

“The Center of the World Everywhere”: *Bamako* and the Scene of the Political

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The viewer of *Bamako* (2006) must first of all come to terms with what Abderrahmane Sissako's uncompromisingly political film refuses from the outset to attempt. For *Bamako*—which places the policies of the World Bank and the IMF, and their effects on Africa and the global South, squarely within its sights—conforms to none of the most familiar strategies associated with engaged film. The aim of the film is not primarily to defend an identity or to unmask an ideology, whether globalizing or nationalist. It does not attempt an allegorical representation of the global system as a whole, in order to elaborate a “cognitive mapping” of the place of Bamako within it. Nor does *Bamako* envision, through the unfolding of a singular life story or marginal experience, a utopian or mythic “beyond” of multinational capitalism, which would exceed its geographical, historical or conceptual limits. In this sense, *Bamako* might be said to reveal nothing that is not already visible: for it neither represents an experience previously inaccessible to us, nor does it offer a synthetic representation of its situation, nor does it refer us to “another scene” that would permit us to understand what is already manifest in light of a repressed or hidden truth.

If *Bamako* would thus seem to offer little to the critic in the way of hermeneutic satisfaction—if, in other words, there would seem to be no truth here to unveil—it is first of all, perhaps, because the “other scene” in question seems to be placed immediately before us. For almost everything there is to see in *Bamako* is given from the outset, in the simple courtyard of a house in Mali (where the director tells us he himself grew up) that provides the improbable site of a “trial” of international financial institutions. In that trial, we see jurists on both sides of the debate about neoliberal globalization cross-examine intellectuals and experts. We hear arguments for and against the economic policies imposed upon sub-Saharan Africa by technocrats residing in a distant metropole, along with testimony from victims of those policies, who have also been called upon to testify against them. Meanwhile, the habitual occupants of the courtyard go about their everyday routines, as they would on any other day, intermittently interrupting their labors to listen to a particularly eloquent speech, or to register the affective power of an especially moving story of hardship. But these lines of action serve alternately as background or foreground to one another, without either seeming to fundamentally modify or engage the action unfolding in the other.

And this is, at least initially, what most fascinates in *Bamako*: the incongruous coexistence of these two dimensions—the debate over the governance of the global system, and the immediate here-and-now of everyday life—played out before our eyes within a single frame. On the one hand, there is the highly theatrical form of the trial, with its opposing arguments and its clearly defined antagonists, in which the discourse of corporate globalization and its critique are elaborated in the film. On the other hand, there is Sissako's patient observation, in the neorealist and documentary tradition, of the rhythms of the everyday existence of those inhabiting the courtyard (many of them played by non-professional actors, who “have always lived in the courtyard, and are therefore part of the film”) and the space immediately surrounding it (where the proceedings of the trial are audible through loudspeakers).¹ But while he places both of

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them before us in a single space, where they observe, and occasionally interrupt one another, Sissako provides no common language, code or mediating term through which these two perspectives on life within the global system might be rendered commensurate with one another. What initially appears before our eyes in this Malian courtyard is, on the contrary, the nonrelationship between discourses concerning the global system as a whole, contested here in the language and forms of law and justice, and the immediate experience of some of those it governs, as that experience unfolds in the daily rhythms of a life which does not seek to explain or justify itself, but only, against all obstacles, to persist.

What are we to make of Sissako's staging of this nonrelationship? In part, the incongruous setting of the trial serves to foreground the impossibility, from a political perspective, of the event staged within it taking place outside the realm of mere political theatre. It is, no doubt, quite unlikely, should the World Bank and IMF ever be put on trial, that this trial would be held in such an unassuming place as this courtyard of the director's childhood, its solemn proceedings taking place alongside the washing of laundry, the nursing of babies, the dyeing of cloth and the morning ablutions of its residents. But, one is compelled to ask, is this setting of the trial any more improbable than would be its enactment in an actual court? Under what circumstances could one imagine officials of the IMF or the World Bank actually being compelled to defend the consequences of their policies in a court in even the most metropolitan of venues, be it New York, Paris, Brussels, London or the Hague?

Indeed, the implausible location of the trial never allows us to lose sight of the fact that it is first of all intended as a symbolic act, even a provocation, which calls into question what Sissako, like many other critics of the IMF and World Bank, sees as the fundamental asymmetry that defines their role in the global system. The inhabitants of Africa and the rest of the global South have no choice but to participate in the international financial system, which affects every aspect of their lives. But the conditions under which they do so are largely determined by the policies of institutions over which they have little or no effective say. As Sissako himself suggests in a text accompanying the DVD of the film, the neoliberal "structural adjustment policies that set the rules of the game for millions of people"—with their radical dismantling of social services and subsidies, and the massive increases in poverty and infant mortality which have followed—have been imposed by these institutions and their African collaborators upon millions of sub-Saharan Africans in the name of supposedly objective economic necessities outside the scope of legitimate political debate, without any semblance of democratic consent, and without any political or juridical mechanism for holding the engineers of these policies accountable for their failures.²

Leaving aside, for the moment, the specific economic and social content of the claims made by the plaintiffs in the trial, their case will thus turn on the denunciation of this political and discursive asymmetry between the authority of the globalizing technocrats at these institutions (whose expertise lends legitimacy to the neoliberal project), and the unacknowledged objections of a population of unwilling "debtors" (who, having rarely received its benefits, are nonetheless condemned to bear that project's consequences). Indeed, this asymmetry constitutes the fundamental "wrong" or "*tort*" (to use Jacques Rancière's language) to which Sissako's trial responds.³ Within the limits of the trial's

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mise en scène, the critics of neoliberal globalization, and the witnesses they call, speak as though they were on an equal footing with those they accuse, who, outside the trial, occupy the commanding heights of international trade and finance. To borrow once again the language of Rancière's *La Mésestante*, the performance of the trial allows those critics to behave "as though [...] a stage existed" in which they were recognized as legitimate and equal interlocutors—as though, in other words, "there were a common world of argument" (52). And within the confines of a discursive space implicitly defined by the legal fiction of equality before the law, this assumption might seem perfectly plausible. The law could, in this sense, be understood as providing a form for the expression of a collective dream of equality. This dream is, however, social and political before being juridical: the dream of a popular justice, where the masters of global trade and finance would be placed on the same footing as any citizen, and could thus be held accountable.

But, as I have already suggested, the incongruous appearance of this trial in a family compound on the periphery of the global system reminds us that this enactment of even a purely discursive equality can appear in our conjuncture only *as* theatre. No verdict that it might pronounce (and the film does not indulge us with the symbolic satisfaction that such a verdict might provide) could be expected to produce an effect outside of the utopian "common world" of its performance. If the inhabitants of the courtyard, although they are often visibly moved by the power of the victims' testimony, only intermittently follow the process of the trial, it is perhaps not so much because they have repressed or disavowed the collective wish that this utopian performance might seem to fulfill, as because the staging of that wish unfolds within a space—that of their immediate everyday experience—where its fulfillment is as yet unimaginable. Indeed, the event with which the film concludes—the suicide of Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré), the unemployed husband of the bar singer Melé (Aïssa Maïga), whose failing marriage provides the representation of life in the courtyard with its principle narrative focus—only reinforces our conviction that, whatever the verdict, the ultimate sentence has already long since been passed by the logic of the global system itself, not upon the accused, but upon its victims.

What Sissako makes visible in this strangely double space—where the implicit claim of each speaker to equality within "a common world of argument" coexists with the lived experience of inequality, without any language, code or narrative capable of "transcoding" (to use Fredric Jameson's term)⁴ between them—is thus, first of all, a failure of mediation. This failure is initially foregrounded as a problem of aesthetic form, in the incommensurability between the generic codes that govern the distinct lines of action that unfold in the space of the courtyard. It is as if Sissako were unable or unwilling to find an overarching narrative capable of linking the trial's theatrical confrontations over the injustices characteristic of the system as a whole to the local stories of the everyday struggle for existence of those who live alongside but outside it, such as that of the singer Melé and her disintegrating marriage, or that of the young man awaiting death in a room just off the courtyard. To the extent to which the relationship of this theatre of popular justice to these everyday narratives is presented here, it is, as we have seen, first of all presented as a nonrelationship. For if the possibility of a relationship would seem to be suggested by the juxtaposition of its

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terms, the realization of that possibility seems to await the story capable of weaving the two, not only into a common space, but into a shared narrative world.

This possibility is, however, realized in one place in *Bamako*: in the film-within-a-film, *Death in Timbuktu*, the “African spaghetti Western,” where the agents of international capital and their African collaborators are represented as a group of marauders visiting a reign of terror on the ancient Malian city, as they gun down the inhabitants (notably including a school teacher, emblematic of those civil servants deemed superfluous by structural adjustment policies), whose only defender is a lone black cowboy (Danny Glover). This narrative might be said to succeed in representing the connection between the individual sufferings of Africans and the reigning powers in the world financial system, which effectively condemn many of them to death. But it does so only allegorically, by transposing the two distinct narrative worlds that fail to communicate in the courtyard, where they merely coexist, into the generic code of yet another narrative universe, a supplementary world where alone the elements of the first two can be brought together.

This third narrative world—that of the Western, or, rather, its postmodern pastiche—appears at a sufficient distance from the world inhabited by Sissako’s courtyard dwellers, whom we see watching *Death in Timbuktu* on television, that they can respond to the deaths on screen, not with anger or compassion, but with the slyly complicit laughter of postmodern irony. This may be taken, at least in part, as an implicit satirical commentary on the contradictions inherent in the relationship of African films such as *Bamako* to the public in a country like Mali, which, because of what Sissako himself describes as an almost non-existent distribution system, is less likely to have access to his films than to the more widely available metropolitan mass-cultural products of the sort that his film-within-a-film allegorically rewrites.⁵ But this interlude of parodic satire also provides, as a sort of counterpoint, an exemplary sketch of an aesthetic strategy that Sissako declines to pursue elsewhere in the film, where the allegorical inscription of the actions of an individual or collective character (such as Timbuktu’s marauding gunmen) serves to represent the intervention of a global system (the reach and complexity of which is too vast to be readily imaginable in relation to the existential experience of a single individual or group) within a localizable narrative space.⁶

Indeed, this is the narrative strategy of an important forerunner of *Bamako*: Djibril Diop Mambéty’s allegorical masterpiece, *Hyenas* (1992), an earlier attempt to represent the relationship of impoverished Africa to the creditors of the world system. When Mambéty’s Linguère Ramatou, the former prostitute, “rich as the World Bank,” descends upon the impoverished provincial backwater of Colobane, she and her group of acolytes are, from the outset, quite explicitly presented as allegorical figures for international capital, which appears from outside to destroy local industry and government, as well as what remains of traditional ties of reciprocity, even as it promises, in a carnivalesque send-up of a now global culture of consumerism, infinite riches to those who will embrace it. As an allegorical figure, Ramatou appears as the mythic incarnation of capital, first in the guise of a miraculous rescuer, and later as the cynical destroyer of this community which, for all its undeniable miseries and injustices, had once encompassed the whole social world of its inhabitants.

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But this “meaning” of Ramatou, as a mythic figure of capital descending upon the village from some global beyond, is not, by itself, enough to sustain our interest in her story. That story is only compelling because it is also that of an individual, with her own history and grievances. Indeed, at the literal level of the narrative, that individual history is representable, and her motivations are explicable (without any reference to the “elsewhere” of the global system of which she is the emissary, and in accordance with the conventions of a more classical realism), entirely in terms of her relationships, as an individual woman, with the other inhabitants of this particular town.⁷ The power of Mambéty’s film to convey the effects of the global system in terms of individual experience thus turns on the deftness with which he imperceptibly switches gears between these two possible readings of Ramatou’s story—the “global” and the “local”—each of which alternately serves as the explanation of her actions. For she appears in Colobane both as an oppressed member of the community who has been unjustly cast out (and has returned to that community in order to demand justice from it) and as the embodiment of a world system that, as the absolute negation of the world of that community, is unimaginable within it, except as the mythic figure of a power from beyond that world.

The function of Ramatou’s character within Mambéty’s allegorical narrative is, in other words, to mediate between these two poles, and thereby make each translatable into the language of the other. Whatever the other virtues of this narrative,⁸ *Hyenas* can thus be said to offer, at the level of narrative form, an attempt to resolve, through non-realist means, the aesthetic impasse faced by realism in the global system, as it attempts to carry out the seemingly impossible task of representing the logic of an unimaginably vast global totality in and through individual and local experience.

If *Bamako*, for its part, refuses to attempt a similar resolution of this aesthetic problem—if, with the parodic exception of its “African spaghetti Western,” it does not seek to elaborate an allegorical narrative frame capable of weaving the global and the local into a single story—it is in part because it refuses to elide the disparity between these two moments of the global system in the name of offering a coherent representation of that system as a whole. Rather, to the extent to which it attempts a realist representation of the global system, it begins with this disparity itself as an unsurpassable reality that it must confront, even if it is not yet capable of coherently narrating or representing it. In this aspect, *Bamako* might be said to stage before our eyes the very failure of mediation that Mambéty’s allegorical narrative representation so artfully displaces and contains. Indeed, if *Bamako* is also to be read allegorically, it is perhaps best read as an allegory of this very impasse.

As I have already suggested, this impasse is no less political for being aesthetic, since it reflects the pervasive difficulty in the neoliberal era of imagining any role for politics in everyday experience other than that of an outside force which, to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase, comes “like fate” (which is to say, like Mambéty’s Linguère Ramatou) to impose its “conditionalities” upon us from without. But unlike *Hyenas*, *Bamako*, rather than pursuing an aesthetic resolution of this underlying contradiction, reframes the problem by foregrounding the very disparity that gives rise to it: the nonrelationship between the logic of a totality that determines what it will impose upon society from some transnational elsewhere on the one hand, and, on the other, the lives of the governed,

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who have no part in the governance of the social whole, except that of assuming its accumulated debts. Rather than attempting to mediate between the extremes of this disparity, *Bamako* stages the scandal of their impossible coexistence.

The figure in *Bamako* who most strikingly stages this scandal is the peasant (as Sissako describes him) Zegué Bamba. In his first appearance, in a sequence before the film's credits, he is denied the right to speak, but later, toward the end of the film, having called out from the back of the crowd, he approaches the bench as an uninvited and uncomprehended witness. For even as the assembled crowd witnesses this astonishing event of an unrecognized speaker "reclaiming the right to speak" (*reprendre la parole*), he begins to "sing," to "cry out" with accumulated anger and grief in a different language from those spoken in the courtyard, one described by Sissako as a language of the country's south, which is understood, perhaps, by "no more than three" of those present (Sissako, DVD Interview). Sissako chooses to provide no translation in the court, and no subtitles, during this complaint, until the end of the trial, when one of the plaintiff's advocates provides a summary in her closing argument.⁹ This decision to withhold an immediate translation foregrounds, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has suggested in a recent lecture, the undecidable position of his speech, as simultaneously within and outside the discursive space of the trial.¹⁰ But, considered in light of the formal dilemma we have discussed above, the scandal of his insistent appearance in that space—a scandal inseparable, as Spivak further suggests, both from his problematic status within it as an uncalled witness, and the ambiguous nature of his untranslated (and perhaps ultimately untranslatable) complaint, which he compels those present in court to hear, even though it cannot be fully understood—also dramatizes the impasse of aesthetic mediation we have been exploring as an immediately ethical and political problem. In other words, what had previously appeared as a dilemma of narrative representation—as the impossibility of integrating the discourse of, and debates about, global governance into a narrative of local experience—now is presented as an ethical and political imperative: This man's complaint, his expression of the wrong that he has suffered, *must* be heard within an existing space of juridical and political discourse that has neither a place for it, nor the means to fully comprehend it.

But this shift in focus is not without its own formal implications as well. For it leads us to turn from a first reading of *Bamako*—focused primarily on the limits, within the present conjuncture, of any dialectic of representation which might attempt, in its depiction of a global situation, to mediate between the individual or local case and the laws of the totality—to reading the film as a staging of the pragmatic conditions, limits and effects of an act of enunciation that would call the structure of the totality itself, along with its system of governance, into question. For this intervention obliges us to ask: in what form, and to what effect, can the complaints of those condemned by the structures of the global system to unrelenting pauperization be heard within—or, indeed, beyond—the discourse concerning that system's governance?

We have already begun to address the most immediate effect of this intervention. It reformulates an impasse at the level of representational form—the failure of mediation we have discussed above—as an ethical and, ultimately, political demand. For it confronts us with the implicit assertion by one of those forced to participate in the

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global system, while having no part in its governance, of his right to intervene within the discursive space where the process of that governance is formulated and debated. In doing so, it implicitly calls into question the legitimacy of any political theatre that provides no place or time for his intervention. But by thus reframing the nonrelationship between the discourse of global governance and the lives of the governed as the site of a demand that cannot be satisfied within the limits of existing political discourse, the enunciative act of this singular witness paradoxically produces before us the image of a relationship where there was none—an image through which, to once again borrow Rancière’s language, it becomes possible for “the relationship and the nonrelationship to be seen together as the object of dispute” (40). In this first aspect, the old man’s intervention is emblematic of a key effect of *Bamako* considered as an intervention in debates on globalization: that of forcing us to confront the crucial political question of which speech “counts” as political, and which does not—and who is counted as a legitimate political subject, and who is not—in contemporary discourses of globalization.

But the scandal of this witness’s intervention goes beyond the paradox of staging a trial in which the refusal of the reigning authorities to recognize a complainant as a party to the dispute turns out to be the very wrong to be adjudicated. A further scandal lies in the fact that, at this moment, this complainant, whose intervention has no place in the legitimate forms of political discourse, nonetheless comes to provisionally express the grievances of society as a whole. To be sure, the community on behalf of which he speaks does not yet exist as such. Indeed, the potential members of that community are collectively defined by the reigning institutions of the global system, just as this witness is defined by them individually, only negatively—as those who, since they are recognized only as inheritors of debts whose benefits they have never received, count as less than nothing.

But that community, which can neither rely on national or international institutions to represent it, nor refer to a representable class or party that might incarnate it as a collective body, is nonetheless momentarily called into being by the enunciative act of this uninvited witness. This potential collectivity does not appear, to be sure, as the object of a representation of the existing social totality. For it is not as yet even a part of that whole, against which it can only assert itself as a virtual community of debtors, endowed with nothing more than the authority of its suffering. And yet the image of this potential collective momentarily emerges as an affective reality in response to the peasant’s appeal. From the beginning of his complaint, both the proceedings of the trial and the work going on around it come to a halt, as both participants in the trial and those who had been more or less casual observers are equally transfixed by the astonishing appearance on the scene of this figure who belongs neither to the juridical world of the court, nor to the familiar local world of the courtyard. As the emotional intensity of his lament progressively builds, we see, in a series of reaction shots, a corresponding wave of emotion rise as it passes through the crowd, encompassing not only the judges and observers whom he directly addresses, but also those who had been more or less indifferently going about their everyday affairs around it. As this witness sings and cries out his complaint, we see each in turn listening as if transfixed, as all eyes are drawn at first to the source of this unexpected interruption. But, as his singing continues, gazes turn reflectively elsewhere, eyes closing, turning down or toward the

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distance, as if each hears expressed in this anguished irruption of a memory of suffering within the political space of the trial—an event in itself exceptional enough to interrupt both the procedure of the trial and the rhythm of domestic labors—the effects of a whole string of catastrophes he or she has lived in isolation.

Whose fate is being decried or lamented by the voice of this uncalled witness, and the flood of accumulated anger and grief that it pours forth? Does it express the individual suffering of this man alone? Does it lament the fates of those who have testified before him, or those to whose reactions the camera cuts away as he speaks? Does it express the shame and anger of the economic migrant who was forced to leave his companions' bodies exposed in the desert, the longings of the young man dying (very possibly of AIDS) in the isolation of his room, or the despair of Chaka, whose solitary suicide on a road outside the collective space of the courtyard seems already to be announced by his mournful song? Sissako's editing of this sequence invites us to understand that his lament expresses all of these at once, as if it were the memory of all of these individual sufferings distilled into a single lament—as if those hearing it, both within and outside the discursive space of the trial, found echoed in this cry a common memory of wrong, which passes through the collective it calls together in a single wave of grief and indignation.

Not that this witness represents that collective which, as we have seen, does not yet exist as such. Nor, indeed, is his own fate represented, in terms that might permit his addressees (including his cinematic spectators) to identify with it, still less to rewrite it as an allegory for the social whole. Sissako's strategic withholding of the translation of his discourse invites his various publics to receive his song as it is performed as a pure asignifying affect, in relationship to which its meaning and its frame of reference are secondary. But it is precisely the isolation of the affective power of his song as such from its signification which permits his performance to intercede between all of the heretofore individual wrongs suffered by those auditors, by placing them momentarily into an indeterminate, but nonetheless intensive, relation.

He appears here, in other words, to use Deleuze's term, as an "intercessor."¹¹ His intervention makes it possible for what might otherwise be lived as a series of private griefs to be expressed as a collective grievance, insofar as they are the effects of one and the same event: that of the sentence imposed on a global population of debtors by the IMF and the World Bank. But his cry of protest, as itself an event in its own right, also gives rise to the powerful fiction of a possible world, in which what had previously been lived as a series of individual wounds can be experienced as immediately political. That is why this prolonged song or cry, as Sissako remarks, has no need to be translated, any more than one needs to translate the silence that precedes it (DVD interview). For the value of this expression of each of these individual griefs as moments of a single affective movement—and the standard according to which it must be "judged"—lies not in its capacity (or failure) to represent each in terms of a global situation, but in its power to leap beyond itself: both in its ecstatic movement among the individuals who are drawn by it into the collective experience of grievance it announces, and in the affective overflow of the borders between the juridical world of the trial and the world of everyday life. Its role is not to represent the relationship between individuals and the emerging collective, nor the relationship between that collective and the space of a

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political discourse that excludes it, within the frame of an overarching totality. Nor is it limited to staging the undecidability of those relations (although it is not the least of its merits, as we have seen, that it does do that as well). The effect of this intercessor's cry is, more fundamentally, to unleash a "movement of world" (to use Deleuze's term) in which each individual is affected by his or her potential relation to the others, as each, in response to the cry that passes through them all, comes to echo or resonate with the others. In response to his call, they are momentarily drawn into a movement toward a new common world that arises out of their relation—a world in which their individual griefs appear as a collective matter.¹²

This movement, like the cry that sets it in motion, finds its most powerful echo beyond the space of the trial and its political theatre in Melé's tearful repetition of the song that she sang joyfully at the beginning of the film, and which she sings for the second time toward its end, when the trial is over. "... It is," as Sissako observes of this second performance of the song, "as if she had participated in the trial, as though she is aware and wants to show her support for what was said there...." (DVD Interview). Indeed, this affective response to the trial, beyond the circumscribed space of its performance, is all the more powerful in that it comes from one of those non-participants who, as Sissako remarks, had previously been indifferent to its theatre. Here, the irruption of the suffering of everyday existence within the space of politics would seem to find its counterpart outside the trial: Melé's song, sung in a domain normally excluded from political debate, her place of work, is involuntarily but affectively performed as a sort of testimony given after the trial, a public performance of a grief whose experience has become interwoven with the political, even if it initially appears, and is expressed, outside the institutionally sanctioned space of politics.

This makes it all the more striking that this wave of collective passion, which, as we have seen, achieves its most intense expression in the complaint of Zegué Bamba, and then finds a powerful echo in Melé's song, is broken by the event with which that song is juxtaposed—the suicide of Melé's husband, Chaka. Chaka's death on the roadside takes place outside the private space of his family (where we have seen him caring for the couple's daughter), outside the local collective space of the courtyard, and outside the political discourse of the trial. It thus exemplifies the very anomie Chaka alludes to earlier in the film in his interview with a journalist covering the trial. Having argued in a previous interview that the worst effect of structural adjustment policies is the destruction of the social fabric, he is asked by the reporter to repeat his statement for the record, as Chaka's statement has accidentally been erased. But Chaka, with an air of resignation, declines to say anything further, insisting that no one would listen to his grievances in any case.

This suggests that, just as the intervention of Zegué Bamba implicitly affirmed the right of each to be heard, even if he or she cannot yet be fully understood, Chaka's suicide would seem to represent the ultimate abandonment of the hope of being heard in the structures governing the current global conjuncture. It may thus be taken as one possible verdict on the trial itself, which, in light of this shocking event, risks being dismissed retrospectively as an ephemeral and ineffectual dream of protest, from which the suicide's pistol shot might be said to awaken us. Indeed, is not Chaka's suicide immediately followed by the disappearance of the tribunal from the courtyard? When

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we return from the road where his body lies, as yet undiscovered and unattended, we see the chairs from which the judges had presided stacked up, and discover that the participants and observers of the trial have been transformed into a stunned and passive crowd of mourners. After a brief prayer, we see this crowd solemnly but quickly disperse, in part through the lens of the diegetic cameraman, Falaï, who, having been on hand to record the collective's theatrical emergence, is also there to document its disappearance, as it trails after the bier bearing the body out of the courtyard.¹³

In their wake, the mourners, who had so recently been engaged in a theatre of justice, have left this quotidian space which has been returned to its banality, as a solitary man takes up the rugs on which they had been seated, amid the clotheslines and their drying laundry. The trial—together with the arguments of the advocates and the testimony of its victims—has perhaps been nothing more than theatre after all. For the collective that its dramas had briefly called into existence has evaporated. The last shot of the film lingers on the gate out of which the crowd has departed, perhaps inviting us to consider the consequence of its disappearance from the space where the complaints of everyday existence had found a sufficiently theatrical expression to appear as political contestation, perhaps also to reflect on the possibility of that provisional community's eventual return.

For this space remains haunted by the two parallel events whose effects have been played out within it, and by the two impossible worlds which those juxtaposed but divergent events have conjured up before our eyes. On the one hand, there is the uninvited witness's act of enunciation, and with it the emergence of the movement of affective attraction that draws together a collective which does not yet exist as such, but which, borne by an ecstatic wave of grief, has nonetheless briefly emerged on the scene of politics to affirm its political visibility. On the other hand, there is the act of suicide that takes place, not only outside of the realm of politics, but seemingly beyond the limits of sociality, an act which precipitates the disintegration of that same collective, and its dispersion from the site of contestation. Two worlds, then, coexist as memories within the same space, where we have lived through the duration of a passage from one to the other.

In a sense, we have returned to a situation analogous to the opening of the film, where two noncommunicating worlds are presented side by side within a single space. But the problem of how to think their coexistence has, by the end of the film, been formulated in a new way. Between the two, there is no longer only the abyss of a nonrelation, as between the noncommunicating spheres of the global system. There is also the potentiality of a passage from one world to another—a potentiality that is lived affectively either as a movement of ecstatic passion that overflows its limits, giving rise to an image of collectivity, or as the collapse of that same movement in a catastrophic blockage of communication that depopulates the space of potential collectivity, leaving behind only an empty theatre of sociality, devoid of collective actors. At the end of the film, the problem of thinking the relationship between the political realm of the trial and that of everyday experience is thus no longer posed as that of mediating between an “elsewhere” and a “here” that could be represented as spheres or moments of a single global situation. Rather, we are called upon to think the passage between the impossible worlds that appear as coexisting potentialities of a single space

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immediately before us. In the first, the collective, in affirming its own existence, lays claim to a new form of appearance which reimagines the relation of the political to what had heretofore been excluded from it; while in the second, the collective disappears altogether from the scene of the political.

“I think the center of the world is everywhere,” remarked Sissako during a visit to Izola, in Slovenia. “When I’m in Izola, I think the center of the world is here.”¹⁴ If a courtyard in Bamako becomes, for the duration of a trial, the center of the world, it is not because this place has any special privilege over any other, but because it is in this space, for the time of this event, that the logic governing the whole world is contested by a part of the world that has no part in its governance. But the very form of that contestation—an enunciative act which, by calling the virtual collective it addresses into being, sets in motion a “movement of world”—confronts us with the question: For what collective, and of what world, will this place be the provisional center?

If, as the ambiguous conclusion of *Bamako* reminds us, this question is as yet largely an open one, it is no doubt due in part to the scarcity of collective actors on the global stage able to contest the logic governing the global system as a whole. But this question has, meanwhile, only become more pressing with the rapid spread of a systemic global crisis, as the virtual community of debtors becomes increasingly visible even within the metropole’s great citadels of international speculation and finance, which have complacently flattered themselves that they governed from the world system’s stable and immovable center. Indeed, in the present crisis, the cry of Sissako’s film—with its appeal to a collective that does not yet exist, together with its creation of an affective, if ephemeral, image of that collective—now reverberates with a new intensity, not only in Africa and the global South, but within the metropole itself. The problem of representing or mapping this new global situation—in which, with the economic collapse of Iceland, the reach of the IMF’s policies of structural adjustment extends from the global South to the Arctic Circle—will undoubtedly be posed anew, and in new forms, as this crisis unfolds. But, as we have seen, Sissako’s film does not only lead us to reflect on how *Bamako*’s various publics might map their own respective places, either in relation to this new global situation considered as a whole, or in relation to the ambiguous place of the film’s uninvited witness, whose cry reverberates within and beyond its fictive theatre of justice. It also obliges us to ask in what form, and under what conditions, new collective actors might emerge to respond to its call.

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Notes

¹ This quote is from the interview appearing on the DVD released by New Yorker Video (2008) (hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as “DVD Interview”).

² Sissako's text appears in the booklet accompanying the DVD released by New Yorker Video (2008) along with other short texts by other African intellectuals and representatives of civil society critical of the policies imposed by the so-called "Washington Consensus." For an extended critique of those policies from an insider's perspective, see Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

³ See Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente: Politique et Philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), translated in English by Julie Rose as *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.) Parenthetical references in the text will be to the English translation.

⁴ On transcoding, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 40.

⁵ As Sissako says of *Bamako's* own distribution in the interview on the New Yorker Video DVD, "Unfortunately, the question of the distribution of this film is a difficult question, as for any African film, because the distribution networks that once existed on this continent are dead [...] So today the visibility of the film in Africa will be a difficult matter..." (I have modified the translation given in the subtitles.) This situation, he goes on to argue, is itself partly attributable to cultural policies imposed as a result of "structural adjustment."

⁶ For a discussion of a number of permutations of this problem, see Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

⁷ Most immediately, the origin of those grievances may be traced back to the injustice inflicted on her by her former lover, Dramaam Drameh, who deserted her and their child for a then wealthier woman, but, considered in a broader context, they are inseparable from her mistreatment as a woman by the patriarchal establishment of the town, which connived at this injustice.

⁸ Given the film's biting portrayal of the gender and political relations that existed in the town before its complete assimilation into the global system, these virtues include an implicit rejection of any notion that an uncritical affirmation of the "traditional" or "local" might be an adequate response to multinational globalization. On this point, see Richard Porton, "Mambéty's *Hyenas*: Between Anti-Colonialism and the Critique of Modernity" *Iris* 18 (1995), which foregrounds Mambéty's refusal of any "essentialism" or simplistic "binarism" (98).

⁹ She summarizes his lament, which lasts for three minutes in the film (but which Sissako says was itself cut down from twenty minutes of improvised performance), in three questions: "Why don't I sow anymore? When I sow, why don't I reap? When I reap, why don't I eat." For his remarks cited above, see Sissako's interview with Ali Jaafar, "Finding Our Own Voices," in *Sight and Sound*, v.17 no. 2, February 2007, pp.30-31.

¹⁰ Spivak's lecture, "Rethinking Comparativism," delivered at Northwestern University March 8, 2008, discussed *Bamako*, among other texts, in a further development of questions raised in her *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), especially those raised on translation in the first chapter of that book, "Crossing Borders" (pp. 1-24).

¹¹ On the concept of the “intercessor” [*intercesseur*] in Deleuze’s thought, see *Pourparlers 1972-1990* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), 165-184. It is translated in English as *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 121-134 (where “*intercesseur*” is translated as “mediator,” despite the latter’s rather un-Deleuzian dialectical overtones.) The role of the intercessor in Deleuze’s thought is not to represent or exemplify, nor is it, as Ronald Bogue observes, “simply to advocate for the other,” “but also to ‘go between’ (Latin: *inter+cedere*), to assist the other by intervening in the other’s world and producing creative interference [...]” As Bogue points out, this concept in Deleuze has at once ethical, aesthetic and political dimensions: it is linked to the ethical imperative “to affect and be affected” by the other, “to suspend, as much as one can, the categorization and comprehension of the other,” in order to disclose “the undetermined, hidden possible worlds that are expressed in the affective signs of the other”; to the aesthetic aim of mobilizing “powers of the false” in order to produce new forms of truth; and to the political imperative to give expression to unactualized potentialities immanent in the social field, in the name of a “people to come.” See Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze’s Way: Essays in Transverse Ethics and Aesthetics* (Aldershot, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2007), 13-14.

¹² Deleuze’s notion of movements of world develops out of his discussion of “states of reverie, of waking dream, of strangeness or enchantment” in which the virtual potentialities unactualized in a situation (potentialities paradoxically disclosed by the blockage of a character’s immediate possibilities of acting upon that situation) are no longer attributed to the dream of an individual subject or character, but become visible in a virtual movement of the world surrounding that character, as in an “implied dream.” (See *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 58-64; *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 80-87. According to Deleuze, such movements of world, which perhaps find their supreme development in the musical comedy, depersonalize the powers called up by the dream, which thereby take on a collective dimension: “There takes place a kind of “worldizing” [*mondialisation*] or “societizing” [*mondianisation*], a depersonalizing....” (English trans. p. 59; French p. 80). This becoming-collective of the virtual powers mobilized by the dream, one might add, bears an undeniable, if often only implicit, political charge: it is indissociable, for example, from the utopian dimension of the musical as a form. In *Bamako*, of course, we are not transported into anything like the dream-world of an “enchanted proletariat” (as Deleuze says of the world of Busby Berkeley) (60; 82-83). Here, by way of contrast, it is the improbable event of the trial itself, in this everyday space, and, above all, the appearance of this uninvited witness within it, which, like the improbable movement, in the musical, from walking to dance in an ordinary street, provides the point of passage from the actual to the virtual. But Zegué Bamba’s performance—which draws previously individual griefs into an ecstatic movement passing through an emergent collective, and thereby give expression to its heretofore nonexistent world—expresses, no less than the “world” of a musical number, the experience of a virtual community, for which those previously private sufferings have been “worldized,” at least for the duration of that performance.

¹³ Falaï, in his attempts to film both lines of action in the courtyard throughout the film, despite being forbidden to do so, may in part, of course, be seen as a stand-in for the filmmaker himself.

¹⁴ “Abderrahmane Sissako explains Bamako,”

<http://www.isolacinema.org/2007/en/node/1961>.