

The Challenges of Aesthetic Populism: An Interview with Jean-Pierre Bekolo

Akin Adesokan
Indiana University

In the early 1990s, a young Cameroonian director, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, stormed the annals of African filmmaking with a stylish urban comedy, *Quartier Mozart*. This fast-paced story about sexual politics in a Yaoundé neighborhood was edited on the template of the musical video, a genre in which Bekolo had worked briefly before turning to filmmaking. *Quartier Mozart* was widely praised for its iconoclastic attitude, considered refreshing in a filmmaking tradition which had formalized cultural identity and the politics of self-representation into aesthetic concerns. The form of Bekolo's work encouraged critics to compare him to Senegalese Djibril Diop Mambety (d. 1998), another filmmaker who, twenty-years earlier, had similarly redefined African cinema with his first work, the magnificent *Touki-Bouki* (1973). The film was so reflexive in its awareness of contemporary cinema that comparisons with the style of black American director Spike Lee became just as relevant. Such critical comments did not produce an "anxiety of influence" in the young director, who openly and repeatedly declared his interest in the works of Mambety, about whom he, Bekolo, shot a documentary film, *Grandmother's Grammar*, in 1996.

Four years after *Quartier Mozart*, Bekolo produced and directed *Aristotle's Plot* (1996), his commissioned entry in a series sponsored by the British Film Institute to mark the centenary of cinema. Other directors in the series included Stephen Frears, Bernardo Bertolucci, Martin Scorsese, and Jean-Luc Godard. In this film, Bekolo uses the genre of action film to question the rationale of *mimesis*, the Aristotelian plot of the title, which has overdetermined the practice of storytelling, in Hollywood and elsewhere. The confident mix of aesthetic populism and critical, even *auterish*, staging of conceptual issues in African *and* contemporary filmmaking has become Bekolo's style. For him, a film has to entertain in the traditional sense, but without sacrificing an awareness of its place within a vast, diverse but persistent effort to form and transform the practice of African filmmaking. This is a complex but productive intellectual position within an artistic tradition noted for its divisions, factions, and labels.¹ The commitment is pursued further in *Les*

¹ Among such labels are "cinema de calebasse" or "cinema a là National Geographic," in which "the beautiful images serve to fix Africans as exotic savages" (Diawara 394);

Saignantes (2005), a beautifully photographed film about two *femme fatales* who set out to rid their country of its corrupt and sexually obsessed male politicians. It is a hybrid sci-fi-action-horror film set in the year 2025, and again, the director uses the opportunity to discursively explore the forms of cinema and of African politics. Bekolo's other directorial credits include *Boyo* (1988), *Un pauvre blanc* (1989), and *Mohawk People* (1990). This interview was conducted on April 29, 2006, in New York City.

Adesokan: Let's start with your new film, *Les Saignantes*. It is a funny film, I think, especially if you think back to those scenes about eating the SIG's body, with the mortician mistaking the corpse's foot for his own beer bottle. There are many more of that kind of stylish touch in the film, so the question is this: What accounts for the conception of the *mise-en-scène*? Why did you choose to shoot the entire film under the cover of darkness, and make women the protagonists?

Bekolo: Right, let me begin with the fact that I gave women a central role in the film. I had the idea that if I focused on women, I would really touch on very sensitive issues in society. I was trying to make a film about Cameroon, and so it was important to bring up the issue of women's relationship with men in power. That is a sensitive issue, and it would seem more interesting than if the central characters were to be boys. Also, there is a connection between the idea of human corruption and girls, because at an early age they have the experience—earlier than boys—of deciding that, although I don't love this person, he has something that I want, and I can sleep with him and get what I want. They feel this at an early age: sometimes thirteen, sometimes sixteen. They are under the pressures of competition; they have to be socially competitive. So, for me it was important to deal with corruption from that angle. Secondly, I would say that girls are at the very heart of the dynamics of what's going on in society. That is to say that, when people are looking for political positions, the first thing they do is look for girls. It is like a way of securing power, I think.

As for the idea of making the film at night, it's mainly like we're in a tunnel, and one day there will be light. There will be a new dawn. Right now, things are not positive, and I think that if you look at the film closely, it's like the girls are trying to get out of hell. The scenario is that things are getting worse, the girls are pushed by events, and the hope is that eventually they will take control of the situation. That is when they resolve to get on with the wake or the funeral. That's why the film is structured like that. I didn't want to pass judgment on the girls, to say that what they do is good or bad, because the context is what matters. Also, I didn't want the film to send a negative message to people who don't have

“cinema d'auteur” versus “cinema of entertainment” (Ngangura Mweze 61); and “old school” versus “new school” (Akudinobi 93).

a choice. I wanted the film to be more of a relief. Rather than blaming them, I wanted to show how they could get ahead. Because sometimes when you use a formulaic structure, it often comes out with the opposite effect of what you intended.

A: I'm also interested in this question of an open-ended structure. For instance, the film asks a series of rhetorical questions about formula, about how to make a horror film, how to film a love story, and so on. My point about this is that, in spite of that template of questioning, this is also a film that's close to sci-fi, with a futuristic setting. There's a poster of the film *Scream in Chou-Chou's* (one of the two girls) bedroom, for example. So, what's your view of these standardized genres which you question but also use, especially in the context of contemporary global cinema?

B: I would say that, first of all, genre films are part of our culture, as Africans. There's no doubt about that. But the thing is always not just to use them, but to question them in relation to the choices we have to make in the context of African cultures. It's a question of how to appropriate the cinema that's out there, that we're watching like everybody else. It's not just about following what's being done like sheep, because I think it's all about reaffirming and realizing our own identities. The point is that one can get alienated very easily, because the images out there are powerful and are being constantly driven and distributed. So we have to raise these questions: why am I using the horror film style? Why am I using the sci-fi style? It doesn't mean that I shouldn't do it, just to prove that other people prefer to take short-cuts, and I don't want to join the bandwagon. The typical thing is to say if you use any of the genres, then you have moved African cinema to the next level. But I don't think there's any formula about it, except if we really have reflection about it, and wonder why one should make a sci-fi film. For me, the more important question is that every time you talk about Africa you never talk about the future.

A: Yes, we're obsessed with the past, and rightly so, I think . . .

B: Yes, we always talk about the past. So, by setting the film in 2025, it is about creating meaning in relation to the future, not just for entertainment purposes. For instance, one of the rhetorical questions in the film is, *How can you make a detective film in a country where you can't investigate?* It's true that sometimes things come across as caricatures, like when I see an African film where the investigation proceeds just like in an American film. How can you make that kind of film in a situation when information is held back by government officials? The point then becomes to use the genre to raise questions about what concerns us, and it doesn't really matter whether it's science fiction, or a horror film, or a detective story. It's really about our society and where it's going. One has to be critical about that society while using those genres, so it doesn't mean that we can't make a film in those genres. Because, at the end of the day, I'm

making the film, but I don't want to be going through the reasoning of why while I'm making a film.

A: Do you think that having to deal with all these socio-political issues at the same time that you are raising these artistic issues leads to the work becoming aestheticized? The questions about genres are presented in an aesthetic sense, and since your work stands at the edge of aesthetic issues, it's very fraught, as anyone who makes art in a troubled society knows. How do you deal with this?

B: I do think that it will take time before the kind of cinema that I envision for Africa really kicks in. But if we don't try to do it . . . It's like, let's say you have a real film—normal, story-driven, for the audience and all that—and you put all these messages in it. It becomes a problem because, in my opinion, in that cinema the institution is not there yet. So, if we sort of make it look clean, it's as if you've found the final form. And I really don't think the whole commercial game is relevant because it is consumption like everyone else's, the idea that you eat, drink and you throw it away. That's not what I'm doing or what I'm interested in doing. I think people need to share all that progress and research so that one day we'll have an African cinema with its own diverse styles, and which is competitive with the rest of world cinema.

A: Which brings me to the next question. Last night at the question-and-answer session, when someone asked you a question about the distribution and whether you've been able to make some money, you said you'd had two shows, opening for two weeks in Cameroon. And then you said, well, it didn't really matter because the funding was from a grant. Yet when you look at what's happening in a place like Nigeria, where the cinema is commercial and doesn't address the aesthetic issues that you're raising, one sees a paradox because your work is actually close to those in Nigeria in terms of what one may call aesthetic populism. Let me give an example: two years ago, Tunde Kelani's *Campus Queen* was screened here in New York City, at the same film festival, and in all sorts of ways you're both dealing with the same questions. That is a tradition that's commercial, not always aesthetically challenging in the sense that we've been talking about, questioning genres, etc., but the onus is on you to respond to the paradox as it affects your work.

B: I would say I'm working in two directions. My films are very popular, and when we showed *Les Saignantes* in Cameroon, everybody liked it because they knew what it was about; these big government officials trying to sleep with the girls and all the corruption going on. This is something that everybody knows about, so it's a popular theme. I'd just decided to treat it in a way that finds a form, not necessarily a new one, but one that is different from what we are familiar with. Also, I think that generally on the continent, people aren't really bothered with form. They

will watch anything; the film may not be well-edited, it might be too long or too short, it doesn't really matter. So, it means that you can also serve them something in a different form, something "elitist" in terms of aesthetics, and you will get them to watch it. I don't think we have to only serve up the lowest common denominator American style commercial films. So, I think that avant-garde works have their place since people are not really committed to any particular form. Actually, it's those who are really well-educated who tend to be formatted, which is really to say close-minded, but then others will watch anything. I think there are a lot of similarities with Nigerian cinema, where you find many amateur styles. That might look like the style of *Les Saignantes*, because it doesn't look like anything you've seen before. Maybe it's done more consciously, but the audience will decide because the format is open. That's one thing; the other thing is, even if people felt that they couldn't follow a film very well, they got the big picture; because there were several messages underneath, and they would try to watch it again. It doesn't mean that they didn't like the film. I think that, in that sense, it's like forcing upon the masses the kind of culture that in the West is often limited to sophisticated audiences. That's very important and it is possible to do this in a positive sense in Africa, and especially in a country like Cameroon.

Now when you mention the success of Nigerian films, I do think that the formula for success is to address what's important to people, and it's true that in Western Africa and in Southern Africa, we tend to make films about subjects that people don't care about very much. They talk about Darfur in the West and then that becomes important, but it doesn't mean that someone sitting down at the dinner table in Lagos is really moved by that issue. I would say we have a lot of themes like that, where we're being manipulated into following certain themes, while ignoring the things that people really care about. Even if I'm a little bit serious about not being concerned with making money for now, in the end I do care about that too, and would want to see that happen without changing form or without having to concentrate on issues that are irrelevant to me. We have to develop our institutions by working on several fronts, not just pushing one thing, and leaving others behind. It takes a while for that to happen, and there's no guarantee that it will happen; but the idea is to really push it with all the elements so that the standard we set may ensure that African cinema comes into its own.

A: The next question is about *Aristotle's Plot*. It's now been ten years since that film came out, and in it you raise important questions about the direction and content of filmmaking in Africa, and especially about the relevance of mimesis and conventional storytelling. So, what's your assessment of the field of filmmaking in Africa, after this work?

B: Ten years later. Wow, time goes by quickly! What I would like to say is that nothing has changed and, if anything, things have gotten worse. I'm sitting on this commission where we read scripts, and I wonder what's

going on. It's like we work without memory. I like that film *Memento* a lot, because it's about how one can live without memory. Someone who has this disease whereby he cannot recall many things because his memory will stop at one thing. Then he has to seek revenge on someone who kills his girlfriend. The film shows the danger faced by someone who has no memory. And I have the feeling that in African cinema it's as if we have no memory. So we always have to start again at point-zero. There's not been much evolution in the last ten years. I don't know if that's the case in other fields too, but in cinema we really feel that things are stagnant. And as I said, I'm on this commission . . .

A: That's in France, by the way?

B: It's Francophone, and we read the scripts that people send . . .

A: But it's based in Paris.

B: Yes. What's shocking is—what I really can't stand is—to see someone making a sub-*Touki-Bouki* or sub-*Yeeleen* film; I feel like we're going backwards. I mean, these are masterpieces in African cinema, and it doesn't make sense for a new film to go below that level. Do something else, but don't destroy this. But still, you're amazed at how many projects like that there are right now. I see a situation whereby anything that is great in Africa could also be erased very quickly. By the way, this is not a problem that is only specific to Africa: I should admit this. I remember when I watched this film here (in the US) called *Friday*, starring this guy who was in *Boyz 'n' the Hood* . . . I mean the one who's also a rapper . . .

A: Oh, Ice Cube.

B: Yes, thank you. That's the guy.

A: But *Friday* is not new . . .

B: No, I mean *Barbershop*! That's it. I watched it and was really shocked. I said, how can black cinema still be at this level when they had someone like Spike Lee ten, twenty years ago? So that's the kind of regression I'm talking about. Which you don't see a lot in Western cinema. Anyway, I would just say that I'm really wondering whether that kind of attitude is unconscious, or whether there's a conscious manipulation going on. I really don't know. Maybe this question of memory in cinema is very important and has to be worked on. We still don't seriously consider the fundamental question of how we are telling stories, for whom we are making films. Everybody follows the latest trend, but the latest trend is always a manipulation. Take the film *Lumumba*, for example. That film set the standard for a lot of so-called African filmmakers. Or, for example,

the film he makes about Rwanda, *Sometimes in April*. For me, at the same time, I feel that this is not the way to go.

A: You mean the Raoul Peck route? In what sense?

B: Yes, in the sense of content. He's a great filmmaker, for sure, there's no doubt about it. He makes really great films. But the subject is what the West wants to see. And the whole idea is really trying to see the direction that things will go, despite all the noise. Because it's all noise. For me, what really matters is memory, and not just with regard to films. The main point is to keep in mind the question of direction for Africa. That's one of the hardest things, and it also applies to film because a film cannot work outside of this broad context in which Africa is evolving. And when you look around African countries right now, we really feel like we're back to liberation movements all over again. So, you wonder, is it so difficult to be liberated? Did we do something wrong? It makes you go back and look. I would like to add that cinema is not alone in posing this question.

A: What you said about Peck, I would like to push it a little. First, I haven't seen *Sometimes in April*, although I know it was an HBO (Home Box Office) production, and it came out about the same time as *Hotel Rwanda*. But I don't think it has received the same kind of attention as *Hotel Rwanda*, which is an American (Hollywood) film. Secondly, the film about Lumumba, I'm not sure that that's something that the West is interested in as such. He based the film on his documentary, *Death of a Prophet*, which was made in the early 1990s, when Zaire was not a burning issue. I can understand that a film about what happened in Rwanda can feed into all sorts of notions about how the world looks at Africa, but can that be said about the Lumumba film? If I understand you correctly, you seem to be saying that he's a good filmmaker, but that his choice of subject matter is driven by what's in fashion.

B: Actually, that one you got wrong. Because when someone is successful, which happens to Raoul, everybody tries to follow that route. But the risk is that if something is successful because it follows the standard set by Raoul, we merely duplicate something that's small and make it bigger. In terms of the content of *Lumumba*, let me go back to that. Just one thing about that film: who decides to kill Lumumba? The CIA. How big is the CIA in the film? So, who's the bad guy? Mobutu. Why would Mobutu be the bad guy when it is the CIA that commits the crime? I would say that in the way we are telling our stories we need to take into account this kind of opportunistic survival strategy, and the question of compromise. Whatever. Historically, it's funny how those films are wrapped up in the end. It's always us against ourselves doing things to ourselves. If you look at South Africa, it's the same thing. Winnie Mandela is responsible for killing one person, maybe two, maybe three. De Klerk is responsible for killing thousands, and he got the Nobel

Prize. Pik Botha, nothing happened to him. He got away. But who's being harassed for killing one or two people? She's the devil, and these other killers are out there. That's strange, how we end up viewing ourselves under the prism of what the West would like to see. Again, I would like to take Zimbabwe as an example. In 1981 Mugabe signed what they call the Lancaster House agreement, whereby for fifteen years nothing negative would happen to British interests in the country. And the British were very happy. They won the war, and that's what kept Mugabe in power. The British liked him. But against whom? His people. The minute he reverses it, he becomes evil. At some point we have to face these issues, although it's not about films at all.

A: Yes, but these are issues of life and death, issues to make films about.

B: So, I would say, what are we promoting? Are we just going to focus on these guys who are depicted as evil while those who we should hold responsible are out there, free, with no questions to answer? I think it's really unfair. I always think, at the end of the day, everybody is beating up on Africa, everybody is squashing it, stepping on it to get wherever. And we have to applaud and say that this is good? But it's not just about the guy, because Raoul is a great filmmaker. I'm saying it's the system which creates these tendencies with specific agenda. So, why am I making the kind of film I'm known for making? To be honest, first of all, I'm not serving anything. There's the question of self-expression, to say that we're out there, that we exist. And we're doing things the way we feel is right for us. I'm not there to be manipulated. Even the story itself, I do think the story has to be picked carefully and manipulated carefully, so we just don't serve a consensus. That's why I'm careful about the kind of story I choose. They say it's just a story. One thing that's clear is: look at the way the Western world has always played with the idea of good and bad. See how many times they shift on an issue? Look at the case of Afghanistan. The guys who used to be good are bad now. You see how stories are being created. To go back to *Aristotle's Plot*, based on the story's structure. That structure also affects the action when people see the world as cut-and-dry. Good and bad. So we say, let's look at it this way, maybe the good and the bad are there together, that the Devil is the other side of God. For me, the structure of the story also determines how the story is understood. That's Western storytelling, and it has penetrated into the future of our storytelling. Just this morning I was reading something about Darfur. The janjaweed are the bad guys, and those in the South are victims, which I think is true in a sense. But these are narrative styles that don't take a subtle approach.

A: Yes, I agree with this critique. But it's also the argument that people like Charles Taylor (former Liberian president) and Mugabe will use. So, how does an intellectual who wishes to escape Western manipulation and

also attack murderous African dictators address it? How do you keep yourself out of Mugabe's camp?

B: But the problem arises when it's a case of, You're for Mugabe. Again, how do we tell the story differently? The challenge is to create a new language, a new semantic actually, to talk about these things. The moment we create a new semantic, we will be able to speak properly. Right now, we can't speak. Let's say that a bad writer, someone who really can't write, has to make a living by writing about Darfur. He will use the formula just because he can't write, and the formula will polarize the story, and those who read will conclude that this is what's going on. In the end, he creates even more harm. In our ethnic group in Cameroon . . .

A: Which ethnic group is that?

B: Bechi. In our culture, the guy who's gifted at speaking is the one who represents others when there's conflict. This is because the way he structures things allows several perspectives, the point of contention of people who are at each other's throat, to be seen. That's his function.

A: What is this mediator called? Is there a specific name for this figure? Something like the *okyeame* among the Akan in Ghana?

B: There's a name but I can't recall it. But he's the one who holds the stick of speech, in a sense. That's his gift, and it's mainly used for conflict resolution. So, it's how you see the whole idea of creative talent, which is like writing, and the purpose is for conflict resolution. The way you put the story is how we're going to approach it if a problem arises. And that's why, when you watch CNN, there is a war on terror and there is no other way of looking at it. This kind of perspective is affecting storytelling. For me, that's one of the things you pay attention to. When you watch a film and it's entertaining, that's fine on a level. But there's more, and that is why, for example, I've been careful about making a film around racial issues. These are things that we need to look at carefully because they are very sensitive.

A: There's a question I've always wanted to ask you. At some point in an interview, I think it's in Nwachukwu Ukadike's book, *Questioning African Cinema*, you did say that both Souleymane Cissé and Ousmane Sembène refused to let you use clips from their films when making *Aristotle's Plot*.² But when I look at the film, it isn't a documentary, in the

² “[W]hile I was doing *Aristotle's Plot*, I wanted clips from Ousmane Sembène's films. He wrote to me to say that not one piece of his movie would ever be cut off...Souleymane Cissé also said he would never give me a clip of his film . . .” (Ukadike 224).

sense that clips and newsreels would be useful. So in what sense would you have used clips from those directors?

B: Well, it's more complicated than that. It was a commissioned film, and in the commission they wanted us to introduce the works of certain filmmakers, and I also wanted to introduce Djibril Mambety, Lionel Ngakane, and so on. It was the same idea. That was how it was set up. But we had to change the format because we couldn't get that cooperation.

A: During the Q and A, you also said that the Meuvougou, the women's group which is used in the film, was suppressed by the church in Cameroon in 1930 . . .

B: I don't know exactly when . . .

A: But historically, they were driven underground, and you said jokingly that maybe this was a way of bringing them back. My question is, since the question of the occult is very complicated in Africa, and dreaded cultic societies tend to be drafted for political ends, what is at stake when powerful but marginalized social groups are used in a creative manner as in the film?

B: One thing is that such forces could be positive and they could be negative. But my idea was that maybe our solution lies in a group like Meuvougou. I don't know. In Cameroon, the solution to all the problems seems to be the World Bank. All these NGOs just come, you don't know what they are or who's behind them, but they want to solve our problems. And things are getting worse. So we need to look at things differently, maybe someone starting up and saying it differently. I'm very ignorant about all these occult powers, but I'm thinking: How can we surrender all that we have while someone, the Minister of State, is using it for his modern position? He has to use it as magic, but for a ministerial position. That means he doesn't really believe in the magic, but in the position that it gives him. My point is that all these concepts are coming from outside, and we don't even question them. You look at the World Bank. What's there, besides money? And we know the logic of money. They want their money back, and even more, with interest. And you hear everyone in Cameroon saying "*point d'achèvement*." It's like everybody is waiting for instructions from the World Bank, to tell us whether we've reached "*point d'achèvement*" or not. We've surrendered our future to this kind of logic, and it's worse than alienation. I'm just suggesting that maybe there is stuff we need to be looking at, even beyond mystical forms like Meuvougou, even in normal, everyday structures. That's what I'm after, because it looks illogical, but there's a logic to it. These are people who've hijacked power for themselves, and so I have to separate myself from them, because they try to make it seem as if we're doing the same thing. It's like those wars of liberation back in the sixties. Those who really fought didn't

get anywhere, so there were the puppets who would manipulate everything.

A: Watching your films, I am constantly reminded of the writings of Achille Mbembe. It's not so much that you film to validate the things he writes about, but that in a sense both your works are complementary. Do you agree that there is a connection between his work and what you are trying to do?

B: Yes, his work is really important. Very sharp and punchy. He's raising questions, very relevant questions about what's going on. I've met him a couple of times. But I would add that, lately, I've been having a feeling that he's getting caught up in the intellectual games, always raising new questions, and assuming that old questions are past because he wants to move on. The fact is that we could be stuck on a question for the next thirty years. The fact that you have new questions does not mean that we have to move on. I think he's sort of lost touch because he doesn't go back to the country very often. I remember telling him about this, because I see Cameroon as a place where, although people are walking, it is as if they are dead. But those are only my sentiments, and Achille's work is very important.

Works Cited

- Akudinobi, Jude G. "Survival Instincts: Resistance, Accommodation and Contemporary African Cinema." *Social Identities* 3.1 (1997): 91-121.
- Diawara, Manthia. "On Tracking World Cinema: African Cinema at Film Festivals." *Public Culture* 6 (1994): 385-396.
- Mweze, Ngangura. "African Cinema: Militancy or Entertainment?" in *African Experiences of Cinema*, Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (eds.), London: British Film Institute, 1996. 60-64.
- Ukadike, Nwachukwu F. *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002.