1991: 2-13). This makes the African horror or pornography movie a particularly significant gesture in the act of breaking Western epistemologies expressed through expected mimetic relations in aesthetic representation; *Les Saignantes* fully instances this. In addition, Carol J Clover notes that 'horror [is] [...] the form that most obviously trades in the repressed but also the repressed of mainstream filmmaking' (2002: 20). Bekolo's juxtaposition of the future-focused with the abject remnants of a repressed past can therefore be read as aiming to undo the unity of narrative mimesis as it re-imagines cinematic narrative through recombinations of genre and gender coordinates.

This challenge to accepted norms of mimesis is underscored further in non-diegetic elements of the film which directly address the audience on issues of the limits of representation. Thus, a number of anti-realist inter-titles punctuate episodes of the film. They call on the audience to reflect on its own horizons of expectation: 'Comment faire un film d'action dans un pays où l'action est subversive?' ['How can an action movie be made in a country where action is subversive?'];

‘Comment faire un film d’horreur dans un endroit où la mort est à la fête?’ [‘How can a horror film be made in a place where death is having a ball?’]; ‘Comment faire un film policier dans un pays où on ne peut pas enquêter?’ [‘How can a detective film be made in a country where you can’t investigate?’] and as the closing image, ‘Comment regarder un film comme ça et ne rien faire par la suite?’ [‘How can you watch a film like that and then do nothing?’]. These insistent interrogations flag up the limits to representation set by wider social and political contexts within which the filmmaker must work. They also call on the viewer to reflect on the artificial nature of what they are seeing; and also on the actions that must ensue from the revelation of the social and political embeddedness of cultural representation. Further, the inter-titles play on the notion of ‘sign’ and signification within the film at the same time as they gesture paradoxically at varieties of visual aesthetics from the early twentieth century, an era when the meaning of cinema derived predominantly from the recording of bodily, gestural signs, and when cinema itself was an expressive form at the margins of western cultures. This too is consonant with the film’s overall reflection on the meanings of genres and identities. As Carol J. Clover remarks, in genres such as horror,

There is in some sense no original, no real or right text, but only variants; [this is] a world in which, therefore, the meaning of the individual example lives outside itself. The ‘art’ of the horror film, like the ‘art’ of pornography, is to a very large extent the art of rendition or performance and it is understood as such by the competent audience. A particular example may have original features, but its quality as a horror film lies in the way it delivers the cliché (Clover 2002: 11).

The question of the notion of the original and the authentic extends to the narrative conceit of the *Mevungu*. Bekolo’s return to the past to construct a narrative that questions gender and genre identities in such a thorough-going manner is highly innovative, constituting an aesthetic and philosophical tour de force that composes and decomposes history and representation even as its last words posit the need for cultural representations to impel political and social action. The *Mevungu* in *Les Saignantes* is far from the current, exotic practice that the film’s Western viewers may reduce to the anthropological. Bekolo never witnessed any actual *Mevungu* ceremony, although he is himself of *Beti* ethnicity. Instead, he learnt of it from the work of the French anthropologist Philippe Laburthe-Torl before turning it into the narrative motor for *Les Saignantes* (Diabate 2012: 169-171). Bekolo’s contact with the ritual must itself then be read as emblematic of layered histories of cultural adaptation, refraction and inflection. It is particularly telling that the film’s prime narrative motor



should be mediated in this way by the layered histories of cultural appropriation, adaptation and re-appropriation; for these are layers which are then instanced in the film's engagement through presentations of gender and inflections of genre with the dynamics of transnational cultural exchange and palimpsestic rewriting.

### **Gender and genre in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (2006)**

*Bamako* (2006) is Sissako's third feature film, after *La Vie sur terre* (1998) and *Heremakono/Waiting for Happiness* (2002). If *Les Saignantes* screens from the outset as an edgy genre product which slowly reveals itself as an enquiry into the very coordinates of genre identity, *Bamako* offers a more discursive, elegiac inflection of genre towards the same field of enquiry. Taken in its entirety, *Bamako* eludes categorisation within any recognised film genre, weaving instead a multi-dimensional narrative that is both polemical and deeply intimate. The film also overtly co-opts genre film as part of its reflection on representation, agency and identity. The film has the outward form of a court-room drama, but it is an allegorical one where the accused is a geo-political entity, the West, and through the generic envelope of the court-room drama, the film foregrounds the West and the International Monetary Fund as complicit in death and destruction. The West and the IMF are defended in court by an elderly white lawyer, Maître Rappaport. Here the complex play between identity and mimicry begins already, for the actor is in real life Maître Roland Rappaport, the renowned cinema lawyer, while the court's judge in non-filmic life, is a real magistrate. Further, the court scenes filmed are extended improvisations between all the actants-actors, who speak in capacities that significantly blur the lines between them as actors representing others, and them as the objects of representation through film. Moreover, the filmed physical space of the court in which the trial takes place is a multi-faceted, multi-layered site. For as well as the law court in the film, it is also the courtyard of a complex of family dwellings; and thus the political and the domestic, the global and the everyday, are fundamentally intertwined in the film's *mise-en-scène*. Indeed, even the autobiographical makes an appearance, for the location is the courtyard of Sissako's father's family, where the director himself grew up (Ruggle & Knaebel no date: 6).

Alongside the trial of the West taking place in the central area portrayed, other narratives are profiled threading through the rooms that open out onto the courtyard site of prosecution and defence, or through the backwaters of the trial space itself. These secondary narratives invoke a range of different genres. A stolen watch amongst those attending the trial sketches a crime narrative; the unhappy relationship between Melé and Chaka sketches elements of soap opera; while a more intimate

mode between documentary and reportage, mimicking western miserabilist depictions of Africa at the same time as a kind of medical realism, sketches the slow death of African man and the fever of a sick child. These fragments of heterogeneous genres for representing Africa presented through shots of spaces contiguous with the space of rhetorical inquisition - the central courtyard – are highly significant. Commenting on his choice that the sick man and child should not die on screen in the film, and that *Bamako* should thus not screen the West's clichés of Africa, Sissako reflects that, 'Il y a, chez moi, une envie si forte de filmer une Afrique qu'on n'imagine pas, parce qu'on ne la montre pas. C'est à dire une Afrique consciente de ce qui arrive. Incapable de changer le cours des choses, peut-être, mais consciente de ce qui se passe.' ['I have such a strong wish to film a kind of African that isn't imagined because it doesn't get shown. That's to say an Africa aware of what is happening. Unable to change the course of things, maybe, but aware of what's happening'] (Ruggle & Knaebel no date: 6). Sissako's use of parallel narratives and genre fragments can therefore be seen to constitute a filmmaking strategy that presents Africans as agents reflecting on their situation, at the same time as it calls on the viewer, African or not, to engage actively, reflecting on the process of film-making and on the film's discursive content. This conscious deployment of recognisable elements of genre film reaches a high-point in the inclusion of a western film-within-a-film, *Death in Timbuktu*, that insistently questions identity and authenticity via considerable play with the gender coordinates of the western.

The western is a particularly interesting choice for the film-within-a-film. The western genre has highly recognisable attributes, including significant rehearsals of gender identity and gender difference. It also has a very specific history and lineage in the colonial and postcolonial popular cultures of Francophone African countries (Glaser 2000: 48; 135; Gondola 2009: 75-98). Within *Bamako*, *Death in Timbuktu* screens from the outset as a markedly adapted, translated and appropriated product. The moments of slippage into this film within a film are vital: the western is announced diegetically to family members gathered in one of the rooms off the courtyard, it is trailed as the television schedule's evening film, and prefaced by an uncomfortable failure in continuity as technical problems lead to a break in the smooth movement from one form of representation of African reality to another. As the film audience loses the diegetic framing of the TV set, the incursion of the western into the African film marks the merging of extra and intradiegetic audiences – the film audience watches the TV film at the same time as the TV audience: multiple crossings and translations of borders of media thus frame the African film's entrance into the world of the western deliberately clumsily.

Culturally, geographically, and temporally, the *mise-en-scène* for *Death in Timbuktu* both signals and enacts the western genre's circulation across borders. Its opening music is wistful; the first shots are of riverbank dunes and a cowboy watering his horse in what appears in the afternoon light. The setting is clearly African but the genre clearly western, and a complex transcultural reading of meaning and representation ensues from the inclusion of this digressive film-within-a-film. This is further emphasized in the next shots, where an international posse of cowboys wearing modern dress and sunglasses, as well as cowboy hats, chaps and neckties, rides into a recognizably West African village. Further, the deployment of the western, which is a prime genre for the circulation of narratives reinforcing white settler hegemony, subverts the genre's status as a cultural narrative that excludes the history of black people from white-authored history. This is emphasised in the deliberately counter-hegemonic choice of the African-American actor Danny Glover as the cowboy saviour-hero. As a black actor here playing a potential saviour from the West (itself often portrayed as Africa's saviour), Glover's presence at home in the landscape raises the African origins of black Americans, thus overtly indexing the impacts of past and present transatlantic crossings. Further contributing to my reading of *Death in Timbuktu* as a reflection on representation and the transcultural, there are also striking images of the omnipresence of the detritus of American global capitalism in this 'traditional' Malian village; the camera lingers in particular on a small boy's Nike-branded T-shirt, and his dusty and abandoned bicycle emblazoned with 'Rocket12' and 'Rambo' stickers. Following the entry of the international posse into the village, the screening of acts of naming occurs, identifying the cast as actors and/or film-makers appearing under their own names. This mixture of authentic and fictional identities is listed on screen before the title *Death in Timbuktu* appears in large play-bill script against a décor of adobe architecture; multiple exchanges of genre, language and star-status across national, cultural and even temporal borders are invoked even in these simple acts of naming.

The aim of this transnational posse of cowboys pitted against Glover is a parodic pursuit of efficiencies based on the annihilation of the double: parodying the West's mission to make Africa economically efficient, the line 'deux instits, c'est trop' ['two teachers, that's too many'] justifies shooting one of the two primary school teachers dead. A number of critiques is made just through these words: the critique of the rationing of education for Africans to this much teaching but no more, which has informed educational policy from colonial to neo-colonial to contemporary governments in Africa; a critique of economic reason which measures value only in terms of value for money; and a critique of the univocalism and essentialism of Western hegemonic discourse for which two teachers, two sources of value, must be reduced to one single authentic value. Thus far, in

only a few minutes of *Death in Timbuktu*, interrogations of identity, category, authenticity, essentialism and performance have already been profiled as key to understanding the meaning of the genre-film incursion into the wider non-genre film *Bamako*. As *Death in Timbuktu* continues, this interrogation is foregrounded further through a specific exploration of gender in the form of western/Western masculinity, one which dialogues with the constructions of masculinity and femininity problematized in the main narrative of *Bamako*.

In the film more broadly, African men are portrayed as incompetent and disempowered. Male witnesses come to testify at the wrong time, or cannot get into the court to testify for lack of understanding; they cannot make themselves understood once they reach the stand; or they come to bear witness, but have ‘rien à déclarer’ [‘nothing to declare’] despite their alleged education. Even for the few white men present, whiteness and being a Westerner provide any advantage: maître Rappaport cannot match the presence and rhetoric of powerful African women such as the barrister and a ‘well known Malian writer’, Aminata Traoré, the former minister of culture in Mali. Men have become the objects of the masterful rhetoric of authoritative African women; the formerly virile male body lying dying next to the courtyard bears witness to this simultaneously as he is an object in the women’s narrative telling the tale of the erosion of men’s social and economic standing: ‘le père de famille, qui avait son autorité, qui avait son influence, qui avait sa dignité, tout lui est emporté par un licenciement injuste,’ [‘the father of the family, who possessed authority and dignity, has it all taken away by an unfair dismissal’], they comment. Amplifying this, in a parallel narrative the female singer Chaka leaves her husband Melé, aiming to make her own living in the nearby town.

With *Death in Timbuktu* mobilizing so many of the tropes of the western, we might expect this interlude film to invert the main film’s images of dominant women and dominated men outlined above. At first viewing, it is the case that *Death in Timbuktu* depicts women and children as defenceless bystanders and victims, and that the cowboys rampage violently through the streets performing, or mimicking, the western’s essentialised masculinities through an emphasis on phallic weaponry, the trope of the one against the many, mastery of landscape and nature, and a binary narrative of good against evil. However, as the narrative unfolds no masculine model of successful heroism emerges. The international cowboy gang lacks competency and cunning, failing to master both the environment and their weaponry, and acting with no stable rationale. And although for a while Danny Glover’s character is seen looking down on others from high buildings, largely silent and stealthy, at one with nature, and thus seemingly takes up a position of mastery in the narrative, there is a telling ambivalence around the character. For Glover’s cowboy singularly fails to prevent the slaughter in the village, and

the ending of *Death in Timbuktu* is an unfinished beginning, with a shoot-out in the streets and more indiscriminate killing heralded. Thus, Glover's highly serious classical western *modus operandi* is unequal to the comic incoherence of the multi-national cowboy gang's praxis. Significantly, when the execution of the single school teacher goes wrong, turning the trimming of excess into a hyperbolic double murder, it is not a reaction of horror but of profound amusement that Sissako shows playing across the African television audience's faces. Strikingly, they identify not with the victims of the murder, but with the amusement of the perpetrators. They thus identify not with Glover's 'good' masculinity of the cowboy saviour, but with the playful, incompetent, comically 'bad' masculinity of the cowboy 'baddies'.

From this scenario of masculine identities screened as shortcomings and women's roles ambivalently portrayed as structurally weak but rhetorically strong, two divergent interpretations are possible. Firstly, this scenario could illustrate the barrister's supposition that importing western culture to Africa leads to 'la dégénération totale en fait des fondements qu'ont représentées les valeurs ordinales en fait [sic] de nos sociétés' ['the total degeneration in fact of the foundations represented by the cardinal values in fact [sic] of our societies']. Read in this way, these words could be understood as an elegy to a lost past of authentic, clearly delineated, stable values. However, given the extent to which the film overall subverts the idea of stable, authentic identities through its interrogation of film genre coordinates, this does not seem a persuasive reading. The second possibility is that this depiction of the failure of essentialised gender categories to produce platforms for change links back to some of the initial shots of *Death in Timbuktu*, such as that of the boy's bicycle emblazoned with 'Rocket 12' and 'Rambo' stickers lying abandoned on the street. It is striking how the camera pauses and meditates for a moment on this image in particular, thereby foregrounding not only the saturation of rural Africa with Western macho fictions of manhood but also the hopelessness of such models, reduced to the dimensions of children's toys lying in a dusty street which will imminently become a bloodbath. Foregrounding the failure of generic gender identities in this way excludes a return to them as an answer to the social issues entangled with gendered forms of power seen discussed in the courtroom. Just as in the film overall, Sissako's intercalated western momentarily adopts fragments of essentialized identity – whether genre film or its gender coordinates – and then discards these. The appeal of the essential is thus acknowledged but rejected as a solution, through this depiction of the multi-layered reality of transnational vectors of power in the globalized present.

In place of essentialisms, a significant emphasis on relation and transaction is raised by the end of the film. *Bamako* foregrounds the power of African speech acts against the West, but does so

in a film where the television projects a broken mimicry of Western narratives of mastery into the African family, and where this mimicry is seen to disempower rather than emancipate. The film's final sequences show pre-burial prayers over the dead body of the man whom the audience has watched suffering on his bed bordering the courtyard throughout the narrative. As the body is removed from the courtyard, the camera pauses on this image in a high angle shot: the lines of drying washing delineate and divide the screen but also connect its different points as the eye travels up and down their length, and they come into tremulous, momentary contact, shuddering slightly in the wind. The audience's eyes travel up, down and across the screen to follow and try to 'read' these lines in conventional ways, but find that there is no evident beginning nor end, and instead a series of temporary juxtapositions and contacts. This image so close to the end of the film is a powerful visual metaphor, echoing what has been shown through the film's strategic occupation and abandonment of genre and gender markers.

Historically, hierarchies of cultural status structure the transnational movements of genre products across place and time (Bassnett 2006: 90). Postcolonial filmmakers necessarily operate within such structures of exchange and appropriation. Strategically adopting and discarding essentialised elements of genre and gender allows filmmakers such as Bekolo and Sissako to lay bare the workings of those hierarchies even though they remain enmeshed within them. The dynamic hybridisations of gender and genre in *Les Saignantes*, and inclusion of the western film-within-a-film as well as multiple fragmentary genre allusions in *Bamako*, alongside both films' consistent questioning of the meaning of gender identities, places the performance and appropriation of genre, its modes of recognition, and its implications for the conceptualisation of identity, firmly to the fore. The films do this alongside an interrogation of the reproduction of dominant hierarchies of cultural identity and exchange, innovatively figuring film aesthetics as palimpsestic by engaging with the coordinates of aesthetic representation expressed through presentations of gender and its interconnections with the coordinates of film genre.

### **A theoretical nexus? – gender, genre, essentialism, mimesis**

The preceding close analysis of *Les Saignantes* and *Bamako* highlights the importance of their explorations of aesthetic representation, definitional categories and of essentialist constructions of meaning to the films' interactions with genre characteristics. It also highlights the extent to which presentations of gender, both male and female, are key to the interrogations of genre; but also to wider conceptions of subjectivity, essentialism and representation. The following section will

explore the relevance to a fuller understanding of the significance of Bekolo and Sissako's inflections of film genre of key theoretical frames that foreground re-articulations of essentialism and mimetic representation in connection with gender.

The American scholar Ken Harrow has argued that the innovative aesthetics instanced by films such as *Les Saignantes* and *Bamako* is characteristic of a postmodern wave in African film that reacts to outmoded, politically didactic modes of cinematic address, which he associates especially with the work of Ousmane Sembene (Harrow 1995). David Murphy (Murphy 2000) has shown how this interpretation of African film simplifies aesthetic genealogies and misrepresents Sembene's work, and below I will explore new ways to extend the theorisation of film genre's transnational signification, ways which also challenge Harrow's fetishisation of the hybrid and the indeterminate in African film. Underpinning my exploration is a concern that the coincidence of interests in identity formation between film genre studies, postcolonial theory, gender studies has been insufficiently mobilised in accounts of genre in non-Western film.

In film genre studies, identity is a central concern due to the fundamental difficulty of establishing with stability what film genre *is* as an object of study. Over the past few decades, following the deconstructionist turn in cultural studies, critical consensus has tended to move away from essentialist conceptions of genre previously in vogue; it has converged instead on more relational definitions. Such relational definitions conceptualise genre identities, often perceived by audiences as entities delineated by inherent defining traits, as defined instead by their relation and difference from other genres. In this view, it is these relations of similarity and difference, always themselves on the move, that constitute the borders of individual genre types for directors, marketing executives and for audiences; and these borders are conceptualised as porous sites of recognition rather than fixed boundaries. A key paradigm for this contemporary approach to film genre studies has thus been that of relation and difference (Bordwell and Thompson 2000; Neale 2000; Stam 2000); emphasis has been placed in understanding dynamically how one genre is differentiated and marked off from another, and establishing what makes one genre recognisable as different from another. Moving beyond the idea of inherent genre traits as distinctive, film genre studies has become a study of patterns of echo and repetition. Genre is thus conceptualised as a dynamic principle or structure generated by and within national and transnational cultural flows.

When genre is conceptualised in this way, it is easy to see how central concerns in film genre studies coincide with key concepts in gender theory and postcolonial theory. The important strand of

thought around category and identity that has long been central to gender studies seems to me to be particularly helpful for expanding understandings of the kinds of interplay between genre, gender, representation and resistance that are evident in the films studies in this article. In this regard, it is the notion of gender identity as performance, construction and perception which emerges across the works of the key theorists Laura Mulvey, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler (Mulvey, 1975; Irigaray 1985; Butler 1990) that I believe to be particularly helpful to the analysis. Concomitantly, postcolonial thought from Fanon and Césaire onwards has been particularly interested in the politics of the social constructions of identity by dominant discourses (Fanon 1952, Césaire 1955). Later strands of postcolonial theory have examined how, as political entities, dominated identities and the definitional categories that support them can be resisted, and in Homi Bhabha's work in particular, the notion of mimicry as subversion or resistance is clearly crystallised (Bhabha 1984). Aside from Bhabha's work, other approaches have co-opted potentially reactionary essentialist discourses around identity and authenticity, and have subverted these for emancipatory purposes; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's much cited work on strategic essentialism in the struggle for political rights is particularly influential here (Spivak 1993). In what follows I want to consider briefly how working with the relational definition of genre in light of notions of resistant essentialisms, gender and mimicry can advance understanding of the kinds of questioning of gender and genre as interrogations of category and identity that I have outlined at work in *Les Saignantes* and *Bamako*. Although there is a risk of over-complication of the theoretical frame of this article, and over-simplification of complex aspects of gender theory and postcolonial theory in such a brief overview, I believe nonetheless that it is important to show how dialogue between these theoretical approaches can advance our understanding of the inflections of film genre in postcolonial contexts beyond the limited frameworks of hybridity and postmodern play.

In Luce Irigaray's notion of mimicry, in order to resist hegemonic but rejected discourse, the subject may take up the rejected discourse and reproduce it faultily, for example through parody, hyperbole, irony. To do so provides a double-edged tool for resistance: for it signals both the power of the dominant discourse, but also a resistance to absorption by the dominant:

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one 'path', the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. [...] To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it (Irigaray 1985: 76).



Identifying how Irigaray's work co-opts mimesis as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance Rey Chow comments, 'This potential enables mimesis to take on the value of a type of behaviour — a camouflage conformism — which, even if it does not exactly set women free, allows them (to imagine) a utopian space/time of alterity from within the bounds of patriarchal subordination' (Chow 2012, online). Postcolonial theory, in parallel with Irigaray, contemplates the power of mimicry. This consonance is clear in the work that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has undertaken theorising identity and resistance. Spivak's work extends the idea of mimicry beyond individual acts of resistance through role play, to notions of collective resistance. In Spivak's work in this area, rejected essential categories that constrain individual identities are posited as identities that can be mobilised at the group level for political leverage, but must be mobilised dynamically and in a context-limited way to avoid the danger of fetishisation:

The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like woman or worker or the name of a nation is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized [...] the critique of the "fetish" seems that to remind oneself of it is counterproductive. Otherwise the strategy freezes into something like what you call an essentialist position, when the situation that calls forth the strategy is seemingly resolved (Spivak 1993: 3-4).

As many critics have noted, Irigaray and Spivak's concepts are not without contradictions. The idea that essentialism can be first espoused and then abandoned is problematic: can an essentialism that founds itself on a tactical rehearsal of the appearance of essentialism either truly inhabit or truly interrogate the problematic contours of essentialist thought? Yet it can be argued that the aspects of Irigaray's writing that seem closest to suggesting essentialist gender identities could be read instead as sites strategically mimicking elements of the phallogocentric (Xu 1995). A common thread of convergence in Irigaray and Spivak's work is the linking of subversions of mimesis to resistant essentialisms, strategies through which the individual and group consciously represent themselves as stable, essential entities in order radically to disrupt the status quo and its conceptual foundations. This is of real significance to African film in particular, and to transnational film in general. It is helpful here to return to the idea that racism relies on the principle of 'continuous mimetic repression', an organised control of mimesis that becomes a key principle 'essential to modern civilisation's cultural apparatus' (Taussig 1993: 68). For it is not only that essentialism is problematically constitutive of the founding binaries of colonial thought; it is also that essentialism allies itself with a principle of 'continuous mimetic repression', through which mimesis is both the repressed and a fetish in colonialism, as instanced in the gamut of acts of mimicry that characterised colonial ideology and

practice (Huggan 1997-8: 95) alongside the marginalisation of the highly mimetic Europeanised, assimilated, ‘good’ colonial subject.

In this context, there is a central question key to my analysis, one that Michael Taussig poses accurately: can the mimetic faculty ‘escape this fate of being used against itself [...], [could it] be used against being used against itself?’ (Taussig 1993: 68). The ideas of strategic essentialism and strategic mimicry raised above provide a new route in to an answer. They allow us to consider how the mobilisation and interrogation of genre and gender that we have seen in *Les Saignantes* and *Bamako* is part of a wider strategy of resistant essentialism in postcolonial cultural production, one which addresses how postcolonial, transnational cultures are marked by the depredations of essentialism and of the continuous mimetic repression which Taussig identifies. *Bamako* and *Les Saignantes*’ narratives of failed male dominance alongside those of dominant but not hegemonic performances of the female rehearse a series of strategic, temporary occupations of essentialized gender positions as well as their abandonment and failure. This occupation and abandonment is potentially emancipatory, even parodic (Huggan 1997-8: 96). Its value is extended in both films by the strategic, temporary performances of aesthetic genre markers which are also multiply adapted, abandoned, and re-formed. *Les Saignantes* screens fragmented, prosthetic, multifaceted performances of a constellation of female identity markers, which the film juxtaposes with hyper-stable markers of the male; *Bamako* shows all models of manhood as failed, but does not counteract these with ultimately successful models of the female. In *Les Saignantes*, the aesthetic markers of the genres that the film inflects – horror and sci-fi – have their solidity disrupted, questioned and deformed, while *Bamako* weaves a film from many partial genre references as well as the activation of the western genre very specifically for metaphorical, rather than mimetic, value. To my mind, while this could, following Harrow, be read as a form of post-modern play that sideswipes at the construction of any type of overarching metanarrative, *Bamako* and *Les Saignantes*’ overt political engagement suggests that here is more to their play with mimesis and its formal procedures than this.

*Bamako* and *Les Saignantes*’ work with genre and gender can be read as insisting on the historical, contingent nature of identity, representation and interpretation. Within the two films we can perceive a situation where the postcolonial space screens back to the former centres of power, bringing to the fore peripheral genres such as the western, the horror movie, pornography, the TV court room drama, and crime narratives. These are genres which are low status – except perhaps when cited ironically - within European independent cinema, the cultural ‘envelope’ which the films inhabit as they make their way on the Western film circuit; but often high status within West African

contexts, because of their links with popular culture associated with social success. In *Bamako*, there is something elegiac about the film's foregrounding of the power of African speech acts against the West in a film where the television projects a broken mimicry of western narratives of mastery into the African family, and where this mimicry is seen to disempower rather than emancipate. In *Les Saignantes*, the billboard signage in a European language raises the constant spectre of what is not possible, and what cannot be said, in global capitalism's terrible spaces; this forcefully uncovers the geo-political foundations of the limits to representation.

## Conclusion

The rearticulation of film genres through gender markers in *Les Saignantes* and *Bamako* creates narratives that profoundly interrogate notions of category, identity, and representation. These narratives question the meaning of cultural identity in current eras of globalised, highly unequal cultural shift, exchange, and adaptation. Mobilising concepts of strategic essentialism and mimicry as theoretical frames for understanding the way that film genres are reconfigured across cultural contexts, this article's enquiry into the presentation of genre in two specific films has outlined a template for the analysis of gender and genre that allows new insights about film genre and cultural exchange in African film to be developed. Such insights are important not only for our understanding of the meanings and functions of African films, but also for our understanding of the cultural processes that inform the transnational dynamics of representation at local and global levels. Contemporary non-Western films are characterised by their presence in networks of cultural exchange and borrowing that are framed by local and global patterns of cultural combination, domination and resistance. This is an area of enquiry that has not yet been theorised through the lens of questions of identity, mimesis and essentialism, despite the contemporary widespread turn towards a transnational emphasis in film studies and cultural studies. The processes of adaptation and rearticulation in the two films examined in this article instance a wider cultural phenomenon of appropriation as a form of active participation in global media flows (Krings 2015: 269). Properly understanding the dynamics of genre shifts within such global media flows requires a focus on the locally mediated meanings of cultural products that is integrated with wider theorisations of cultural encounter and aesthetic resistance. This means examining how individual cultural products, as well as collectives of cultural flow, dynamically mimic, resist, re-present and appropriate forms, styles and contents that originated elsewhere. Rethinking the nature of African directors' encounters with film genre through the frame of resistant essentialisms opens up new perspectives for understanding the dynamics of exchange between Western and non-Western film genres as a politics of forms.

Further, it allows scholars to enrich understandings of the transnational relationships between cultural forms and strategies of cultural resistance.

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### **Filmography**

- Bamako* dir. Abderrahmane Sissako. Archipel 33, Chinguitty Films, Mali Images 2006. Mali/USA/France. Colour. 115 mins.
- Les Saignantes/The Bloodettes* dir. Jean-Pierre Bekolo. Quartier Mozart Films 2005. Cameroon. Colour. 92 mins.