

Violence in Postcolonial African Film

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Summary

Different forms of violence surround Africans. These forms of violence go by different names, but all are built into and sustained by the fabric of everyday life. Contemporary African film delves into the subject of violence in a variety of ways. Some films show violence in its Fanonian sense, as liberatory and creative; others treat violence as a perpetually destructive force; and others still are ambivalent about the meaning of violence. Ultimately, the issue appears to rest on the matter of which specific violence one is talking about. This article looks at the representation of violence in *Bamako* (2006), a film by Mauritanian film-maker Abderrahmane Sissako. The author argues that in *Bamako*, violence is often invisible to the naked eye and is easily missed if one is looking for stereotypes of violence such as rape, killings and beatings. Rather, violence is endemic to our socio-economic order and overt instances of violence may be regarded as mere symptoms and flare-ups of a more sinister, quiet violence that goes by other names. The author further argues that the way we read representations of violence needs to be constantly subjected to rigorous contextualising and historicising, and that analytical frameworks should allow for more questions than certainties.

Opsomming

Verskillende vorme van geweld omring Afrikane. Hierdie geweldsvorme het verskillende name, maar almal is ingebou en word voortgesit in die struktuur van die alledaagse lewe. Kontemporêre Afrika-films delf op verskillende maniere in die onderwerp van geweld. Sommige films beeld geweld in sy Fanoniaanse sin uit, as bevrydend en kreatief; ander behandel geweld as 'n ewigdurende vernietigende mag; en nog ander is ambivalent oor die betekenis van geweld. Uiteindelik lyk dit of die kwessie berus op die spesifieke geweld wat mens behandel. Hierdie artikel handel oor die uitbeelding van geweld in *Bamako* (2006), 'n rolprent deur die Mauritaniaanse rolprentvervaardiger Abderrahmane Sissako. Die outeur voer aan dat geweld in *Bamako* dikwels onsigbaar is vir die blote oog en mens dit maklik kan miskyk indien mens na stereotypes soos verkragtings, moorde en aanrandings soek. Geweld word eerder uitgebeeld as endemies tot ons sosio-ekonomiese orde, en sigbare gevalle van geweld kan beskou word as bloot simptome en opwellings van 'n meer onheilspellende, stil geweld wat onder ander name gaan. Die outeur voer verder aan dat die manier waarop ons die uitbeelding van geweld lees voortdurend onderwerp moet word aan nougesette kontekstualisering en historisering, en dat analitiese raamwerke vir meer vrae as sekerhede voorsiening moet maak.

Introduction

This article theorises about the representation of violence in *Bamako* (2006), a 118-minute film by Mauritanian film-maker Abderrahmane Sissako. The author argues that in *Bamako*, violence is often invisible to the naked eye, and is easily missed if one is looking for the stereotypes of violence such as rape, killings and beatings. Rather, violence is endemic to our socio-economic order. Overt instances of violence may be regarded as mere symptoms and flare-ups of a more sinister, quiet violence that goes by other names. The article argues that the way we read representations of violence needs to be constantly subjected to rigorous contextualising and historicising, and that analytical frameworks should allow for more questions as opposed to certainties.

Defining Violence: Aporias Aplenty

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community”.¹ The American Psychological Association (APA), on the other hand, defines violence as “an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape or murder”,² a definition adapted from the eight-volume *Encyclopaedia of Psychology* (2000). *The Sage English Dictionary and Thesaurus* (2009) defines violence in three ways: as “an act of aggression”, “the property of being wild or turbulent”, and “a turbulent act resulting in injuries or destruction”.³ Dictionary.com, on its own part, defines violence as a noun that stands for “swift and intense force”, “rough or injurious force, action, or treatment”, “an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force or power, as against rights or laws”, “a violent act or proceeding” and “rough or immoderate vehemence”.⁴

These sample definitions, randomly taken from different sources and targeted at different audiences, all appear to share a singular aporia. They regard violence purely as a physical, visible phenomenon. There is little or no attempt to see violence as an *unseen*, systemic phenomenon whose physical manifestation is *merely* its effluvium. The tendency, hence, is to regard violence through its residual surpluses. The author argues that this is *crude* or *vulgar* violence in the sense that it is symptomatic but not the thing

1. <<http://www.who.int/topics/violence/en/>>

2. <<http://www.apa.org/topics/violence/>>

3. <<http://www.sequencepublishing.com/thesage.html>>

4. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/violence>>

itself. It merely points ostensibly to an “elsewhere”, to *actual* violence. The preoccupation with *effluvia*, instead of that which is behind the by-product, is detrimental to critical studies of *actual* violence. It also leads, as in the case of the WHO’s *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002), to apparent obsession with quantities and statistics of victims, as opposed to qualitative understanding of violence as an everyday, lived relation. This article resists the reductive view of violence. It proposes seeing violence as a deeper-lying, systemic phenomenon which escapes positivistic observation and cannot be counted or enumerated. Seeing violence in this way does appear to repay attention. It fits, for instance, with Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s discourse of the chalkboard. In Ngugi’s words,

Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom.

(Ngugi 1981: 9)

Ngugi clearly acknowledges that “physical violence” transubstantiated into something more salient and potent: the blackboard. Limiting ourselves to discoursing about the sword and the bullet will mean a failure to discourse about what *follows* what.

The question of violence is relevant to the discourse of the African postcolony. The African postcolony is the site of the relation of violence. Ali Mazrui (n.d.) is of the view that the postcolonial state in Africa is subject to two pulls, both of which are negative.⁵ The first is the “pull of tyranny” which entails “centralized violence”. The second is the “pull of anarchy” which involves “decentralized violence”. Furthermore, these pulls are marked characteristics of fragile institutions inherited from the colonial era. Mazrui constructs violence in terms of a “dialectic” of “tyranny and anarchy” (Mazrui n.d.).

Noticeably, and unfortunately, Mazrui’s dialectic exists in a world of pulls without any pushes, contrary to the laws of force and motion.

Mafeje (2002) does not subscribe to the definition of African states as postcolonies. Rather, he sees them as neocolonial states. The neocolonial African state, according to Mafeje, was:

First, ... inherited ready-made from the departing colonial powers and remained extrinsic to the African society, despite change of personnel. Second, its bureaucracy maintained the same arrogance as the colonial bureaucracy and has it fixed in its mind that it is administering not subjects but objects. Third, it is accountable to itself and the president for life (an equivalent of the colonial power in the metropolis). Fourth, it excels in

5. http://www.cccb.org/rcs_gene/ali_mazrui.pdf>.

VIOLENCE IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN FILM

arbitrary use of power and does not believe in transparency. Fifth, it is highly extractive, especially with regard to peasant producers but, unlike the colonial state, it has no sense of accumulation or of changing ill-gotten state revenues into productive capital. Sixth, it is characterised by authoritarianism and callous disregard for civil liberties. If we take into consideration such deviations as rampant corruption among state officials, bureaucratic inefficiency, and economic mismanagement, we can legitimately reach the conclusion that the neocolonial African state is a degenerate derivative or poor reproduction of the colonial state.

(Mafeje 2002: 7)

It is rather clear why Mafeje is reluctant to see the African state as a postcolony and insists on seeing it as a neocolony. Firstly, he sees the post-independent state as inheriting and continuing the monopolies, hierarchies and elitisms of old. There is little effort in the way of attempts to replace the colonial state with more balanced, indigenous and sustainable models. Secondly, Mafeje (2003: 1) sees the African state buckling under dependency to what he calls “mono-economics”, a brand of hegemonic Eurocentric economics. The “highly extractive” (2002: 7) relations, based on taking wealth from the poor to give to the rich, continue. The global system “where some nations own resources outside their territory to the detriment of the inhabitants” (Mafeje 2002: 12) is protected and extended. Mafeje (2002: 8) argues that the neocolonial African state, like its colonial predecessor, is based on “deprivations”. The motif of deprivation reflects that violence is systemic. Such systemic violence works through a vast system of exclusions which privilege a few while continuing to extract profit from the rest of humanity.

Violence in African Film

The view of violence as physical is evident in literature that discusses violence in African film. An example is Lindiwe Dovey’s *Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen* (2009). Dovey’s definition of violence is based on screen adaptations of rape, war, murder and genocide in films from South Africa and Francophone West Africa. Rape in *Fools* (Ramadan Suleman 1997), murder in *A Walk in the Night* (Mickey Madoda Dube 1998) and *Cry the Beloved Country* (Darell Roodt 1995), and rape, murder, war and genocide in *Genesis* (Cheick Oumar Sissoko 1999), for instance, are highlighted. According to Dovey, “the films highlight the filmmakers’ concern with the social realities of violence, and offer ways of conceptualising, visualising, and critiquing violence” (2009: 6). This article suggests that the screening of rape, war, murder and genocide is merely incidental and irrelevant to the “idea” of African film. It is a serious misreading to view violence in postcolonial African films as approximating

to portrayals of rape, war, murder and genocide. Rather, African film-makers' definition of violence is way more profound, grounded, lived and much more subtle than this.

It can be demonstrated that African film-makers have little interest in the graphic *showing* of rape, war, murder and genocide on screen. Med Hondo's comment about *Soleil O* (1967) supports this view of systemic violence:

My main character can be a garbage collector, a student or a teacher. His status does not prevent him from being affected in the same manner by the general conditions of a racist society. If I take the subway, I have to face the same problems as a migrant worker. To be black in France is an identity. You might be stopped in the subway by the police verifying your papers or alien card. Whatever his job or diploma, any black or Arab daily meets racism. OPEC prices might go up and violence occurs. One or two Arabs might get killed in street fights with the French. A West Indian might be mistaken for an Arab and shot. In France racism is no longer subtle or latent, but violent.⁶

The concern in African film, I argue, has – in fact – never been with adapting physical violence to the screen. This may explain why there tends to be only a few well-known so-called action movies and thrillers from Africa. Rather, the concern is with the hidden, hegemonic, sinister system form of violence one may call systemic violence. Systemic violence is not only largely invisible, but is the kind of violence which enables all other violences. Hence it has seemed more important for African film-makers to show this kind of violence rather than its lesser, underdeveloped – vulgar – physical forms. Where physical violence occurs, it is merely *symptomatic* of the preoccupation with systemic violence.

The concern with violence in its systemic forms is clear in the earliest films from the continent to the later ones. Ousmane Sembene's *Black Girl* (1966), for instance, shows the violence of alienation and “deprivation” in the life of Diouana (Mbissine Thérèse), a Senegalese maid in France, just as Paulin Soumanou Vieyra's short film *Afrique Sur Seine* (1955) – often considered the first film directed by a black African – explores the violence inherent in the idea of being an African in France. The concern with appreciating the nature of systemic violence continues from these early decades of African film-making to later films such as Mweze Ngangura's *Pieces d'Identite* (1998) where Mani Kongo's (Gérard Essomba) search for his daughter is anchored in the violence of Belgian colonisation, reflected in the use of monochromatic archival footage to punctuate the present.

The violence in *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) is not so much the massacre by the French military of the defenceless black soldiers but the complete

6. <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC31folder/HondoFilms.html>>.

inhumanity underlying it. This is why Sembene and Sow sought to show the everyday human simplicity as well as quiet intelligence of Sadiki Bakaba's character, in contrast to the French's genocidal aloofness. In other words, violence in its physical form is neither the preoccupation nor the focus. It is merely a surplus. Rather, the focus is the whole structural system of which the massacre is merely a reproduced fragment and surplus. This mode of showing violence is in contrast to the generality of Hollywood action films and thrillers, for instance, which centre on reproducing violence on screen as a suturing mode for purposes of titillation. In Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* (1972), Maria's (Elisa Andrade) traumatic search for her husband, Domingos Xavier (Domingos Oliveira), from jail to jail, treats violence through the metaphors of search and prison. The shots of Maria with baby Bastido on her back, or the prisoners bathing in blood from Domingo's body, are substitutes for physical violence. The drought in *Mortu Nega* (1988) is Flora Gomes's parabolic comment about the violence of colonialism, the violence that sought to end colonialism and the violence of the present and future of postcolonial and neocolonial Africa. Violence in Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni* (1983), is manifest in Wend Kuuni's loss of speech, his muteness, while the violence in *Xala* (1975) is largely allegorical.

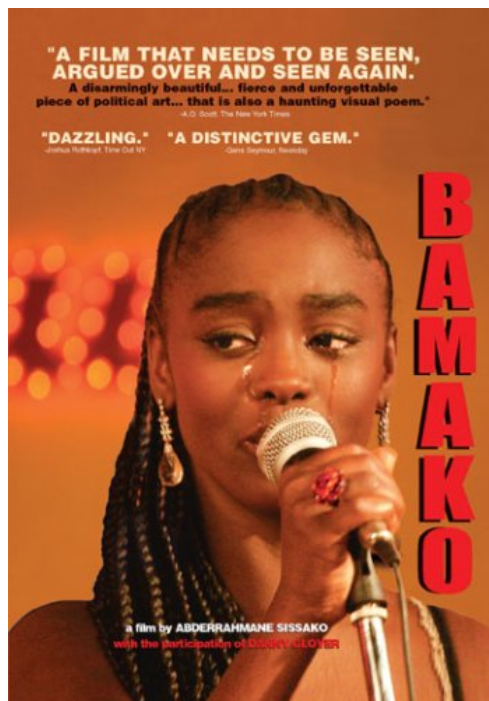
The late Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas* (1992) is an important film in the context of this article as it forms part of the cinematic tradition in which Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* falls. *Hyenas* is a parabolic adaptation of a parable, this time dealing with the tragi-comic violence of neocolonialism. Linguere Ramatou (Ami Diakhate) is not only "as rich as the World Bank" but is willing to use money, credit, televisions, air conditioners and fridges to corrupt and destroy. The town of Colobane is credit-obsessed, just as Africa's neocolonial nations are donor-aid dependent. The final shots show bulldozer tracks, anchoring the message about the levelling violence of corrupt power and money. In an interview with Nwachuku Frank Ukadike, Mambety says, "My task was to identify the enemy of humankind; money, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. I think my target is clear".⁷ The image of the would-be murderers of Colobane dressed in cast-off rice bags denotes the inescapable undertone of systemic violence turning poor people into cannibals.

***Bamako* (2006)**

Bamako is a film about the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the rest of the world's financial institutions from the West being put on a fictitious trial in Mali's capital, Bamako, in an open-air backyard

7. <<http://www.newsreel.org/articles/mambety.htm>>.

amongst the washing, insects and dust in the capital of Mali. African countries spend nearly £10 billion each year on servicing debt and loan repayments, at the expense of public social services such as health, water, sanitation, shelter and education. The crime committed by these institutions lies in the injustice of demanding loan repayments, with exorbitant interest rates, from the poor of Africa. The trial contests the notion of debt, questioning who really is in debt, the Bretton Woods's institutions or Africans, and who really should be paying whom. Witnesses have been drawn from the rank and file of ordinary Africans such as farmers, schoolteachers, writers, immigrants, local craftsmen, the unemployed and laid-off workers. In incorporating all these people, the film illustrates that everyone carries a burden, has a story to tell, and that their stories are inextricably linked. The faceless victims of global profit-making institutions are humanised, at the same time that the remote and indifferent policies of the IMF and World Bank are shown to cause real pain and real trauma to real people. Anchoring the discourse is Sissako's sheer counter-intuitive courage at daring to put such powerful institutions on trial.



Bamako Poster

The backyard courtroom is the site of the unmasking of hegemonic violence. The use of the backyard is important because it returns agency to the poor at the same time that it humanises and shows them respect. The backyard

space, surrounded by a compound of poor people's houses, is a space that resists easy co-option by hegemony compared to a "proper" courtroom. For instance, a woman insists on singing until a judge pays her not to sing. In this way, anyone can interrupt the proceedings, lending heteroglossia and polyphony to the drama. The lawyers and judges are the ones forced to come to the people's space, hence leaving their comfort zone and its elitism and trappings of power. Nwachuku Frank Ukadike says of *Bamako*:

Sissako's film exemplifies a number of trends in contemporary African cinema. What might be described as the new pan-African aesthetic interweaves melodrama, politics, ideology, satire and comedy – and Sissako draws on all these conventions to produce a film that not only instructs but entertains.⁸

(Nwachuku Frank Ukadike)

Bamako comes across as an example of the convergence of political storytelling genres and discourses in the early decades of the 21st century that unapologetically centre Africa.

The other powerful element, of course, is that a fictitious court is examining real evidence. The metaphorical is mixed with the actual in order to reverse Orwellian unreality imposed on Africans by the West. Jamaican dub-poet Mutabaruka's "People's Court" has used the same concept of a fictional court to question the violence of white hegemony in Africa and the Black Diaspora:

Order, now my court is in session/Will u please stand/First allow me to introduce myself/My name is judge "betta mus com"/Some people call me Judge 1000 years/I am from Afrika/I com to try all u politicians/For sellin' out black people/In my court, only me talk/Cause I am vex./Dis is de people's court/What do you have here today?

The fictitious court allows Mutabaruka to reverse the historical accusation of the Black subject, and to put the system of white hegemony and its upholders and managers in the dock. In Mutabaruka's "People's Court" as in *Bamako*, the accused are allowed to defend themselves as best as they could, even though it is clear on whose side the artist is. Other court scenes with unexpected performative aspects that immediately come to mind are in Kafka's *The Trial*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Aristophanes' *The Wasps*.

In *Bamako*, witnesses report over an open microphone how economic structural adjustment and liberalisation imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions are ultimately responsible for the traumas of everyday life in Africa. Spending cuts in education, retrenchments and lay-offs, the privatisation of water management systems, the dismantling of public railway

8. <<http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/3691>>.

networks, closure of hospitals and public medical care, among others, have caused the witnesses great hardship and presided over the continuous crushing of dreams. Multinational companies operating in the protective shadow of the Bretton Woods institutions expand their looting operations across Mali. Furthermore, the witnesses at the fictitious court “incriminate not only the Western-dominated institutions but also the corrupt elites in their own country – a theme, like many others explored in Sissako’s film, that runs like a red thread through the history of African film” (Killian 2010: 152). The IMF and the World Bank are represented by eloquent French lawyers who repeat arguments about binding agreements and corruption in Africa.

The power of *Bamako* is in the unmasking of the Orwellian invisible violence that ordinary people have been massaged into *not* noticing or into not calling it by its proper names. Fingers are pointed at the real evil which had been masked as good, at the killers masked as messiahs, monsters dressed as guardians, criminals disguised as law-givers, and so on. More importantly, this is not done through slogans or lectures. Rather, the court proceedings are made to fuse into the fabric of the everyday. Daily life continues around the trial. A parallel drama to the trial, for instance, is the troubled and failing marriage between beautiful pop singer Mele (Aïssa Maïga) and her out-of-work husband Chaka (Tiecoura Traore). People come and go, women peel potatoes, a mother nurses an infant, a wedding procession goes by, a relative is dying in one of the rooms from some untreated disease, some workers make batik cloth, women hang the washing or bathe the children, there is singing and dancing, and Mele comes out of the house to ask one of the participants to help tie up the back of her dress. During a break in court proceedings, one of the defence lawyers is able to wander off and haggle with a street vendor over the price and brand of a pair of sunglasses, while a toddler’s squeaky slippers later interrupt proceedings. Inside the houses adjoining the courtyard, people watch television. One interruption after the other fragments the testimonies, revealing a carnival, heteroglot parable at the same time as making a statement about democracy, democratic praxis and democratic participation in situ.

The everyday ordinariness and ordinary everydayness serve to do two things. Firstly, they show that the violence planned, perpetrated and perpetuated remotely from a distance and hidden in a seemingly objective and impassive free market is ever-present in the everyday life of billions of poor. The minutiae of ordinary everyday life do actually affect the big picture in ways that are not seen by the naked eye in quantifiable terms. For instance, the fact that Mele’s husband Chaka is out of work points ostensibly to the imposition of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) that demanded that workers be laid off in the name of efficiency, cost-cutting and profitability. Also the spaghetti Western spoof – *Death in Timbuktu* – being watched on TV a few metres away from the courtyard featuring Danny Glover meta-

phorically shows how the West enacts the genocidal excesses of the Wild West, murdering defenceless women and children. Secondly, the constant goings-on demonstrate that life in Africa goes on *despite* the violence. This last point is a statement of quiet defiance.

Conclusion

Bamako is about how evil is still evil, however deodorised and impeccably dressed, and how poor people remain human despite the violence and trauma that attend being poor. Sissako refuses to balkanise and isolate the poor through speaking through a hero or through situating the terrain of contestation in a “proper courtroom”. Globalised capital is fingered as the source of the systemic violence scarring poor people and burdening them with imposition after imposition. Through putting the IMF and the World Bank on trial, Sissako puts the entire system of world government on trial. In this way, he allows the 99% who are exploited for profits to sit in fictitious judgement over the 1% who run the world. The historically tormented (the poor), finally, face their tormenters (the rich, the corporations, and the banks and banksters) in a space where goal posts cannot be arbitrarily shifted and where everyone is guaranteed a say (or no say, as the schoolteacher takes the stand and remains silent). The film debunks notions of “progress” and “development” that mask sinister and dark operations to continue using the poor of Africa as objects for making profit.

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