

DIGITAL DILAPIDATION: JEAN-PIERRE BEKOLO'S *LES SAIGNANTES* AND THE ECONOMY OF IMAGES

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Persistence and survival. Chouchou (Dorylia Calmel) in *Les Saignantes* (*The Bloodettes*, dir. Jean-Pierre Bekolo, 2005). Courtesy © Jean-Pierre Bekolo.

The year is 2025, the place is Yaoundé. Cameroon's capital and second-largest city is drenched in perpetual

darkness. The sharpness of the midday sun has been replaced by sparse artificial light in luminous neon colors. Misty wafts of unknown origins occasionally cloud vision. Those with power live at the expense of those without in a city that seems to have departed from the rules of time and space, where daylight never arrives and movements slow down and speed up intermittently.

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This is how *Les Saignantes* (*The Bloodettes*) imagines the future of West Africa twenty years on from the date of the film's premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2005.¹ Director Jean-Pierre Bekolo invites viewers to see a speculative version of the country's future if things were to carry on the way they were at the time of release. In an interview, he called the film a "cautionary tale" against corruption, institutional standstill, greed, and sexism.² While drawing on the tropes of science fiction, the anticipatory orientation of the genre is deployed not in the spirit of radical change or utopia, but rather to depict persistence and survival in a place that has "no future," as one of the film's intertitles reads. Instead of suggesting that what lies ahead will be either excitingly novel or apocalyptically dystopic, Bekolo's vision of Yaoundé instead binds the future to an unendurable but ceaseless present, whose continuation is in the interest of greedy politicians and profiteering officials.³

Representing Circulation

Reviews of *Les Saignantes* make clear that the film's peculiar style, which I call "digital dilapidation," has polarized audiences since its release. Bekolo's images have been read—and contested—as commentary on social and political life in Cameroon. This approach has neglected the film's formal qualities, a careful analysis of which troubles the assumption that a direct line of representation connects the film to a presumed African reality.

The plot is centered on Majolie (Adèle Ado) and Chouchou (Dorylia Calmel), who join forces to become the eponymous "Bloodettes," operating in defiance of an exploitative political system to which, as young women and sex workers, they are highly vulnerable. In the opening scene, a powerful government minister dies in Majolie's bed. The friends, panicked about the possible repercussions of this accident, go on a frantic, absurd journey across the city to hide the corpse, utilizing their skills of seduction and performance to manipulate and defy cops, politicians, and other powerful men. They pay a visit to Chouchou's mother, a matriarchal authority figure who always appears surrounded by four other women flickering in and out of visibility like holograms. Their urban odyssey eventually leads Majolie and Chouchou to the funeral service for the deceased minister, a theatrical farce centered on the preservation of power among political elites rather than on mourning. One particularly predatory official, the Secretary-General (Emile Abossolo M'bo), seems especially set on expanding the reach of his power and tries to force Majolie and Chouchou into a sexual encounter with him.

Rather than caving to his attempted blackmail, they defy him through Mevougou, a spiritual force called on by Beti women that is evoked throughout the film as a current that guides the protagonists through difficult times.⁴

Shot in low-resolution digital video, *Les Saignantes* has frequently been likened to a music video because of several choreographed fight scenes and a playful sartorial transformation in front of a mirror, all set to music.⁵ The same song returns time and again, giving rhythm to the story and structuring the movements of the protagonists in a cyclical way. However, instead of trapping them in its eternal return, the tune symbolizes their power, recurring in moments when the two women join forces to fight the men who seek to exploit them. Low-cost special effects enhance the video look of *Les Saignantes*: in several instances, the frame rate is either sped up or slowed down to heighten the tension as a police car drives by or to shake up the rhythm of a dance. At other times, the image is blurred or doubled, evoking a drunken tumble after the women down a bottle of liquor, or the intoxication they feel under the spell of Mevougou. During the film's climax, an elaborate dance-fight in which Majolie and Chouchou defy the corrupt Secretary-General, Chouchou unleashes an orange vapor. Flaunting its artificiality, this animated element diverges from the paradigm of realism that has been central to computer graphics since their invention.⁶

In light of these special effects and the low resolution of the film's images, critics have tended to either dismiss *Les Saignantes* as an "amateurish" failure in the craft of filmmaking, or to celebrate its low-budget look and disjointed storyline as a truthful expression of life and politics in Cameroon.⁷ Film scholar and critic Olivier Barlet, for example, acknowledges the film's nonrealist style and content, but proceeds to map precisely this characteristic onto a perceived social reality: he writes that the "bricolage" of different genres and styles "draws its consistency from the tragic reality of a continent in shambles." He concludes: "It's not the film that's out of sync, it's reality."⁸ Barlet, in other words, understands *Les Saignantes'* nonlinear narrative and low-resolution images as a successful representation of reality in twenty-first-century Africa. While I don't wish to dismiss such a reading, I believe that critical engagement with *Les Saignantes* must take seriously the mediating role of film, and how its position between the material substrate of the world and images thereof troubles representation as the assumed equation between the two. In his essay "Against Representation," art historian and critic David Joselit argues against the "persistent conviction that a highly motivated connection exists between . . . signifier

and signified,” claiming instead that “artworks generate an unending sequence of meanings by formatting configurations of image flows.”⁹ For Joselit, images reveal less about the “what” of representation than about the “how” of their distribution, the particular economy they are a part of. In line with such an approach, I argue that *Les Saignantes* does not merely represent a Cameroonian reality, but rather mediates the image economy and its underlying infrastructure, which create such a reality in the first place.

In connection to this, I insist that *Les Saignantes* expresses something about its medium—digital video—as much as it comments on and stems from the historical circumstances of the film’s production. The striking formal qualities of *Les Saignantes* and its engagement with digitality have hardly been considered beyond vague admiration or equally vague distaste.¹⁰ This gap in scholarship and criticism, Jennifer Blaylock suggests, is due to a persistent “emphasis [on] historical moments of invention, which tacitly privilege Euro-American ontologies of new media [rather than] ... meanings of media technologies once they are adopted and adapted.”¹¹ A thorough mythologization of

the tech industry in the United States, with Silicon Valley as its fraught center, has been a result of this desire for novelty and innovation.¹² Those who study film to understand contemporary media aesthetics and affects privilege Hollywood productions, sometimes extending the scope of their investigation toward Central Europe or East Asia, regions with a similarly established reputation for technological innovation.¹³ In his book *Post-Cinematic Affect*, for example, Steven Shaviro considers Olivier Assayas’s *Boarding Gate* (2007) and the music video for Grace Jones’s *Corporate Cannibal* (2008) to grasp “*what it feels like* to live in the 21st century” when “[d]igital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience.”¹⁴

Despite the global reach of said digital technologies and neoliberal capitalism, it would be a fallacy to assume “*what it feels like* to live in the 21st century” is a monolithic or universal experience. If digital media, as Shaviro claims, shape and represent this experience, they nonetheless resonate across different communities and countries (which, in turn, interact with them). Accounting for the affective



Disarray as a condition of possibility. Majolie (Adèle Ado) in *Les Saignantes*. Courtesy © Jean-Pierre Bekolo.

environments and aesthetics of twenty-first-century capitalism necessitates accounting for the globalized nature of new media and for feedback loops between them and their audiences and creators. This requires a repository of case studies that consider theoretical questions of new media and digital film beyond the well-established context of the Global North. The sociohistorical stakes and geographic contingency of ontological inquiries into what the digital image *is* or the subjectivities it expresses and creates are thereby brought to the fore.

How, then, do the digital aesthetics of *Les Saignantes* relate to “*what it feels like* to live in the 21st century”? I approach this question via the formal qualities of the work’s images. Far from an ahistorical analysis, this critical approach to the film’s low-cost special effects and low resolution understands *Les Saignantes* in the context of West African video production and unofficial film distribution. This infrastructure blossomed in the 1990s and 2000s as a consequence of the region being cut off from the globalizing forces of Hollywood distribution, but it was also produced by economic austerity measures (discussed later in this essay) that exerted an asymmetrically globalizing power of their own.

My hope is that this investigation will provide a basis for reconsiderations of other films and media produced in the same region that also flaunt a small budget, low quality, or a “trashy” look, such as the more recent productions of the Wakaliwood studio in Kampala.¹⁵ Wakaliwood is known for its exuberant use of CGI blood splatters and fiery bullets that, like Bekolo’s orange vapor, do not veil their postproduction insertion. In linking these new productions to the ethos of Bekolo’s film as a precursor, it is important to consider how low-quality digital images relate to the socio- and media-historical circumstances from which they stem, but it is equally crucial to take into account how their amateur appeal, assumed technological ineptitude, and kinship with the legal twilight zone of unofficial distribution evoke and subvert their audiences’ desire for media images of Africa.

Trash and Treasure

Following *Les Saignantes*’ release, several reviewers attributed the film’s look to Bekolo’s putative incompetence. Todd Brown’s caustic report from the premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival warned readers to avoid the film “at all costs,” noting that it was “poorly lit,” shot on a “mid-grade home video camera,” and that futuristic technologies like a voice-controlled car were “amateurish in the extreme.”¹⁶ An anonymous reviewer

who, like Brown, had watched the film at TIFF came to an even crasser conclusion: “This is science fiction as an underdeveloped 14-year-old with limited means would shoot it: cheap, stupid, and ugly.”¹⁷ As recently as 2018, Kevin Lyons expressed similar if more measured criticism, deeming *Les Saignantes* “hampered by the lowest imaginable budget” and faulting the “shot-on-video look” for “making it look like the cheapest of exploitation films.”¹⁸ On Letterboxd, a social-media platform where users log films they have watched, one highly ranked review calls the film out for a lack of futuristic details: “this 2005 portrayal of 2025 looks like 2006, maybe 2007 at best,” the user complains, before adding another dig at Bekolo for an apparent amateurishness that never moves beyond a “Student Film Vibe.”¹⁹

Enthusiasts, by contrast, have lauded *Les Saignantes*’ skillful divergence from popular African media. Cameroon-based critic Nchanji Njamnsi highlighted the film’s “uniqueness” amid “the world of African cinema where the general monotony of storylines and chronic superficiality of movies produced has led to their consideration as ‘videography’ not cinematography.”²⁰ French journalist Olivier Rogez expressed relief that Bekolo’s “modern and avant garde cinema” had “left the beaten tracks one has come to expect from African filmmakers.”²¹ In a brief anonymous synopsis, published for a screening of the film at the 2022 edition of the International Film Festival Innsbruck, similar anticommercial inclinations found expression: there, Bekolo was deemed the “author” of a film that points “away from the usual commercial cannons [*sic*].”²² Taken together, these critiques are evidence for the polarizing reactions that *Les Saignantes*’ video aesthetics, futuristic details, and peculiar narrative provoke. Disappointed reviewers express irritation at the movie’s style, while admirers revere Bekolo as an auteur who brings hope to an ostensibly uninspired and overly commercialized African film industry.

Rather than claiming the film’s absolute distance from “videography” and the “commercial canon,” I position *Les Saignantes* in relation to both, considering digital video as a form that captures and comments on aspects of the social, political, and economic situation in contemporary Cameroon. These meditations on film form, then, are different from conventional or traditional accounts of formalism in that they are far from ahistorical or apolitical in their intended resonances. The images of *Les Saignantes* emerge as signifiers of political and media infrastructures damaged by privatizations and the withdrawal of state funding in the 1980s and 1990s.²³ But they also serve as provocations thrown out for the film’s audiences at high-profile hubs like Cannes and TIFF, toying with the pleasures of consuming

bootlegged images, and, by implication, of consuming images of Africa in a more general sense.

Institutionalized Disarray: West African Video Production in the 2000s

In *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Brian Larkin dedicates two chapters to the prolific film industry that has emerged in Nigeria since the 1990s. The book examines “the relation between infrastructural technologies and modes of rule,” first through the role of cinema and radio as colonizing tools under British governance, then by linking the emergence of independent video productions and a blossoming piracy market to the waning of state control as well as the consequent shift toward neoliberalism and informal economies.²⁴ Because of the considerable international influence wielded by the southern Nigerian entertainment industry, widely known as Nollywood, Larkin’s analysis is relevant beyond its immediate national context.²⁵ Nollywood movies often blend tropes of corruption, betrayal, and the sudden gain or loss of fortunes in order to encapsulate the economic and ideological insecurities that have afflicted Nigerian society since the intensification of austerity measures in the 1980s. In many African states, this decade was marked by the introduction of structural-adjustment programs, based on privatization plans developed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which reduced the purchasing power of salaries and hence the prestige of public-sector jobs.²⁶ At the same time that the “[g]overnment’s role as provider of employment and salary was overtaken by its role as awarder of contracts,” a generation of authoritarian rulers came into power.²⁷ Some, like Cameroon’s president Paul Biya, are still in place today, supported by the economic interests of former colonial powers and petrocapitalist enterprises, such as the French oil company ELF and the American multinational Shell.²⁸ These linked developments—structural-adjustment programs and autocratic politics—fostered the increase of corruption and informal economies as modes of exchange and wealth building that heavily rely on interpersonal relationships.²⁹

Larkin argues that the makers of Nigerian films like *Glamour Girls* (Chika Onukwufor, 1994), recently remade as a cleaned-up version for Netflix, or *Doctor Death* (Fidelis Duker, 2000) grapple with the conflicts and uncertainties of a society in transition by turning them into visceral, melodramatic spectacles unfolding at the family level. Acting styles, storylines, and set design are marked by hyperbole, together with an abundance of evil nemeses, fast cars,



Nighttime odysseys. Left to right: Dorylia Calmel, Josephine Ndagou, and Adèle Ado in *Les Saignantes*. Courtesy © Jean-Pierre Bekolo.

and glamorous clothing. Larkin connects these southern Nigerian melodramas to a context beyond their immediate setting in private homes, interpreting them as expressions and exposures of sociopolitical predicaments.³⁰

Bekolo’s work differs from these earlier Nollywood movies insofar as it is self-consciously political, explicitly concerned with gender relations and issues at the level of the state rather than the family. Yet *Les Saignantes* relies on its audiences’ absorption of conventional Nollywood tropes. It is difficult to decide whether the film’s plot is so simple that it becomes secondary to the darkly absurd mood in which Majolie’s and Chouchou’s nighttime odyssey through the city unfolds, or actually so abstruse that it is challenging to follow. In any case, *Les Saignantes* twists popular entertainment into a construction viewers are constantly trying, and failing, to catch up with. Physical stimulation, which Larkin sees as the central means by which early Nollywood films engaged their audience, is thereby countered by a decidedly intellectual effort. The intertitles pose questions about film, the future, and governance, further generating the reflective, cerebral approach that *Les Saignantes* demands from its audience. Thus, even though the film draws on the popular genre movies that emerged as responses to West Africa’s struggles with corruption, violence, and uncertainty, it also cracks their formulaic surface open. This, in turn, allows for a consideration of how the economic and spiritual disarray these films delve into has itself risen to the rank of an institutionalized aesthetic with considerable international commercial success. Bekolo, in this specific sense, criticizes the profitability of these chaotic representations of social chaos—a critique of media as well as society. *Les Saignantes*’ self-reflective approach to these populist forms, which it both appropriates and shatters,

insistently asks whether film and life could be otherwise. This is the question Bekolo dwells on, refusing to give definitive answers, and instead offering oblique comments such as, “If we sort of make it look clean, it’s as if you’ve found the final form.”³¹ *Les Saignantes* recognizes disarray as a condition of possibility and a form of quest, but it also refuses to establish chaos as the eternal condition of postcolonial Cameroon. Perhaps this is because Bekolo knows that chaos in one place may be what secures order in another.³² The positive force within Bekolo’s imagined future is, after all, Mevougou, a force that structures time and gives spiritual purpose, contrasting the unsettling forces that constantly tear at Majolie and Chouchou.

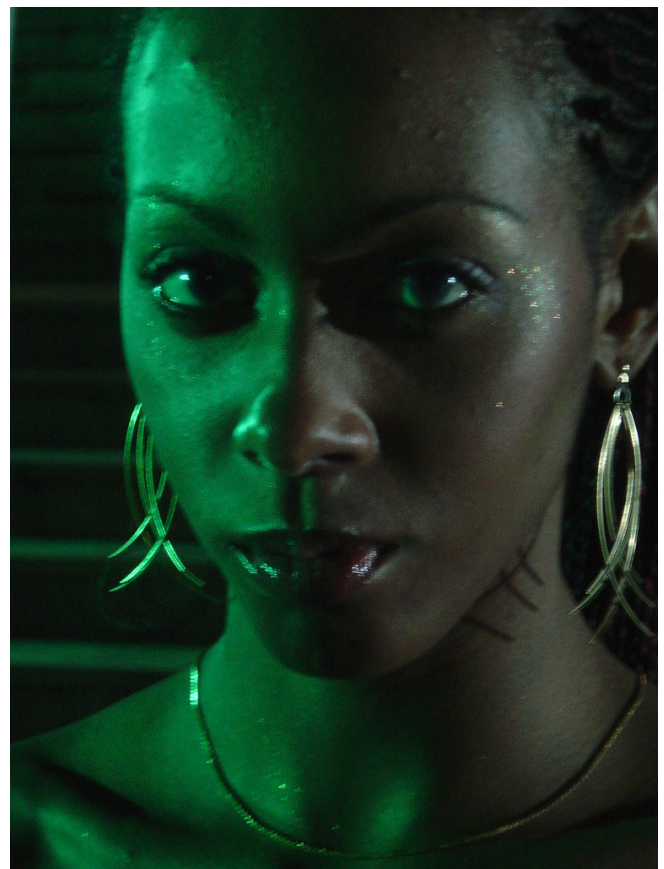
Critical Mimicry

Les Saignantes must be considered not only as a response to the characters and plots of popular movies generated in the filmmaker’s own region, but also in conjunction with the structures of distribution, access, and economy for West African and Sub-Saharan African film. In interviews, Bekolo frequently addresses how funding and the concentration of international film festivals in Europe and the United States impact creative production in Africa.³³ His second feature, *Le complot d’Aristote* (1996), commissioned by the British Film Institute for its documentary series *The Century of Cinema*, dramatized the enduring quest for “African cinema” in the face of a dearth of screening and production venues as well as the soft power exerted by other film industries, notably Hollywood. Like Bekolo’s debut *Quartier Mozart* (1992), *Le complot* is shot on celluloid film, making *Les Saignantes* his first feature-length attempt at video photography. *Les Saignantes*, a film that deals with corruption, exploitation, futures, and the lack thereof, is also a film about the media infrastructures that are the product of those sociopolitical circumstances and render one’s experience of them.

Brian Larkin’s work is again relevant here, since the final chapter of *Signal and Noise* expands his engagement with Nigerian video films of the 1990s and 2000s from their content and aesthetics to their distribution. To be sure, his account is by now historical: writing in the mid-2000s, Larkin observes that “the driving force of the market remains the purchase and rental of videocassettes and VCDs.”³⁴ Since then, the weight has shifted toward DVDs and, more recently, online streaming—for example, via Netflix or the Nollywood subscription platform iROKOTv—leading to significant changes in the way that films are accessed, consumed, and produced.³⁵ *Les*

Saignantes, however, is the product of a time when the circulation of physical copies, both digital and analog, was the main way to access movies outside the TV schedule.

Signal and Noise makes the case that the burgeoning Nigerian video industry was enabled by the emergence of a piracy market for Hollywood movies, which became almost impossible to come by legally after the Motion Picture Association of America suspended Nigerian distribution in 1981. Sellers, most of whom traded legal media too, consequently set up a decentralized network for pirated copies of US films across West Africa, including Cameroon.³⁶ This, Larkin argues, was “part of [a] larger reconfiguration of the Nigerian state and economy,” which saw the growth of unofficial markets.³⁷ In the early 1990s, privately funded Nigerian films began to be sold alongside copies of international blockbusters. Across the region, producers and directors utilized the structures of this informal entertainment economy, which developed in the holes left by defunded and otherwise damaged cultural infrastructures. In comparison to celluloid film, the invention of video decreased the cost of production significantly, making it the medium of choice for filmmakers working in this struggling economy.³⁸ As discussed earlier, the fact



Imperfect digital video aesthetics. Chouchou in *Les Saignantes*. Courtesy © Jean-Pierre Bekolo.

that corruption and instability take center stage in many of these films is therefore indicative of the larger situation in the country, as well as of the market that popularized them. Images of corruption and corrupted images were reflected in film form, not just content. This fostered the emergence of a recognizable aesthetic, one of “degraded images [and] distorted sounds,” as Larkin’s chapter on piracy is titled.

The reasons for degradation and distortion lie in the so-called generation loss that inevitably happens when analog video is reproduced. With each successive copy of an original, limitations in the recording electronics and the storage medium lead to the deterioration of signal quality, experienced by the audience as noise and blurry, striped images that seem to fall apart.³⁹ But even without reproduction, analog video is subject to deterioration: the magnetic tape that holds the data of a VHS cassette erodes ever so slightly with each viewing and over time in general. Subpar storage conditions accelerate this process.⁴⁰ Larkin paints a picture of an “infrastructure of reproduction . . . marked by cheapness, faulty operation, and constant repair.”⁴¹ This infrastructure reflects the sellers’ need to ensure the affordability of their product by using low-quality tape and recording equipment. The results are “images [of] hallucinogenic quality” and speech that blurs, slurs, and screeches—a “technological veil of semiotic distortion” that marks the distance between Nigeria and centers of soft power and cultural production in Hollywood.⁴² This points to a tension inherent in globalization. The availability of pirated foreign media marks a connection between places, while imperfect transmission turns their consumption into an experience of distance and marginalization.

Digital dilapidation, as a critical concept, extends this logic of form and content into new areas of investigation. In theory, digital video, on which *Les Saignantes* was shot, should remain unaffected by generation loss. In digital systems, it is possible to create an exact copy of a file. (This is one reason that commercial DVDs are heavily protected against reproduction.) In practice, however, the cost of data storage and software is a reason that the quality of a digital reproduction often differs from its preceding version. By default, lossy compression codecs are used for DVDs, Blu-ray discs, and streaming services to decrease the file size of a film. Unless special measures are taken, creating ripped reproductions of these mediums demands the transcoding of an already lossy format into an even lossier one, rendering the copy of a film worse than its original. In addition, different disc types circulate: DVD-9s, with up to 8.5 GB of data storage, are used for officially distributed movies, while DVD-5s, with 4.7 GB of storage, circulate as a much

cheaper, widely available blank disk type. The transfer from one type of DVD to another entails lossy compression, resulting in significantly lower quality for pirated DVDs. More straightforward examples of distortion specific to digital reproductions abound on YouTube, where films like *Living in Bondage* (Kenneth Nnebue, 1992–93) or *Billionaires Club* (Afam Okereke, 1999) are available as 240p and 480p versions, minimizing upload time and buffering interruptions at the expense of image quality.

In short, the circulation of pirated copies of digital and analog films habituates audiences to an aesthetic of low-resolution images and sound. In the case of West Africa, this was initially rooted in limited access to Hollywood films, which sparked the growth of unofficial distribution markets discussed earlier, existing in a lateral relation to the economy sanctioned by the state and corporations. Producers of privately funded video films inserted themselves into these networks and, despite limited financial means, garnered considerable commercial success across the region. The link between the burgeoning unofficial economy and these film productions is crucial, for their sprawling storylines and technical imperfections resulted at least in part from the circumstances under which they were made.

Contrary, then, to one critic’s assessment of *Les Saignantes* as “*hampered* [emphasis added] by the lowest imaginable budget,” the film’s imperfect digital video aesthetics can be reframed as a critical mimicry of entertainment media in the age of neoliberal politics, state withdrawal, and the power structures of an informal economy. The characters in the film give viewers pointers about the double-edged nature of resource distribution based on unofficial, interpersonal economies: the corrupt Secretary-General, for example, has no redeeming qualities and exploits holes in the political and legal fabric solely for his own good. By contrast, Majolie and Chouchou, while employing similarly “immoral” means, embody mischief with a playful edge. In one scene, they are stopped by a young police officer who tells them that the country needs “institutions everyone respects.” Majolie, enraged at his condescension, screams back, “What have you done for this country? I paid with my body and my ass.” Within a broken system, Bekolo seems to say, riding a moral high horse and sticking to the rules will not bring about change. Like Majolie and Chouchou, who one-up opponents by playing their rigged game, filmmakers, equally, cannot withdraw from the popular forms of the medium and the sociohistorical circumstances that dictate the distribution of their films, but must mischievously insert themselves into this conjunction.

Absurd Subjection

Les Saignantes mediates experiences of living within a specific economy of media images that, in turn, reflect larger-scale economic systems. At stake in Bekolo's work is subjection to dispersed, informal forms of power, especially in the postcolony, where neoliberal policies have bound states to corporations by debt, and power is distributed via informal networks, exerting an attritional violence that attacks "not only the body but also the nerves."⁴³ Moving from media infrastructures and aesthetics toward digitality as it seeps into the political unconscious, one finds that *Les Saignantes* offers a particularly striking scene. During a night of drinking and dancing that is as joyful as it is despairing, an intoxicated Majolie walks toward Chouchou, still sober, whose point of view is aligned with the viewer's own. In the background, hardly visible in the blue-green darkness of the room, hangs a woven map of Africa. We see only the Sahel and the Sub-Saharan parts of the continent, while the Maghreb remains outside the frame. The disjointedness of the image evokes Majolie's physical state of drunkenness. As she tumbles toward the camera, the image becomes increasingly blurry, until it seems to fall apart, splitting Majolie in two—a particularly evocative choice given that she is easily read in conjunction with the map behind her.

This scene links the experience of beholding a digital image to the constitution of the viewer's subjectivity vis-à-vis the object they are looking at. Shane Denson, in his book *Discorrelated Images*, argues that digital images are not fixed objects to behold, but rather unstable outcomes of computational processes constantly rendered on the fly, acting on their viewers at the subperceptual level in rapid operations. According to Denson, "new subjectivities, new affects, and uncertain potential for perception and action" are the consequences of this image culture, which brings with it an unraveling of the experience of self and of time.⁴⁴ Denson characterizes the ongoing "transition into a world of media not cut to human measure" as an alienation of the perceiving subject from a volatile, unstable object.⁴⁵ Denson's iteration of this predicament as it plays out specifically in relation to computational postcinema is especially relevant if we consider this alienation less an ontological quality of digital images than one among many ways in which they may be approached by critics and artists to render particular experiences. Subjective disintegrity is among these experiences, understood as an inability to make sense of one's relation to the symbolic order of meaning, to find oneself within its parameters, and hence to lack the affirmation of

meaning and self, provided in exchange with an intelligible other.⁴⁶

Les Saignantes teases out such subjective disintegrity at the formal level of the image in conjunction with the content of the plot. In Bekolo's Yaoundé, the flow of time has broken down in favor of eternal night. His protagonists know that they are hardly more than, as one of them says, "two holes that always get screwed in the end" in the eyes of those officials who are supposed to represent them. In the case of Majolie's drunken scene, disintegrity becomes visual disintegration. As she splits in two, the instability of the image mirrors the instability of her position in the world. This happens at a moment when she is shocked by the death of a senior politician in her bed, and worried about the possible repercussions of this event. In a coauthored essay, Janet Roitman and Achille Mbembe consider lifeworlds in urban Cameroon, specifically Yaoundé, to show how "in Africa today [1995], becoming a 'subject' involves a splitting of identities which fuels a certain pragmatics of subjection, both of which make up a simultaneous moment."⁴⁷ Roitman and Mbembe locate this splitting in an existence both inside and outside of power, as a governed subject that in turn must take on governmental power within a "do-it-yourself bureaucracy."⁴⁸ Their concept of the "pragmatics of subjection" resonates with many of the actions of Majolie and Chouchou depicted in the film.⁴⁹ They must take matters into their own hands, wrestling their way through the absurdity of a political landscape in which centralized power erodes and spreads corruption as it degrades into less formal and more chaotic networks.

In *Les Saignantes*, the disintegrity or disconnection of digital video, which evokes the literal disintegration and corruption of a file through illegal reproduction, offers Bekolo a way to grapple with "*what it feels like*" to be a citizen of a state engineered to malfunction by its colonial past and its capitalist present. In the doubling of her drunken image, Majolie's falling apart alludes both to the experience of attempting to behold a fundamentally unstable digital image based on a hardly intelligible temporality, and to that of being subjected to power that perpetually unravels into absurdity. Both of these aspects meet formally as well as historically in the degraded and dilapidated aesthetics of bootlegged video.

The Value of Digital Dilapidation

This neat dyad of digital and political disarray, however, requires further destabilization. Although the film draws on popular productions from West Africa, its festival



A state engineered to malfunction. Rokko (Alain Dzukam Simo) in *Les Saignantes*. Courtesy © Jean-Pierre Bekolo.

run from Toronto to Cannes shows that one key audience of the film on its initial release consisted of filmgoers at festivals in Europe and North America. Bekolo, who is outspoken about the infrastructural difficulties faced by African filmmakers, has thus made a film consumed initially by largely non-African audiences.⁵⁰ In this context, *Les Saignantes*' apocalyptic depiction of a corrupt and death-ridden city that is stuck in perpetual nighttime, filmed on a shoestring budget with images that look the part, also replicates negative stereotypes of Africa. The use of terms like "underdeveloped" by reviewers is testament to this.⁵¹ To take the film entirely at face value is to overlook how its exaggeration of these tropes shines a light not only on quality cinema's need to constitute itself against a trashy counterpart but also on a persistent desire for negative images of Africa. Bekolo's low-resolution video images are the formal vehicle for this strategy. As Lucas Hilderbrand observes in *Inherent Vice*, his US-focused study of bootlegged videotapes, the

grainy images of unofficially distributed movies instill an awareness in the audience that they are watching something they should not be watching and, therefore, that this is somehow an illicit (and all the more enticing) pleasure. He writes:

[V]ideo aesthetics mark the text as forbidden. The idea of the forbidden here, of course, cuts both ways—as temptation and as warning. The white noise, the jittery image, the unnatural colors, the grain, the momentary loss of signal that triggers the blank blue TV screen or the flash of tracking: these are the marks of damaged dupes. Such effects can be frustrating, or they can intensify one's attention.⁵²

By way of his video images, Bekolo has created just such a forbidden object of desire, making his audience complicit in the consumption of problematic images of Africa. The image of Majolie falling apart, with the map of Africa

behind her, thus also evokes the seductiveness and threat of a dilapidated image, of a woman split in two, and of a continent in ostensible disarray. In all three cases, perceived disintegration or disintegrity suggests an openness, a deliberately troubling “there for the taking” that at once incites both desire and frustration. Bekolo stages this problematic viewing experience as an allegory of sorts, heightening the most troubling aspects of its proposed equation in order to push them into visibility.

Media theories of low-quality images, of digital dilapidation, must take into account that their objects of inquiry are part of the global image economy, that they act within and upon it even if they may be othered by it. Where do these images circulate? How are they consumed? In 2009, Hito Steyerl claimed that “poor images,” her term for low-resolution digital images, “are not assigned any value within the class society of images—their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria.”⁵³ *Les Saignantes* could be read within this framework too, as an outsider production that does not play according to mainstream rules. Situating Bekolo’s film within its reception context, however, complicates Steyerl’s thesis: *Les Saignantes*’ “poor” images are hardly exempt from the value system of the image economy. Instead, they are consumed at large film festivals, arguably at the top tier of said “class society,” where they circulate as objects of desire, acclaim, and criticism. In this context, Bekolo’s digital video images also appear as a negative foil to the high-resolution visuals that are the gold standard of cinema. In this regard, they might be read with greater critical complexity as akin to the ways in which colonial ideology has employed the signifier “Africa” itself as a negative value to strengthen its own identity in opposition.⁵⁴ Coaxing out the residual desire for this “other” is part of the self-reflexive dimension of *Les Saignantes*, and, in this regard, the film might be said to preemptively critique its audience and distribution context from within while fostering an engagement with images from the Global South that rejects common reactions to their perceived flaws as supposedly “lesser.” This critical approach views dilapidated images through a lens that focuses on how they circulate inside a complex globalized media economy riddled with contradictions and rife with multiple levels of complicity, rather than proposing that they operate outside of it. At the same time, these images of digital dilapidation also offer a disruption of conventional assumptions about the relationship between quality and value, as troubling as it is productive.

Notes

1. For a list of the film’s festival runs between 2005 and 2008, see “Saignantes (Les),” AFRICINE.org, www.africine.org/film/saignantes-les/1062.
2. Jean-Pierre Bekolo, “Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Bold and Inventive Films Push the Envelope of Conventional Film Genres,” interview by Mamadou Niang, African Film Festival, New York, 2006, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmLWSWwISI0.
3. Kara Keeling makes the point that the “systematic rationalization of the unlivable” (xiv) is driven by corporations that seek to ensure their own survival by exerting control over and thus foreclosing the future. See Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press, 2019), 2.
4. See Naminata Diabate, “Re-Imagining West African Women’s Sexuality: Bekolo’s *Les Saignantes* and the Mevounou,” in *Development, Modernism, and Modernity in Africa*, ed. Augustine Agwuele (Routledge, 2012), 166–81.
5. Akin Adesokan, “The Challenges of Aesthetic Populism: An Interview with Jean Pierre Bekolo,” *Postcolonial Text* 4 (1) (2008), 1–11.
6. For a materialist history of computer graphics between the 1950s and the 1980s in the United States, see Jacob Gaboury, *Image Objects: An Archaeology of Computer Graphics* (MIT Press, 2021). Gaboury highlights a 1965 speech by computer scientist Ivan Sutherland, later published and widely circulated as “The Ultimate Display,” as evidence of the industry’s goal to achieve total simulation through computer graphics. He understands Sutherland as “foregrounding . . . realism as the principal effect of graphical simulation [which] likewise produces the assumption that visual mimesis is the locus from which graphical images should be read and interpreted” (29).
7. For the use of *amateurish*, see Todd Brown, “TIFF Report: *Les Saignantes* Review,” *Screenanarchy*, September 8, 2005, <https://screenanarchy.com/2005/09/tiff-report-les-saignantes-review.html>.
8. Olivier Barlet, “Les Saignantes,” *Africultures*, August 7, 2005, <https://africultures.com/les-saignantes-3943/>. Translation from the French by the author.
9. David Joselit, “Against Representation,” *Texte zur Kunst*, 95 (2014), [/www.textezurkunst.de/en/95/david-joselit-against-representation/#id19](http://www.textezurkunst.de/en/95/david-joselit-against-representation/#id19).
10. Academic writers tend to privilege the film’s plot in their analyses. While Matthew Omelsky briefly considers the ubiquity of technological props in the film, his main interest lies elsewhere: the observation provides him with an impetus to reflect on cyborgian “refusals of imposed female identity,” but he does not probe the movie’s formal qualities further. See Matthew Omelsky, “Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s African

- Cyborgian Thought,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (31) (2012), 20. Other articles on the film are primarily concerned with its articulation of gender and sexuality, Bekolo’s approach to power and corruption in the postcolony, or *Les Saignantes*’ relation to different works of science fiction and speculative fiction from Africa.
11. Jennifer Blaylock, “Media/Fetish: A Postcolonial Archeology of New Media and Africa” (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2019). I thank Jennifer Blaylock for kindly sharing a PDF of this unpublished manuscript with me. See also her article “‘Who Wants a BlackBerry These Days?’ Serialized New Media and Its Trash,” *Screen* 62 (2) (2021), 156–72.
 12. Recent histories of digital technologies and networks that focus on the United States include Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); Pamela Lee, *Think Tank Aesthetics* (MIT Press, 2020); Jacob Gaboury, *Image Objects* (MIT Press, 2021); and Jussi Parikka, *Operational Images* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023). For a helpful introduction to the shift from film studies toward the affective environments created by and reflected in a variety of media, see Jussi Parikka, “Media Archaeology of the Senses: Audiovisual, Affective, Algorithmic,” in *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Polity Press, 2012), 19–40. Parikka’s book, a frequently cited source in media studies, focuses exclusively on European and US scholars whose work is relevant to film and new media. The neglect of media histories of the Global South is mentioned once, as a “sidestep,” on page 52.
 13. Moradewun Adejunmobi outlines the relative lack of attention to African materials in US media studies departments in her article “African Media Studies and Marginality at the Center,” *Black Camera* 7 (2) (2016), 125–39.
 14. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Zer0 Books, 2009): 16, 17; italics in the original.
 15. “Trashiness” as a central motif of African cinema is at the basis of Kenneth Harrow’s book *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (Indiana University Press, 2013). While Harrow intends to “‘trouble the waters’ of the binary, above-below” (9), *Trash* sometimes runs the risk of essentializing “African Cinema” as an entity that plays according to its very own rules, in disconnection from the normative order rather than as part of the global media economy.
 16. Todd Brown, “TIFF Report: Les Saignantes Review.”
 17. Matt, “Les Saignantes at TIFF,” *blogTO*, September 10, 2005, www.blogto.com/film/2005/09/les_saignantes_at_tiff/.
 18. Kevin Lyons, review of *Les Saignantes* (2005), *EOFFTV Review*, February 19, 2018, cofftvreview.wordpress.com/2018/02/19/les-saignantes-2005/.
 19. Julian (Seeking Film), review of *The Bloodettes* (2005), *Letterboxd*, May 13, 2021, <https://letterboxd.com/cynicofcinema/film/the-bloodettes/>.
 20. Nchanji Njamnsi, “Sex as Soft Currency: Another Look at Bekolo’s *Les Saignantes*,” *Bakwa*, January 4, 2015, <https://bakwamagazine.com/uncategorized/sex-as-soft-currency-another-look-at-bekolos-les-saignantes/>.
 21. Olivier Rogez, “*Les Saignantes*, un film africain qui sort des sentiers battus,” RFI, May 17, 2009, www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/113/article_81111.asp. English translation by the author.
 22. International Film Festival Innsbruck, “*Les Saignantes* (The Bloodettes),” *IFFI*, n.d., <https://iffi.at/en/movies/les-saignantes-the-bloodettes/>.
 23. This development is briefly outlined in Florent Coulon, “The Story of Cameroonian Cinema: Toward Independence in Production,” *Afrique Contemporaine* 238 (2) (2011), 91–105.
 24. Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Duke University Press, 2008), 3.
 25. For a collection of essays exploring Nollywood’s global influence, see Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, eds., *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Indiana University Press, 2013). Babson Ajibade specifically tracks the distribution and reception of Nigerian film in Cameroon in his article “From Lagos to Douala: the Video Film and Its Spaces of Seeing,” *Postcolonial Text* 3 (2) (2007), n.p. Floribert Patrick C. Endong outlines the influence of Nigerian films on popular culture in Cameroon and names some concrete ways in which “Collywood” and “Nollywood” overlap, making reference to the anxieties of influence afflicting neighboring film industries, especially in the early 2000s. See Floribert Patrick Endong, “Nollywood in Cameroon: Transnationalisation and Reception of a Dynamic Cinematic Culture,” *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 6 (2) (2017), 130–43. See also Jonathan Haynes, “Bibliography of Academic Work on Nigerian and Ghanaian Video Films,” *Journal of African Cinemas* 4 (1) (2012), which continues to be helpful for understanding the structures, tendencies, and global reach of these films.
 26. See Larkin, 179.
 27. Larkin, 179. In their essay “Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis,” Janet Roitman and Achille Mbembe draw particular attention to the decrease and instability of salaries in Cameroon. They argue that this has interlaced urban life with a persistent feeling of anxiety and insecurity, ending a (colonial) temporality organized around the end of the month. Janet Roitman and Achille Mbembe, “Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis,” *Public Culture* 7 (2) (1995), 348–49.
 28. See Fanny Pigeaud, “Complicités,” in *Au Cameroun de Paul Biya* (Éditions Karthala, 2011), 235–53.

29. Felwine Sarr writes about such “relational economies,” which, if flourishing, are “characterized by the existence of a solidarity . . . that allows for basic economic needs to be met at a minimized transaction cost, relationships being based in confidence and respect for verbal commitments.” Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 60. But Sarr also emphasizes that relational economies can become “negative” if infiltrated by principles of classical economy (61).
30. Larkin, 184–85. For Mbembe’s theory of the grotesque, see Achille Mbembe, “The Aesthetics of Vulgarly,” in *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001), 102–41.
31. Adesokan, “The Challenges of Aesthetic Populism: An Interview with Jean Pierre Bekolo,” 4.
32. See Ginger Nolan, “Bricolage . . . or the Impossibility of Pollution,” *e-flux Architecture*, July 28, 2018, www.e-flux.com/architecture/structural-instability/208705/bricolage-or-the-impossibility-of-pollution.
33. Jean Pierre Bekolo, “FESPACO interview,” YouTube, February 27, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijgbrlqEVuQ.
34. Larkin, 174.
35. Writing in 2014, at the precipice of streaming becoming more widely available in Nigeria, Jonathan Haynes considers the implications of this development, as well as the growing budgets of “New Nollywood” films. See Jonathan Haynes, “New Nollywood’: Kunle Afolayan,” *Black Camera* 5 (2) (2014), 53–73.
36. See Larkin, 222–23.
37. Larkin, 226.
38. Ajibade, 3.
39. “Generation Loss,” *ATIS Telecom Glossary*, January 23, 2017, https://glossary.atis.org/glossary/generation-loss/?char=G&page_number=4&sort=ASC.
40. Olivia Harlow, “Video Tape Decay,” *aperture*, n.d., <https://kodakdigitizing.com/blogs/news/video-tape-decay>.
41. Larkin, 238.
42. Larkin, 239.
43. Achille Mbembe and Olúfémi Táíwò, “Overcoming the Politics of Abandonment,” interview by Nick Buxton and Shaun Matsheza, May 17, 2021, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202105200930.html>. The description of dispersed power in the postcolony appears in Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 13.
44. Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Duke University Press, 2020), 1.
45. Denson, 3.
46. For this thwarted interchange in relation to the meaning making of film, see Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton University Press, 1992).
47. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, “Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis,” *Public Culture* 7 (2) (1995), 324.
48. Mbembe and Roitman, 343.
49. Mbembe and Roitman, 325.
50. See Bekolo, “FESPACO Interview”; and Vlad Dima, “Waiting for (African) Cinema: Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Quest,” *African Studies Review* 62 (1) (2019), 49–66.
51. “Les Saignantes at TIFF,” *blogTO*.
52. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Duke University Press, 2009), 63.
53. Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux journal* 10 (2009), http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_94.pdf.
54. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe formulates this relation as follows: “[T]hese systems of reading the world attempt to exercise an authority of a particular type, assigning Africa to a special unreality such that the continent becomes the very figure of what is null, abolished, and, in its essence, in opposition to what is” (4).