# ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO, LARS VON TRIER, MICHAEL MOORE AND THE AESTHETICS OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CINEMA

## Carolyn Strachan

**BA University of New South Wales, 1969**

**Dip.Ed University of New England, 1974**

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**Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies**

**Macquarie University**

# Abstract

This thesis explores new currents in political cinema in the films of Abderrahmane Sissako, Lars von Trier and Michael Moore. The three filmmakers selected adopt aesthetic strategies to interrogate and expand older parameters of political cinema to create new and divergent radical cinemas. All three filmmakers work in a politically engaged terrain that challenges the status quo. They contextualize current historic/economic conditions and unite around anxieties and reactions to neoliberalism. They cover different geographic locations and enter at different points along a cultural spectrum to collectively serve as an overall global barometer to shifts in expression of the sociopolitical and cinematic landscape. The work of African filmmaker, Abderrahmane Sissako counters European parochialism and Eurocentrism. Lars von Trier digs deep into a critique of the western canon and the Enlightenment, with an aesthetic of what Deleuze calls a "new baroque". Michael Moore with carnivalesque techniques, and populist appeal, challenges American neoliberalism.

The thesis will analyse the aesthetic choices of the three filmmakers who adopt previous dominant models of political cinema and combine them with emergent political aesthetics.  It has been stated that it is impossible to return to the heady days of the revolutionary idealist cinemas of the Soviet Revolution or post-1968.  However, this thesis argues that there is a blurred boundary between the more modernist strategies of the militant cinema of the 1920s and the 1970s and those after the postmodern turn. The filmmakers selected for analysis create a new political cinema in keeping with postmodernist fragmentation and humour. At the same time, they also borrow an anti-canonical aesthetic from previous waves of political filmmakers by adopting "political modernism" in its Marxist/Brechtian form, using reflexive realism, alienation effects, and counter

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cinema as strategies.

The result of these combinations has created new, exciting and divergent cinemas that expand the definitions of older forms of political modernist cinema.

# Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled "Abderrahmane Sissako, Lars von Trier, Michael Moore and the Aesthetics of Contemporary Political Cinema" has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Carolyn Strachan 44822243
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# Acknowledgements

First, I must thank my advisor Dr. Iqbal Barkat. I was very nervous at the beginning of this journey and wanted a bit of handholding. He did the opposite and I thank him for it. He challenged me every step of the way, pushing me to find my own intellectual rigor.

I would like to thank the MRes program for giving me the opportunity to re-examine the theoretical underpinnings that formulated my filmmaking practice, and above all, to give me the research opportunity to explore current political filmmaking practices.

I would like to thank the cadre of women filmmaker colleagues and friends who have supported each other since the 1970s when we all embarked on political filmmaking and the associated theoretical scholarship that inspired this thesis.

I thank my filmmaking partner, Alessandro Cavadini, for the body of political documentaries we made together with Aboriginal communities around Australia. It was learning to live under Aboriginal law that gave me insight to understanding a non-essentialist view of human nature. Here were people living in a non-capitalist system, an egalitarian society for both men and women-no hierarchies, no leaders-a vast system of protocols of communal decision making for all aspects of life from ritual to work to social order. I saw the possibility of a Marxist society practiced beyond state control. Rather than seeing Marxism as a stagist theory of industrialization and progress, the communal connection to land could be seen as a future model that could make a contribution to social justice. I became a skeptic of the almost religious belief in science and Enlightenment rationalism. The Aboriginal people taught me to perceive the world differently, to

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listen with my ear to the ground. These experiences perhaps prompted me to choose to examine the work of Abderrahamane Sissako whose films are both political and connected to indigenous cultures. Sissako was inspired by the Marxist/Surrealist poet Aime Cesaire who saw the use of poetry as a political act to transcend historical trauma and a new way to advocate for the world: "my ear against the ground/ I heard Tomorrow pass"

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# Preamble

I began my filmmaking career amid the tumult of 1960s agitation. I saw my filmmaking as part of a broader movement for change. My university history teachers were Marxists and in my second major, Drama, my primary inspiration and final thesis was on Bertold Brecht. I imagined my future working within the admixture of these theoretical frames. Cinema practitioners, like Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, were early inspirations; I wanted a career as a practitioner/intellectual in which I could combine a deep theoretical understanding of social relations, political aesthetics and artistic practice.

I have worked on documentaries (the Gough Whitlam campaign in 1972, and the fall of Gough Whitlam, "The Greatest Advertising Campaign This Country Has Ever Known" in 1975) and I have worked on experimental films including short films with Paul Cox. While my film reputation has been built on the critical success of *Two Laws,* a documentary, I was not committed to the pursuit of the "purity" of observational cinema as a goal in itself. I chose to focus on diverse voices and political change and I would have chosen any form that would best serve the purpose.

Over the past decades, my primary preoccupation has been to engage critically in social theory and politics and to translate such knowledge into accessible forms in order to create new forms of shared public knowledge. When studying history at the University of New South Wales, I saw myself as a historian with ambitions to make history accessible to a broader audience. In the 1960's there was dissatisfaction with the history department. As students of Australian history, a number of us complained that there was no Aboriginal history taught either pre or post contact. I decided I wanted to engage more directly in the interpretation and recording of history and so I began work on the film *Ningla A-*

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*na* (1972) a record of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra and the first national movement for Aboriginal Land Rights. *Ningla A-na* is still recognized by the Aboriginal community as a significant document of that time. At the invitation of Bob Maza, I worked with the National Black Theatre and worked on Robert J. Merritt's *The Cake Man* in Redfern. As a result of working with the Aboriginal community in Redfern, Alessandro Cavadini and I were asked to make more films with Aboriginal communities and we formed a film company, Red Dirt Films. I have since worked in Aboriginal communities in Sydney, Melbourne, Townsville, Palm Island, Cairns, Yarrabah, Tully, Murray Upper, Darwin, Alice Springs, Borroloola, The Kimberleys and others.

As part of our filmmaking practice, we traveled throughout Australia showing our films in cinemas, universities, classrooms, community halls, bars, and cafeterias. We sat with these audiences and led post-screening discussions. We understood that while the message of the film was powerful, the audience wasn't necessarily moved to accept new information or change their minds, let alone be prompted to act.  When we showed *Ningla A-na,* the audience clearly saw angry urban Aboriginal people protesting against something referred to as "second class citizenship." We were often asked why they were so angry. We knew *Ningla A-na* was an important film, because it recorded the first national mobilization of Aboriginal people and the movement did lead to social change. However, we couldn't help feeling that film in general could contribute more than simply recording a movement once it had achieved significant momentum. Perhaps film could contribute to the early steps towards social change.

*Two Laws* emerged ten years later and evolved from a willingness to experiment with form. The central tenet of our filmmaking practice was to work with grass roots communities and only at their invitation.  We were thus assured that the community wanted to make a film-passionately-and that this invitation

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would provide the focal energy to make it happen. While this basic method of working with communities did not change, the film product did.

*Two Laws* evolved by surrendering our filmmaking control to the collective process of Aboriginal Law. However, it wasn't our intention to make the definitive film of 'the natives' point of view. Our goal was to suggest diversity and to mediate intercultural understandings.

The work stands out as a decidedly non-Eurocentric film, eschewing the conventions of observational cinema and unmasking the realist tradition and objectifying discourse that often represents patriarchy and colonialism in documentary films. *Two Laws* represents an amalgam of forces, of direct participation and theoretical underpinnings, for example, Third World Cinema.

All film decisions were made collectively within the codes of Aboriginal Law, and as a result, the film is not a grand narrative, but through Aboriginal modes of storytelling, direct address, re-enactment, and active participation, the community tells its own story within its own historical, political and cultural framework.

Formally, we used a wide angle lens, long takes, and eschewed authoritive editing. Using a wide angle lens opens up a window, to a wide landscape, which maximized the number of people in the frame and exposed the land, the cultural imperative of Aboriginal law. Instead of using editing techniques to lead the western audience through a translated Eurocentric frame, the wide frame challenged the audience to experience the film by scanning the frame rather then being led from cut to cut. It was only later that I understood the full meaning of the wide-angle lens, the choice of the community. It allowed multiple layers of meanings to co-exist within the frame. It opened up space for multiple voices, and for more complex signs to be understood only by the general

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Aboriginal audience. There were even more significant signs, sacred and concealed, that only the Borroloola community understood.

*Two Laws,* using the reflexive mode of Brecht's "the laying bare the causal network," reveals processes:  the communal decision-making process, community historical context, the filmmaking process, the process of re-enactment, (not by reliving a historical trauma, but of deconstructing and claiming community history). The process of empowering ordinary people through direct participation in production is a way to demonstrate that social change is created not only through counter-hegemonic discourses, but also by altering the process of production itself. The extension of this idea forms a basis for social relations and organizational forms that not only create Aboriginal points-of-view, but also create organizational forms that provide a political approach to filmmaking as an example of new societal structures.

As the press discussed the film as a radical new documentary and a revolutionary way to understand the Other, we were emboldened by the idea that we were part of a new wave of radical filmmaking that heralded new experiments in filmmaking and social change.

However, major political and economic changes in the 1980s had serious consequences for political film. I was first awakened to this when traveling with *Two Laws* to film festivals around the world in the early 1980s. I was told that politics were over, that the 70s were "so over." It seemed our whole movement of radical filmmaking was suddenly unfashionable. The Sydney Filmmakers' Cooperative, where I was on the board of directors, closed in 1981. The national film journal *Filmnews,* where I was on the editorial collective, was disbanded. While many of us continued to work in some form: for example, Paper Tiger TV in New York to counter corporate media, we were situated firmly on the margins.

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It could be argued that the 1970s held out hope for the possibility of change even though capitalism had mutated and survived. However, economic structures went through significant changes in the 1980s from industrial manufacturing to a post-industrial system. Markets were deregulated, trade unions were attacked, and a major structural mutation, produced by a marketized and privatized economy, mutated into its current economic manifestation: Finance Capitalism. Under the banner of Reaganism, there was a shift to the right and a general acceptance of capitalism as the only business in town.

The cultural equivalent is the negative interpretation of postmodernism's lack of materialist analysis, the End of History, and hopelessness for the possibility of change. It was with a deep melancholia that I witnessed capitalism thrive with the old standby of divide-and-rule by taking advantage of difference created by identity politics. In the 1970s the Aboriginal Land Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, The Labour movement, and other movements were theoretically, and often actively, linked together with an understanding of the structural underpinnings of political economy. The Aboriginal Land Rights movement took the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement as its models. These movements were broad in scope and at base anti-capitalist. But as time went on, I was ostracized as 'whitey' within the Aboriginal organizations where I had been active; I was no longer a comrade at arms. I was part of the Feminist Film Workers in Sydney and I saw myself as a Marxist Feminist, but slowly discourse drifted into gender identity without the broader perspective that made connections between patriarchy and capitalism.

Postcolonial Studies separated East and West (or North and South). Disavowing a focus on capital and class in favour of culturalist identification in a neocolonial world order ignored the implications of imperialism in a common global framework. This promoted a kind of Orientalism in which the oppressed in

the global south were marginalized, oppressed, deemed outside the global economy.

Was I an old relic thrown on the scrap heap and no longer relevant? It appeared I was until economic and historic circumstances made a dramatic reversal. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq cast doubt on a postcolonial world. The financial collapse of 2008 challenged the entrenchment of neoliberal capitalism. There has been a dramatic reassessment of these past decades and a reassertion of a Marxist understanding of the connection between current imperialism and neoliberalism. Marx not only identified the economic structural underpinning of society, but also demonstrated that emancipation is not possible unless it is within the framework of class struggle that incorporates *all* identities.

The intensification of economic collapse and increasing inequalities has led to an urgency and a resurrection and proliferation of writers who have always seen the underlying logic of the structural flaws of capitalism. The inevitable crisis, as predicted by Marx, has prompted three filmmakers discussed in this thesis to critique the underlying political economy of capitalism.

I join the chorus and see the resurrection of a close examination of capitalism as a validation of our political investments in the 1960s. It is with excitement that I explore the current cultural manifestations of a still valid premise. Marx is back.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*"Time is out of joint"* - the dead king in *Hamlet*

Political cinema creates an arena that gives substance to a social-political imaginary in order to provoke the audience to thoughtful engagement or incite direct participation. The three filmmakers selected for this thesis engage contemporary spaces that reflect current trends in the political landscape to address anxieties of contemporary capitalism. They offer unique contributions to understanding the historical, political, and theoretical terrain. As a result, they have created subversive films in diverse, unexpected, difficult and humorous ways.

The 1920s and 1960s marked periods of proliferation in political filmmaking. These periods coincide with periods of economic upheaval with unemployment, inequalities and market collapse. This led to skepticism of the economic/political system and theoretical interrogations of, among other things, alienation in labour, free market, and "commodity existence." Artistic expressions arise to explain or combat current anxieties.

This did not happen in the late 1980s and, in fact, there was a decline in political activism. Although this period was marked by a major economic shift from manufacturing industrial capitalism to free market neoliberal global finance capitalism, sometimes known as the "right turn," or the "Reagan Revolution" Reuss, 2007, n.p.) it was also a normalization process. As Susan Buck-Morss ominously states that with the increasing division between rich and poor, there is "a situation for which the new global organization of capitalism–unchallenged as winner in history-no longer tries to apologize" (Buck-Morss, 2002, p.212).

The word "capitalism" had not been used commonly since the 1970s as if using the term would trigger 1960s agitation. For people living today, an alternative to capitalism is not even a consideration. Mark Fisher explains,

> Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. Jameson used to report in horror about the ways that capitalism had seeped into the very unconscious. (Fisher, 2009, p.8)

Economists such as Paul Mason, David Harvey, and Richard Wolff observe that the historical convergence of growing global interdependence and domestic socioeconomic conformity to neoliberalist policies has led to crisis. Economic deterioration in both the north and the south has increased inequalities and the rapid growth of globalization has led to widespread alarm of neoliberalist ideology of the free market, a disorientation of thought, and a hegemonised acceptance of the impossibility of an alternative.

The challenge for current political filmmakers is to undermine the claim that global neoliberalism has won. The filmmakers' first political priority is to make the audience aware that it is a living historical hell. Any cinematic exposition of current disorientation must first be an appeal to the imaginary. This concern relates to Brecht's *Historisierung* which says that "the purpose [is to] mak[e] people aware of the historical contradictions and the repeatability of the terror of history"(Koutsourakis, 2013, p.85). The second requirement for the political filmmaker is to create an imaginary that suggests the possibility of an alternative as a "way to conceive themselves as active historical subjects and think of alternatives to the repeatable historical oppression" (ibid, p.85).

In this current state of socio-political uncertainty, the filmmakers under discussion are driven by the urgent need to map and understand the present situation. Their work cannot be understood without a sense of historical roots. By

deepening an interrogation launched in the 1960s, their films contextualize the historical/theoretical terrain and at the same time represent a departure from the old to create new political cinemas.

## Strategies

I will integrate theoretical insights from the field of film studies within the broader critical/cultural studies in order to explore ways various aesthetic tools are deployed for rhetorical impact.

There has been debate as to whether an intermixture of political economy and cultural studies are compatible. Graham Murdock states:

> Critical political economy is at its strongest in explaining who gets to speak to whom and what forms these symbolic encounters take in the major spaces of public culture.  But cultural studies, at its best, has much of value to say about…how discourse and imagery are organized in complex and shifting patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life (Miller, 2001, p.2).

While I acknowledge that there are contradictions between these two approaches, I wish to engage in that dialogue but ultimately show that these contradictions are not mutually exclusive. Whether or not the filmmakers are declared Marxists, their films use political economy as a base to investigate the structural conditions of current economic crisis. Cultural Studies, for example, is useful in producing the tangible imagery of current conditions and the imaginary of future possibilities. It is useful to understand how the films are received by an audience, to be considered part of a broader effort to instigate debate, media coverage, shape public and policy opinion and spark activist networks.

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My method is to analyze the texts, their contexts, and to some extent their social impact beyond the texts. I take the insights from the political economy they critique and the complex patterns of the imaginary in which they express their ideas. My methodological approach can be divided into three sections, but are not weighted equally:

**Textual analysis** – A large section of the thesis consists of textual analysis of the film text and connections between a filmmaker's multiple texts. Tom Gunning has observed that an "analysis of the individual film provides a sort of laboratory for testing the relationship between theory and history"(Redwood, 2015, p.50). The aim is to examine how approaches to the films' construction work to destabilize perceptions of the world to help define political cinema.

2. **Context** --It is naïve to suggest that textual analysis does not resonate a multiplicity of historical and political references. The aim is to explore how these films are situated historically. There has been a long productive engagement between theory and practice in political cinema, and theoretical concerns involving political aesthetics are vital for audience reception and action. Bakhtin and Medvedev argue that form and structure are "just as historically and ideologically shaped as theme and content" (Stam, 2000, p.197).

A further aim is to explore how these films might reflect contemporary societal perspectives and how these films might contribute to public debate.

3. **Public re-articulation & rhetorical Impact –** In times of economic and social crises, music, film, television, and social media often reflect chaotic cultural perceptions and open up public deliberation. I will examine the ways in which popular understandings of both feature films and documentary work to rearticulate the meaning and importance of the films. These texts function as points of debate, taken up and circulated in the press and social media becoming spaces for public deliberation about something beyond the text itself.

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Although the study of film is a large area of scholarship, there is no significant body of work on the ability of film to accomplish social and political goals. It is important to examine the possibilities of the political film functioning as a site of social change. Due to limitations of length for the MRes there will be no thorough investigation to understanding the relationship between text and social change, but it is important to note that the intentions of the filmmakers and their texts have public impact with consequences in the cultural landscape. The results of such cultural interventions are not always clear, but as the above suggests these cultural texts have invigorated public debates and political issues.

## Economic/Historic Context

The decline of political cinema in the late 1980s reflected the acceptance of advanced industrial capitalism as the operating economic system, and criticism of that system in the postmodern age has retreated over the past three decades. It has been argued that changing class compositions and the digital revolution no longer represent the traditional class allegiances of the industrial economy and have produced new social identities that reflect a "post-industrial" culture of consumerism, communications, and the service industry. It suggests that the old left-right polarity is obsolete, replaced by identity issues rather than economic equity.

However, economic dysfunction, first manifested in the global south, began with the fade-out of the postwar boom leading to globalization, to massive international migrations of labour, and increased inequality which "rapidly revert[ed] to Victorian levels of inequality" (Eagleton, 2007, p.3) and a resurgence of racism.

More recent crises have also hit the global north. Wars, oil shocks, the market collapse of 2008, and a general economic downturn have led to an acute economic crisis. Increased anxiety has renewed discussion on the excesses of

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the "free" market and its links to government policy: for example, austerity and the bailout of US banks, leading Paul Mason to declare, "Neoliberalism is broken" (Mason, 2015, p.3) and Richard Wolff to assert, "Capitalism has gone mad" (NPR radio program, 2017).

This has led a renewed interest in capitalism and Marx. While early Marxist theory was a little heavy handed in its denunciations of the "ideological state apparatuses" its one-size-fits-all oversimplification, and its use of nouns like "revolution" and "liberation" to suggest a utopian future, the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction toward a disillusion with any possibility of any change.  Documentary theorist Michael Renov asks whether "our critical goals [have] become too diffuse in the aftermath of the galvanizing social movements of the 1960s [that] … we [have] given ground too readily to hegemonic forces?" (Gaines and Renov, 1999, p.234)

Jane Gaines calls for a return to a space where individual and collective subjects can "regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by … our social confusion." (ibid. p.54)

Reviewing Marx sets the stage for a reassessment:

One of Marx's principal objectives was to show how the subsumption of labour to capital, the capitalist colonization of indigenous lands, and the global spread of market relations were dynamics internal to capitalism and not products of a "natural" and inevitable progression through transhistorical "stages" of human evolution (Keefer, 2010, p.791).

Left wing thinkers and economists like Yanis Varoufakis, David Graeber, David Harvey, Kari Polany Levitt, Richard Wolff, Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Thomas Piketty and others have had a resurgence

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of popular interest in their work. An intensified review of Marxist theory has led many to argue that is still the most rigorous critique of the system (Eagleton, 2001, p.2) Marx's historical analysis understood the ever-changing nature of capitalism, predicted a decline of the working class, and foresaw globalization (ibid.p.2). In these current conditions, acknowledging the underlying logic of a Marxist analysis of capitalism, Frederic Jameson says, "Marxism must necessarily become true again" (ibid.p.8). Referring to Marx, a 2008 headline in the London *Times*, read, "He's Back!" (Mason, 2015, p.49). Terry Eagleton has said that "Far from growing more moderate and benign [capitalism is] more ruthless and extreme than it had been before. And this has made the Marxist critique of it all the more pertinent" (Eagleton, 2001, p.7)

While technology has often defined the present stage of capitalism, Robert McChesney and John Nichols argue in their new book *People Get Ready* that technology will not be the solution many assume, that new jobs will not to replace the old ones. McChesney remarks "Capitalism is in a period of prolonged and arguably indefinite stagnation" (Karlin, 2016).

This has led to a renewed call to activism, and Jacques Derrida (2012) becomes relevant again. In his classic *Spectres of Marx*, he declares:

> Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth. (ibid., p.85)

There is an historic link with old collective social movements, such as the Factory Acts, women's suffrage, the abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights

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Movement, Anti-Apartheid, the Land Rights Movement and a growing awareness seen in new forms of political and aesthetic expressions. This has produced a wide spectrum of practices, evidenced by the mobilizations of the Zapatistas, The Battle of Seattle, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and other actions around the world that have come from the grassroots to address structural inequalities.

Paul Mason sees a resurgence of "rebel consciousness" but with different tools:

It is the networked individuals who have camped out in the city squares, blockaded the fracking sites, performed rock on the roofs of Russian cathedrals, raised defiant cans of beer in the face of Islamism on the grass of Gezi Park, pulled a million people on to the streets of Rio and Sao Paul and now organized mass strikes across southern China. (Mason, 2015, p.212)

McChesney and Nichols are optimistic about a trend to political consciousness:

An interest in politics is no longer a "lifestyle decision," like deciding whether to follow pro basketball, start a flower garden or do politics. It is increasingly a survival issue. And, to invoke Naomi Klein, that changes everything. (cited in Karlin, 2016, n.p.)

The three filmmakers take up the call. Stam in *Keywords in Subversive Cinema/Media Aesthetics* argues for a space for subversive cinema. As long as the capitalist system of international labour generates and amplifies social inequality, a strong divide will separate those who defend that system as normal and acceptable from those who seek to reverse it or at least try to combat its abuses (Stam, 2015, p.5).

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**Theoretical Overview**

> This is no good, she says, that is too conventional, you have to show how society
> makes them as they are. You have to show the *context*.
> (Phillips paraphrasing from Jean-Luc Godard in *Tout Va Bien* 2008 n.p.)

**Aesthetics & Politics**

Many postmodern critics stress the aesthetic, refusing the inextricable connections between the economic and aesthetic. (Jameson, 1998, p.142). I will follow Jameson by connecting links between the economic, the historic, and the aesthetic in the texts.

Concepts of political cinema emerged in the 1920s and 1960s. The aim of political cinema is to politicize the object by destabilizing the narrative, to disrupt, in order to make the audience more productive. Instead of trying to deliver the same canonical, emotional, and hegemonic narrative agendas, these political films are committed to questioning, and not just reproducing a normative sense of "reality" outside the narrative. Rather, they experiment with film language so as to negate a static and permanent understanding of social relationships and to reveal the possibility of change. This definition of political cinema aims at "denaturalizing" the perception of the world, to reveal its constructedness, instead of treating it as "natural" and fixed, "The prerequisite of this politicization of representation is a film practice that interrogates the familiar—both the socially familiar and the representational one—with the view to questioning the medium of its own articulation and pressing on the ways certain aesthetic practices shape our understanding of 'the real'" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.xvi).

Coming out of a postmodernist era there is a poly-perspective mix and match of aesthetic influences. Some might also argue that the anti-realist position

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can no longer function as revolutionary as many Hollywood art films and blockbusters have replaced traditional story telling by minimizing dramaturgy and mixing up image and sound to create spectacle, which can be seen as usurping Brechtian practices (ibid.). However, this is a misunderstanding of the use of aesthetics in political cinema. The Hollywood spectacle oversimplifies the object and stabilizes unproblematic narratives for pleasurable consumption. Political cinema aims to politicize the object by disruption, by destabilizing the narrative. It is viable as long as it disrupts, as long as it makes the audience think (ibid).

It has been argued that it is impossible to return to the heady days of the revolutionary idealist cinemas of the Soviet Revolution or post-1968. Martin O'Shaughnessy, in *New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film Since 1995,* argues that an immense gulf separates the militant cinema of 1968 with a "gradual disarticulation of a once-vibrant political discourse" (Ling, 2009, n.p.), that its language has been silenced and its struggles deprived of meaning (O'Shaughnessy, 2007).

However, this thesis argues that there is a blurred boundary between modernism and postmodernism and that the filmmakers selected for analysis show an interplay of tensions between the two. According to Derrida, "in moments of crisis radical thought needs to return to the past and proceed to criticize it and borrow from it at the same time" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.xxi). This theoretical framework will help me explore the filmmakers' postmodernist tendencies favoring heterogeneity, fragmentation, self-referentiality, humour and Eisenstein's "blows and shocks." At the same time, I will explore the adoption of Marxian sociology, an anti-canonical aesthetic of political modernism from previous waves of political films. This admixture, situated in a postmodernist decentred remapping of political and cultural possibilities, has produced new agitational cultural outputs.

**Brecht**

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The filmmakers in this thesis are distinct in that their cinemas have developed against a background of changing cultural and social circumstances. However, there is a foundational link to Bertold Brecht's 1930s Marxist-inflected critique of capitalism and bourgeois art forming a crucial connection with formal and political avant-gardes. The belief was that the structure of the film determined the message. The Brechtian critique of realism equated "realist" with "bourgeois" and "reflexive" with "revolutionary" (Stam, 2000, p.152) as theoretical tools in creating political cinema.

Brecht was critical in determining the aesthetics of political cinema. Robert Stam distinguishes between the illusion of reality and Brechtian aesthetic goals:

> Brecht's critique of realism centered on the ossified conventions of naturalist theater, but not on the goal of truthful representation. Brecht distinguished between realism as "laying bare society's causal network" – a goal realizable within a reflexive, modernist aesthetic—and realism as a historically determinate set of conventions. (ibid., p.253)

Adopting the Marxist rhetoric of earlier political filmmakers, the filmmakers use reflexivity to advance critical distance and a corresponding philosophical position of argument and social-political analysis. Scholars have referred to this as the "reflexive turn". By giving up the lie of objectivity, anthropology scholar Jay Ruby contends that reflexivity enables the audience to be aware of the filmmakers' methods and themselves in order to demystify the process, so that the film counters the dishonesty and elitism inherent in the 'realist' form (Ruby, 1977).

The "critique of realism," very influential in film studies, has been used to criticize stylistic illusionism and spectatorial naiveté and to advance critical distance and a corresponding philosophical position. However, more recent studies suggest a postmodernist negation of simple binaries appear to shift from a strictly anti-realist position, suggesting that these polarities are not so clear-cut and that realism and reflexivity can be "interpenetrating tendencies quite capable of coexisting with the same text"(Stam, 2001, p.152).

More recent film studies also question the rationality of Brechtian distance. Jane Gaines and others have pointed out its limitations and argue for the legitimacy of desire, to yield to audience fascination. She suggests that emotional knowledge can function as alternative, marginal and subversive, just as it can also confirm or perpetuate bourgeois reality. Gaines argues that a committed film should make the audience kick and yell, that emotion can lead the spectator to politics. She uses Eisenstein's idea of "blows and shocks to the psyche" as a way to approach social change in cinema. Contrary to the belief of the Brechtian intellectual approach, Eisenstein advocated "putting the sensuous back into the theory of political aesthetics" (as described in Gaines and Renov, 1999, p.88).

**Rethinking Brecht and Bakhtin**

When looking at the aesthetics of the three filmmakers, none adopt the dour aesthetics of the 1970s Brechtians. The filmmakers do something interesting by parsing these old theoretical assumptions and adopt what Stam observes to be a Brechtian approach that was never against entertainment or emotion:

> While Brecht endorsed popular forms of culture such as sport and the circus, the new theories [of the 1970s] offered only a festival of negations of the dominant cinema. (Stam, 2001, p.149)

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Stam, who has written extensively on Bakhtin, including *Subversive Pleasures Bakhtin Cultural Criticism and Film* (1989), discusses the notion of carnival. Stam points out that Shakespeare is a partial example of Brecht's work, which can be pleasurable *and* difficult. He points out that Shakespeare's plays could entertain the "Globe's motley crowd because they were multidimensional, with farce and slapstick for the groundlings and subtlety and allusion for the culturally privileged." (2000, p.155) Stam adds:

> Indeed, much of the greatest art that of Chaucer and Cervantes and Shakespeare, one might argue, was deeply rooted in a millennial substratum of popular irreverence and playfulness. (ibid. p.155)

The films could be described as pleasurable *and* difficult. Sissako uses passion and mocking humour, and von Trier and Moore come close to circus and vaudeville. The films eschew normative narrative cinema, for a non-linear and exhibitionist approach, which Tom Gunning calls "cinema of attractions," defined as "a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world" (Gunning, 1994, p.41).

**The Possibility of Alternatives**

The fragment and points of rupture, commonly associated with a postmodernist aesthetic, highlight the non-reconciliation of the individual and society, which the filmmakers present as the current state of crisis. However, the films' structural complexities cannot be seen as postmodern trickery, nor can they be understood within the rubric of postmodern pessimism. Despite the filmmakers' placement in the postmodern era, their films cannot be understood as the end of history. They contextualize postmodernism historically, as Frederic Jameson does, "in an age that has forgotten to think historically"(Jameson, 1991, p.ix) to expose the flaws in neoliberalist thinking where "capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history"(Fisher, 2009, p.4). The films raise questions

regarding history and the representation of history as a linear and inevitable movement forward. The cornerstone of establishment culture and ideology has produced a normative understanding of history as progress, proceeding along a continuum, with distinctions between "past" "present" and "future." The filmmakers challenge "official" history, which contrary to notions of progress, indicates a "retrogression of society"(Benjamin, 2006).

Modernists such as Adorno and Benjamin have explored understandings of "official" history and of futurity. They argue for the need to separate the radical imagination from social practices that have set in motion the regulation of the normative process of future-oriented conditioning, which has produced alienation, destruction, and domination over which individuals have no real control (Wilder, 2016). Wilder notes, "Critical theory and Left politics must therefore challenge both the liberal idea of history as a process of automatic improvement *and* its demand that individuals improve themselves in order to perfect society"(Wilder, 2016, n.p.).

> Walter Benjamin famously rejected the bourgeois conception of progress as founded on a shallow and quantitative understanding of homogeneous empty time. Reformist Social Democrats, he explained, confused progress of knowledge and skills with progress of humankind, which they mistakenly assumed would follow an automatic course through time and as history...Benjamin offered his famous image of progress as a storm blowing from paradise, piling wreckage upon wreckage within an unending catastrophe. (Ibid.)

The filmmakers seize the position as radical artists who *anticipate* a radical action. Gary Wilder discusses the *dialectics of anticipation* "which are dual imperatives, neither about optimism nor pessimism...it avoids the false opposition between liberal progress and apocalyptic rupture." It enables the artist to be "open to the impossible and to imagine the possible" to anticipate a "readiness to

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interrupt the continuum and a commitment to live otherwise" (Wilder, 2016, n.p.).

The filmmakers present perspectives "fashioned to displace and estrange the world...with its rifts and crevices" (Adorno, 2005 p.153). While they express the dystopian condition of neoliberalism, their works are not postmodernist nihilism. They offer glimpses of possibility. Sissako's application of Cesaire's Marxist- Surrealism stimulates consideration of pre-capitalist societies and prompts a revisit to Marx in relation to alternative structures in indigenous cultures. Even the oft-labeled dystopian Lars von Trier shows flashes beyond capitalism. While utopianism has been subject to frequent derision, Michael Moore in his film *Where to Invade Next* offers alternatives for now, not tomorrow. At the end of the film he declares, "I've become some crazy optimist."

I will integrate political economy and film theory within a critical/cultural studies perspective to map out the ways in which economic/historic circumstances inform the filmmakers' rhetorical maneuvers to create distinct political cinema. I will briefly explore how film conventions and public interpretations have been used in an effort to undermine political goals and cultural legitimacy, which have led to an escalation in controversy and to re-articulation in the public sphere.

In sum, this study will explore the filmmakers' adoption of the best lessons of modernism and postmodernism. These works re-combine various aesthetic practices to produce distinctive expressions of contemporary political cinema.

**Chapter Two – ADERRAHMANE SISSAKO – The Quiet and Not So Quiet Revolutionary**
*Bamako* (2004) *Timbuktu* (2015)

Sissako frames his work in the shadow of the Marxist/Surrealist poet Aimé Cesaire. *Bamako* is a polemical treatise: People of Africa versus crimes of the World Bank focusing on past colonialism and its connection to current structural adjustment policies. Interspersed with a Brechtian performative mock trial*,* Sissako employs a non-linear structure fragmenting the narrative to work on multiple levels to include cinematic visual pleasures of place and everyday life*.* *Timbuktu* provides a counterview of Islamic terrorists by mocking their stumbling attempts to assert power. Suggesting the theoretical underpinning of Marxist geography, Sissako opens his frame wide to desert landscape. By drawing upon visual and aural connections to land, multiple African cultures, and pre-colonial cultures, Sissako offers alternative possibilities to capitalism and social change.

**Chapter Three - LARS VON TRIER – A Lordly Racket/Artist Provocateur**
*Nymph( )maniac* (2014)

Von Trier's work, a fierce condemnation of economic and historic forces, digs deeper into a "cellular" level of experience to inhabit a dark dystopian malaise. He uses Brechtian distance to contextualize the historical trauma of WWII that extends into neoliberalism. Paradoxically, he pares down the cultural diegetic referents, and offers what Gilles Deleuze calls a "new baroque" film style a "contemporary form of social-historical-artistic thinking in a decentered world" (Stam, 2015, p.244). His Baroque, a polyphony of historical, literary, and cinema references, opens up opens up the possibility of alternative thinking. Adopting Brecht's desire to politicize the audience, von Trier utilizes the power of cinema to disrupt the cinematic experience in order to expose economic realities.

**Chapter Four –** - **MICHAEL MOORE – The *American* Subversive**
 *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016) *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009)*, Where to Invade Next,* (2016)

Moore is considered a radical disruptor not only because he breaks the normative codes of documentary filmmaking, but also because his documentaries have moved from marginalized reception to mass audience appeal. He has been labeled a spoiler because he has created a populism that is considered to be anti-American. In *Michael Moore in Trumpland,* Moore uses popular entertainment and standup comedy to display the tools he developed for his leftist populism, while simultaneously, deconstructing the appeal of Trump populism. Moore has been lambasted as the über spoiler because he has challenged the sacred cow of American exceptionalism. *Capitalism: A Love Story* historically examines the distinct qualities of American capitalism, ideologically connected to a belief in liberalism and democracy based on free markets, free will, and individualism. *Where to Invade Next* challenges American isolation and the "narrowed landscape of possibilities for US political thought" (Louis Hartz). By offering European ideas to awaken Americans from their "dogmatic slumber" he offers alternatives to American neoliberalist capitalism, not with futuristic fantasies, but examples of economic/political policies operating in Europe today.

# CHAPTER TWO:

## Abderrahmane Sissako – The Quiet and Not So Quiet Revolutionary

### *Bamako* (2007*), Timbuktu* (2014)

*Africa is a continent that is spoken of often, but she rarely speaks for herself. I can make films, while so many others cannot. Europe is arrogant. It has a great many pretensions in relation to others.* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2007)

At the centre of Sissako's work is a vocalization of silenced African voices. His central aim is to present an African perspective that refuses to see the indigenous people of colonized countries as victims but rather as combatants of colonizers who demand a historical place in the global economy. While he vigorously condemns the current economic policies of globalization and austerity policies, Sissako, influenced by the Marxist/Surrealist poet Aimé Cesaire extends his cinema to a political/poetic evocation of African culture in order to reclaim African history. He offers the possibility of imagining social alternatives.

## Ideological Influences

### Marxist/Cesairean

Underpinning the film's political argument is the exploitation of African countries by neoliberalism, a system that deploys the Other in the interest of surplus accumulation. According to a Marxist logic, this exploitation of the South by the North operates at the economic base, which produces cultural and ideological effects at the superstructure. These conditions interact and ideologically justify the economic base (Young, 2006). In the trial in *Bamako,* a witness for the plaintiff, a professor, cries out, "They don't just take our resources,

our work, and our money. They take our minds too."

Sissako's work can be seen as a continuation of that of third world scholars who worked to re-evaluate economic/political conditions within capitalism, colonialism and post-colonialism. He was influenced by Che Guevara, W.E.B. Dubois and Frantz Fanon, but above all Sissako acknowledges Fanon's teacher, Aimé Cesaire, a major voice in anti-colonial movements in the 20th century, as his political and artistic influence.

Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire, 2000) is a passionate manifesto against the assimilation of European Enlightenment thought. The *Discourse* focuses on the evils of fascism, and sees it as a structural component of capitalism. It is

> a logical development of Western Civilization itself...fascism [is] a blood relative of slavery and imperialism, global systems rooted not only in a capitalist political economy but racist ideologies that were already in place at the dawn of modernity (Kelley, 2000, p.20).

In the context of historical materialism, Sissako continues Césaire's logic to reflect contemporary neoliberalism and globalization. Césaire demanded a historical wide lens to acknowledge the connection between colonialism and fascism so as not "to forget and to think we can forgive ourselves for the horrors of our past" (Kelley, 2000, p.19). For Césaire, these horrors contaminate the present. Nazism was first practiced on non-European peoples in the form of colonialism, so that Europeans "before they were its victims, they were its accomplices"(Ibid.). For Césaire, these legacies 'ooze, seep, and trickle from every crack" (Cesaire, 2000, p.36).

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The legacy of colonialism, which did not stop when African countries gained "independence" is clearly marked in Sissako's work. He re-evaluates and deconstructs the "causal network" underpinning current economic and cultural abuse. He sees the continuation of trauma from colonialism to the current global "colonizers" who are free of national boundaries, are non-elected, authoritarian, and wield more power than the once-colonial nation states. Global capitalism and their representatives, the World Bank and The World Trade Organization all contribute to an acceleration of previous racist policies towards the south.

One witness in *Bamako* declares:

These countries have known one hundred years or more of colonialism, and with colonialization over, they are struggling to ensure the conditions of their development. And what do they find themselves facing? An international diktat, institutions that more or less regulate world relations.

**Geographic Marxism**

The Marxist geographer, David Harvey, extends an economic overview of the current supra-state organizational form into a geographic context:

**…** the production, reproduction and reconfiguration of space have always been central to understanding the political economy of capitalism. …[The] contemporary form of globalization is nothing more than yet another round in the capitalist production and reconstruction of space… It consequently entails a geographical restructuring of capitalist activity …across the face of planet earth [creating] a recalibration and even recentering of global power... (symbolized by the growth of supra-state organizational forms such as the European Union and a more prominent role for institutions of global governance such as the WTO, the IMF, the G8, the UN and the like) (Harvey, 2001, p.23-4).

Césaire was a declared Marxist and one could place his ideas within Third

World Marxism, in which geography explicitly determined areas of growth in a capitalist world economy. Césaire saw colonialism as specifically designed "to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies, that is, capitalism (O'Halloran, 2014, n.p). Césaire's concept of alienation of labour "extends deeper than the economic terms in which Marx wrote. Colonialism involves alienation of labor, but also alienation from the land, from the fruits of the land, from pre-colonial political institutions and cultures…and collective identities"(ibid).

Sissako continues this argument in *Bamako.* A witness at the trial says, "Medicine is in the north and the sick are in the south." Historically, Harvey saw how "geographical relationships played in the origins of capitalism"–whether those that concentrated large numbers of wage labourers in urban areas…or those that violently extracted and transferred labour and raw materials from colonies to industrializing core countries" (Gregory et al., 2009 n.p.). The importance of geographic location aligns with Harvey's analysis in which colonialism and capitalism use and produce space to form separate geographical locations, which leads to "uneven development," a central concern in the film.

This is one of the strategies that moves Sissako beyond 1960's political filmmaking: that is by situating the importance of geography and indigenous relation to place. At the same time, by placing his work within capitalist global structure, he does not essentialize cultural difference.

A broader materialist historical context situates Africa in relation to the international division of labour, which avoids fetishizing Africans as outside the global economy. Africa emerges historically from within political-economic coordinates that link with the logic of colonialism to current neoliberal capitalist exploitation.

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**Poetry as Revolution**

> It is revolutionary graffiti painted in bold strokes... it is a hand grenade tossed with deadly accuracy, clearing the field so that we might write a new history with what's left standing. (Kelley, 2000, p.27)

Césaire was aware that modernism was the basis of the long-standing European myth of progress from savagery to civilization and that Africa was somehow outside the realm of world history. Like previous modernist political critics, Césaire uses political surrealism as a way to subvert this false premise, using poetry as a "liberating factor…[to] summon up… unconscious forces (cited in Kelly, 2000, p.16).

Césaire saw a synthesis of surrealist poetry and a re-vision of Marxist historical materialism as incorporating an African historical perspective (ibid.). In Martinque, with group of intellectuals including his wife Suzanne Césaire, Césaire published a journal, *Tropiques,* to envision a postcolonial future:

> a vision of freedom that drew on Modernism and a deep appreciation for pre-colonial African modes of thought and practice; it drew on Surrealism as the strategy of revolution of the mind and Marxism as revolution of the productive forces (ibid. p.14).

Surrealist poetry was a means to intensify collective activity in order to "subvert the language of the colonizer and recreate black collectivity that had been denied… expression" (Polyne, n.p.) Surrealist juxtaposition not only threw up the horrors of colonialism, but also provided the imagination to envision social alternatives. Similarly the Situationists, avant-garde artists and social revolutionaries, continued Césaire's artistic and political position by seeing "ethnographic surrealism" as a way for non-or precapitalist societies to inspire a capacity to "create a moment of communal immanence over and against the

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privation of the market" which they called "precapitalist disalienation" (McKee, 2016, p.60).

For Césaire pre-colonial Africa cultures were based on collective structures: they were "not only ante-capitalist…but also anti-capitalist" (Kelley, 2000, p.21). Like many African nationalist leaders, he thought that modern Africa "can establish socialism on the basis of pre-colonial village life" not as a nostalgic return, but as a counter to Eurocentric assumptions that industrial formations were inevitable and desirable.

In doing so, he is not aligned with Afrocentrists who believe in investing in the past as the only site for identity formation. Césaire does not want to relive a romanticized past; he declares that he does not want to "repeat the past, but go beyond (Kelley, 2000, p.23). He states, "It is not a dead society that we want to revive. We leave those who go in for exoticism…" (ibid.p.23). By offsetting his cultural references with a Marxist underpinning, he precludes an Afrocentric "essentialized" identity paradigm. *Discourse* calls:

> for the overthrow of a master class's ideology of progress, one built on violence, destruction, genocide. Both Fanon and Césaire warn the colored world not to follow Europe's footsteps, and not to go back to the ancient way, but to carve out a new direction altogether. (ibid., p.27)

Sissako continues the legacies of collectivist thinking. His films are a contribution to the current dialogue of general revived interest in the collective. With the rapidly expanding expansion of globalization, worsening climate change, and the dramatic loss of economic and cultural traditions, there is more widespread consciousness of capitalism as a threat to the planet (Stam, 2015, p.31). BBC News notes, "Africa is to be expected to be one of the continents hardest hit by the climate change" (Williams, 2010, n.p). "The Sahel," the location

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of Sissako's films "has experienced some of the most prolonged and severe droughts in the world over the past half century" (Than, 2014 n.p.).

There is increasing visibility of indigenous-led resistance. Examples include, Nigerian women, known as "the mamas," who in 2002 threatened to take off their clothes if ChevronTexaco didn't meet their demands. The Zapatistas from Chiapas, Mexico, an anti-neoliberal movement, seek indigenous control of the local resources. Their most recent manifestation is the Native American protest at Standing Rock in North Dakota against an oil pipeline.

Sissako's preoccupation with the collective is seen directly in the collective process of making his films, and through his images that make the connection between capitalist destruction and alternative collective understandings by referencing current and pre-capitalist communal cultures and with reference to land in *Timbuktu.* This serves as a political/cultural foundation to inspire a new contemporary thinking on the possibility of a new direction.

Sissako is Césaire's heir. He not only pays homage to his predecessor by adopting a foundational political economy framework, but also a poetic aesthetic that includes direct poetry quotations in *Bamako.* He extends beyond the word by creating visual poetry in *Timbuktu*. Sissako's poetics of words, song and image create the imaginary that becomes, as Jameson famously said, "a political-ideological act" (ibid. p.14). I will return to Césaire's poetic influence and the creation of Sissako's own poetic cinema later in the chapter.

## *BAMAKO* (2007)

A trial in *Bamako* has the countries of Africa charge the World Bank and the IMF with economic destruction. It is a critique of the intensified subjugation of

African countries under the chaos of post-modernism and the neoliberal economic policies, of Europe and the United States. Sissako situates colonialist legacies as have informed Ameh Dennis Akoh and other African scholars (Maduagwu: 1999, Ayandele: 1998 Amin: 1997) to delineate the current form of neoliberalism as the fourth stage of capitalism-globalization:

> While colonialsim was a frontal, more militant system of conquest and
> overthrow, globalization is a subtle, more nihilistic conquest and overthrow
> of all peripheral cultures. (Akoh, 2008, p.165)

**To Make the Invisible Visible**

A visual presence throughout *Bamako* is the spinning, dying, and wearing of African cotton cloth. One third of Mali's population is engaged in growing or processing cotton. The price of cotton for export is extremely low because heavily subsidized Europe and the United states 'dump' their cotton on the world market at a price less than the cost of production. Mali has to export its cotton at depressed prices in order to earn hard currency to pay off its loans to the World Bank. An Oxfam brief reported:

> …rich-country cotton subsidies remain unabated, hurting poor cotton farmers.
> World  Bank led reforms to privatise the Malian cotton sector, including the
> adoption of a new price- setting mechanism, are further exacerbating the
> dire conditions in cotton-producing communities. (Oxfam, 2007, p.1)

Sissako says he saw the urgency to make a film that showed "the hypocrisy of the North towards the Southern countries" (Garbarz, 2007, n.p.). The economic facts, laid out compellingly in *Bamako,* are the conditions that compelled Sissako to put the WB and the IMF on trial. As one lawyer states:

> This Africa, your honour, is asking you with dignity, humility and modesty, but

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with legitimacy for justice.  You must do justice to Africa. You must do this by
condemning the World Bank. You will achieve it, your honour, by forcing the
World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and the G8, along with their accomplices.

This trial is clearly aimed at the West in an effort to make Africa's
invisibility visible in the world of globalization. In an interview, Sissako was asked,
"What message do you want to give to audiences in the West?" He answered:

> I would like there to be a mobilisation to demand accountability. I'd like there to
> be a deeper analysis of the African crisis… There has never been such an audit.
> And once we understand who profits from the debt, we will be able to see
> injustice and demand its complete cancellation (cited in Fortin, 2007, n.p.)

## Aesthetic Strategies

The central conceit in *Bamako* is Sissako's creation of a 'legal theater,' a
direct link to Brecht's plays, which were often in the form of a trial (e.g. *Caucasian
Chalk Circle, The Trial of Lucullus, The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*). Brecht
declares, "The main thing is to teach the spectator to reach a verdict" (In Bentley,
2008, p.46).

Sissako's modernist Marxist/Cesairean perspective combines with
postmodernist influences to produce a complex, multilayered and digressive
formal structure. Sissako's Brechtian approach in presenting a mock trial asks
the audience to be critical thinkers with respect to the political implications of
globalization. At another level Sissako counters the dominant language of the
court with indigenous languages and visual images of daily life that give cultural
expression to the economic debate.

**Countering Orientalism, "Miserabilism", Universalism**

At the time of making *Bamako* there were two Hollywood films with African settings, *The Constant Gardener* (2005) and *Blood Diamond* (2006). *New York Times* critic Manhola Dargis recognized the arrogance of these Eurocentric positioned films. Referring to *Constant Gardener,* she wrote, "this film betrays an almost quasi-touristic fascination with images of black Africans, who function principally as colorful scenery." Of *Blood Diamond* she said, "the sociopolitical context [is] insulting because [it] transpire[s] against a backdrop of human suffering" (Dargis, 2006, n.p.).

To counter Africans seen only as backdrop, cliché, or victims, Sissako counters Eurocentric universalism that has neutralized colonialism and the exclusively western concept of capitalist development and globalization as economic progress. As Sissako's cinema is strategically designed to address a western audience, he must first ask the audience to *see,* by re-orienting perspective. He refuses to see the indigenous inhabitants of Africa as victims. His film does not exploit, by appealing to "miserabilism", but demands justice. *Bamako* functions as counter-cinema, against Hollywood caricatures of Africa, confirming that "the idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention" (Leo Frobenius, cited in Kelley, 2000, p.21).

**Third World Cinema, Collective Voices as Acts of Resistance**

Sissako approach to filmmaking has been likened to Third World Cinema, also known as "third cinema." There is little consensus on the definition of third cinema and its application today. The militant manifesto of the original third cinema of Solanas and Gitino was premised on militant mass political movements and militant aesthetic demands, a universal prescription with ties to national identifications. Later definitions clarified. Sissako's work is best be characterized by Paul Willeman who contended that unlike European 'counter-

cinema' that emphasized formal strategy, the theorists of Third Cinema appreciated "the historical variability of the necessary aesthetic strategies to be adopted"(Willeman,1994, p.7). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam might best describe Sissako's combined strategies as belonging to '"Third Worldist' filmmakers [who offer] 'mediated solidarity' between global film and the culture of the people [they] aspire to represent (Mhando, 2000).

While Sissako is less aesthetically militant in opposing Hollywood, one aspect of his creative project that aligns with Third World Cinema and Surrealist philosophy is the collective filmmaking practice and its larger collective aspirations to demand global collective responsibility. *Bamako* introduces a broad spectrum of African voices, of non-actors, from the Griot, to lawyers, judges, teachers, public servants, cloth dying women workers, farmers, and the unemployed. Much of the action is unscripted. More than a typical courtroom procedural, the film offers the power of the spoken word, giving voice to those voices that have long been denied.

Collective voice, an aspect of Third World Cinema, is employed to introduce distinctive personalities who form a collective united front as combatants rather than as victims against the domination of systemic globalization. James E. Genova argues that Third World Cinema has continued relevance for the "post-Cold War era of neo-liberal globalization in both aesthetic and ideological terms" (Genova, 2009, p.140). Genova states:

> An analysis of *Bamako* also reveals important developments within the concept of tradition of "African cinema" that aim toward a universal exposition of systems of oppression and strategies for liberation rather than the recovery of a specific and homogenous African identity. (ibid.)

**Economic Base and Superstructure**

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Manthia Diawara, Malian filmmaker and academic has compared the structural devices of *Bamako* to that of Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout Va Bien* (1972), which is an instant lesson in economics and the social destruction of capitalism. Godard shows a cross section of a multi-leveled factory demonstrating to the audience the "superstructure" and the "base" of society at the same time (Film and Media Blog, 2014).

The base in *Bamako* is a modernist argument of economic conditions presented in the mock trial by the lawyers who use rational statistics and policies in formal western oral argument. Sissako's multi-layered film shows superstructure in the courtyard where the everyday lives of inhabitants interweave with the court proceedings. We observe Chaka the depressed unemployed husband of a cabaret singer, Mele, and people getting water from the central well, eating breakfast, and praying. In particular, in what appears to be a small courtyard, women are engaged in a cotton tie-dying cottage industry. It is a comment on its loss as witnesses testify that Africa now imports their African designed cloth from China. The women become witnesses to the trial and offer a counter point to the intellectual arguments of the African lawyers.

**Brechtian/Oral Performance**

Sissako having gone to Moscow to study film at the VGIK (Federal State Film Institute) and then living in Paris, dialogues with earlier European committed filmmakers adopting many of the formal strategies of political cinema including Brechtian reflexivity.

Shots of cameras and sound recording are a constant reflexive reminder of the filmmaking process. The mock trial in a courtyard, a people's court, is a Brechtian device to construct an argument. Within the Brechtian space of a mock

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trial, the performative quality of the argument is passionate, rarely seen in a conventional courtroom. In the words of William Bourdon, a French lawyer, representing the plaintiff:

> …the centre of gravity of this unchained form of capitalism, financial capitalism, predatory capitalism, capitalism ignoring general interests to attain its key goals: the production of profits for all eternity.

At the same time there is a sense of collective immediacy as Sissako uses documentary techniques (including using the courtyard of his own childhood) to film the procedure. A documentary component takes Sissako beyond Brecht. Sissako uses this power for direct political address by choosing actual people who have suffered from structural adjustment. Each witness, a public servant, an economic refugee, and an economics professor who lost jobs due to privatization when public services were bought by western multinationals, comes forward to testify with the earnestness of a real trial. Sissako filmed people's testimonies without interruption of directorial instruction. He says "[A] scene couldn't be interrupted, a witness wouldn't have been asked to repeat a sentence and we let the court president and the lawyers listen to the testimonies and intervene as they saw fit" (Genova, 2009, p.142).

While the presentations at the trial reflect Brechtian performative style, the lengthy uninterrupted testimonies of the witnesses can also be seen as African oral presentation. Social anthropologist, Ruth Finnegan sees oral performance as 'verbalized action somehow recognized as imbued with style: with art, one might say, or play, "attitude", deliberation, display"(2007 p.7) As Finnegan describes most of the speaking that goes on in *Bamako* is intentional, reflected and theatrical. It is distinct from the 'ordinary' speaking of everyday life (Finnegan, 2007, p.7). African oral history must not be viewed as merely,

…folksy, domestic entertainment but a domain in which individuals in a variety of social roles are free to comment on power relations in society. It can also be a significant agent of change capable of directing, provoking, preventing, overturning and recasting perceptions of social reality.  (Furnes and Gunner, 1995, p.i)

**Fragmentation**

The 1960s modernist political filmmakers used formal innovation, self-referentiality, nonlinearity and fragmentation, the same traits that can be associated with postmodernism. Scholars, including Jameson and Gitlin, differentiate the similarities with postmodernism's overemphasis on the "pleasure in the play of surfaces...mimicry" (Scott, 1992, n.p.) artifice, randomness; anarchy.

Sissako plays within two blurred distinctions. Sissako is a political modernist with an acute sense of history, which removes him from a postmodernist sense of history that effaces the boundaries between past and the perpetual present. With deep reference to cultural roots, Sissako is not a postmodernist depicting a consumer culture of surface and "depthlessness" (Knight, n.d.). He does not shift from content to style, but he does mix forms, from Marxist analysis to aspects of postmodernist's use of different artistic styles. He uses a postmodernist imaginative recombination of everyday life in the courtyard, and blurs the distinction between high and low culture including the use of "realism", emotion, poetry, popular song, TV, and humour.

A digressive aesthetic is used as a counterpoint to the rhetoric of *Bamako's* trial.  Some of his digressions and cutaways are not subscribed. Kenneth Harrow argues that this is an example of what Jacques Ranciere calls "'sentence-image' in which language and image combine in ways that are not fully commensurate"(Film and Media Blog, 2014).

> This gap in meaning opens up a space for commentary, play, aesthetic transformation, and the insistence of un-representable reality and untranslatable idioms. (Film and Media Blog, 2014)

Seemingly unrelated vignettes disrupt the formalities of the trial and some vignettes are not simply cutaways; they are multiple layered in meaning. For example, we see a video-maker shooting the trial and are reminded of the use reflexivity in the Brechtian construct of the trial. However, as a way to communicate the collectivity of the film project, we also see the video-maker become a character in film project as a member of the community of the courtyard. We are introduced to him in a vignette with Chaka. He tells Chaka that prefers filming the dead, "They're more real." Apart from his philosophical discussions with Chaka, we see him shoot two disruptions in the courtyard, a noisy wedding and a funeral. His footage is viewed through the video-maker's lens, which adds another dimension to the film, with more personal close-ups, and the ethereal quality of the washed-out bluish tinge of his camcorder.

Another vignette, which is appears unrelated to the rest of the film, has left many of my students confused. It is a reflexive moment, referring to cinema itself, a sudden appearance of a Sergio Leone parody of a spaghetti western. It begins with children gathered around the courtyard watching a TV and a title introduces *Death in Timbuktu*: "It's like one of those Italian Marxist westerns that proved so popular in the Third World in the Sixties and Seventies" (French, 2007, n.p.) Cowboys ride into town and begin shooting locals and each other. The cowboys, both black and white, are callous, shooting an "extraneous" schoolteacher and a local woman who lies on the ground with her crying child beside her. This could be seen as a commentary on the dominance of Western culture and ideology. As the cowboys laugh, it can also be read as a metaphor for a lawless Wild West Africa and the callousness of both European and the African elite who collude with the IMF in African pillage. What is most disturbing is that it cuts back to the

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children watching the Western. They laugh. One is reminded of how Native American children used to cheer for the cowboys as they shot the Indians.

The mixture of styles is not offering postmodern fleeting moments of disconnectedness simply to deny unity. Sissako is adding complexity, and in this case postmodernist fragmentation prevents the homogenization of Africans; they are accorded diversity, multivocality and multiple points of cultural entry (Scott, 1992).

**Image, Sign, Song**

Non-verbal elements frame and highlight textual signs within the film, which could be seen as examples where the visual signifier indicates oral or ancient customs, blurring "the boundaries between oral and the material"(Larrier 2015, p.xiv).  Interspersed with actual lawyers and witnesses, Sissako also adds actors. Surrounded by lawyers and judges in the courtyard, we see Melé played by the French Senegalese actress Aïssa Maïga asking for a young man to lace up her bodice. Throughout the film we witness this ritual a number of times. The camera pauses as he laces up her various colourfully designed bodices. The length of time taken on this detail is a visual reference, which articulates more than a disruption to the court proceedings. The pattern and display speak and signify cultural heritage and social affiliation and even display current political messages (Banoum and Rice, 2015). The spinning, weaving, dying and printing of cloth, also signify a "powerful source of women's knowledge production [that] can be found in the long history of African textile traditions" (Larrier and Alidou, 2015, p.3).

> African societies do not simply view cloth as protection against the elements or a
> means of personal adornment, but recognize its importance as a mode of

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expression, communicating information, and celebrating affiliation both personal and political. (Larrier and Alidou, 2015, p.3)

The leitmotiv of cotton weaving and dying continues throughout the film. In another scene, in a small room, there is a grandmother or aunty and a young girl spinning cotton. Once again Sissako connects cotton to traditional women's work.

> For weavers wove in 'women's houses' and recognized that women controlled their employment in these domestic spaces...They view the gendered spatial configurations of villages, towns, and cities in ways that defied colonial, and later, nationalist, patriarchal assignations of public and domestic control entirely in men's hands. (Larrier and Alidou, 2015, p.18)

In many African countries the weaving of cloth is an important part of a wedding ceremony, the design and colours of a specially woven cloth is passed down from ancient grandmothers. This is contrasted with a more western bridal party that disrupts the court proceedings. Apart from the bride, dressed in white and the groom dressed in a western suit, the rest of the bridal party, including the woman griot who sings the celebrations, are dressed in African clothing. There is a wide shot of two women on either side of the bride both wearing vibrant African cloth of reds and golds squeezing the bride tighter and tighter into her white bridal dress. A voice-over from the court proceedings says, "We cannot develop independently, but this Negro that you are crushing to death with your economic and financial machinery laid the foundations of your economy. And this Negro has ensured your development."

Juxtaposed with the statistics of globalization, are unsubscribed cutaways. Some close-up shots of wet cloth hanging on the line serve as a visual reference to cloth manufacturing and serve to implicitly heighten the themes. For example, the testimony of young economic refugee, Madou Keita, turns into a dramatic re-creation of people trying to cross the desert in an effort to get to Spain. Rather

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than showing pitiless victims, Sissako shows a close-up of the parched earth and the movement of Saharan Scarab beetles as a means to visualize and locate place and to visualize and give witness to the land. As Keita describes the many who died, Sissako also cuts to a close-up of wet red cloth glistening on a line and of red dye running down a drain in the courtyard. Other cutaways are less subscribed, like a child's squeaky shoes, and function more like disruptions.

At the beginning of the film coloured with deep golden brown with flashes of red, we see Melé singing a popular song "Naam" (some translate as 'people of power'), a popular now a classic song by Ghanaian Christy Azuma. The song is repeated by the children in the courtyard who sing it to soothe their younger charges. There is no translation, and in fact Aïssa Maïga doesn't understand the words she sings. For West Africans the song is well known, and while many don't know the spoken language, song is a way of unifying African voices. Western viewers are invited to see and listen to a hypnotic song, and left to only imagine deeper cultural connections. For a western audience this song might be seen as merely a musical embellishment to the film, but for an African audience, it connects back to griot songs that constitute deep structure in popular music, and are often direct adaptations of archaic songs for electric guitar and piano (Diawara, 1998).

Sissako builds the trial towards a poetic incantation. Near the end of the film a farmer, Zegue Bamba, chants a recitation. He also functions as a *griot,* figures who carry the tradition as historians, storytellers, poets and musicians in Western Africa. It is a reminder of the persistence of tribal Africa, but in the context of the trial, it reflects an application to cinematic poetry. Sissako does not translate during the incantation. Sissako says, "His song becomes like a scream. In this sense, a scream does not need to be translated" (cited in Fortin, 2007, n.p.). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sees "the undecidable position of Zeque's sung speech, that is, both within and outside the discursive space of the trial and

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beyond the rhetorical reach of the IMF lawyers" (Mamula and Patti, 2016, p.171). Sissako cuts to the faces in the courtyard; action is suspended as the audience is asked to observe the people, observing him, who also don't know his language and becoming joint witnesses to his *cri*. The role of the griot can be seen as a device that locates African culture and also as a modern reminder of film's capacity to record, embody and offer African histories (Mhando, 2000, n.p.).

In a last passionate eloquent summation for the plaintiff, Madam Tall Sall extends the political poetry of Zegue Bamba's lament by translating his words: "Why don't I sow anymore? When I sow, why don't I reap? When I reap, why don't I eat?"

Returning to adoption and quotation of Césaire's political/surrealist approach, Sissako's shows the strength of language in empowering an emotional connection to the political. Half way through *Bamako*, one witness (a professor) says, "African countries are facing "An international diktat… characterized more or less like Aimé Césaire's poem, 'The Prayer of a Negro Child'. The very same thing!  We've known nothing but misfortune." The political and poetic fuse with the last line when the professor says, "We've reached the last threshold of the human heartbeat."

**Poetry and Political Imagination**

> *L'oreille collée au sol, j'entendis passer demain* ("my ear against the ground, I heard/Tomorrow pass") Aimé Césaire, 1946, "Les Purs Sangs" ("The Thoroughbreds")

This above quote appears in two of Sissako's films, *La Vie Sur Terre* (1998) and *Bamako*. In *Bamako,* the quote appears at the end of the film after the emotional impact of Chaka's funeral. It appears not as a denouement, but a

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question to consider beyond the end titles of the film.

In this final scene, men are seen entering the courtyard carrying a bier on which lays Chaka's body. The video-maker who had said to Chaka earlier in the film that the "dead are more real" begins to film, and the audience views his camcorder footage in silence as he zooms in on the body draped in a blue and white striped cloth. Prayers are said, and the film cuts back to the camcorder's washed-out bluish footage with no sound. In keeping with the Islamic laws of silence when carrying the dead, the men carry the bier out of the courtyard for burial. The film then cuts to a wide overhead shot of the courtyard as mats are being rolled up, as if at the end of a play, in this case the film, and marks the closing of the varied communal events that have occurred in the courtyard over the course of the film. We follow a man out of the gate and the shot lingers on a white wall and a metal gate, white, the Islamic colour for purity and peace. No sound. Then white lettering on black appears with the words from Césaire: "My ear against the ground, I heard/Tomorrow pass."

There is the immediate wrenching sorrow with the suicide of Chaka, which reverberates back to the trial itself and the united pain expressed by the witnesses. What does one do when faced with despair? The line "my ear to the ground" acknowledges the artist, the human being, who is acutely aware of the pain. A line that comes immediately after the quote is, "'rest, my cruelty' I thought" which indicates Césaire's philosophy that poetic knowledge has the power to suspend pain, "the kind of knowledge we need [to] move beyond the world's crises" (Kelley, 2000, p.17).

The second part of the line "I heard tomorrow pass," is ambiguous and appears as a paradox in imagining a future. But what future? For political artists, the idea of a future is what Benjamin calls a "storm called 'progress.'" Cesaire had condemned rationalism, logic, and the normative understanding of history as

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progress. For Cesaire, it is never-ending defeat to strive for redemption or resurrection in the future. These ideas align with Walter Benjamin who thought that historical actors should perceive the revolutionary presence of now-time so that they "might initiate a revolutionary irruption, break the historical continuum, stop clock-time and redeem the world" (Wilder, 2016, n.p.) he argues that in order to pursue alternative possibilities they are "enabled and condensed within present arrangements"(Wilder, 2016).

As artists, Cesaire and Sissako see a way to use "poetry [that] can be the motor of political imagination, [to be] a potent weapon in any movement that claims freedom as its primary goal" (Kelley, 2002, p.vii). Poetry in the form of radical politics, can be freed to imagine "a radically open future...where desires arose unbidden and unconstrained" (Wilder, 2016, n.p.) to imagine the unimaginable, "on seizing the image as it flashes by" (Robinson, 2014).

*Bamako* is not only a treatise on the World Bank. Sissako employs the imagery and openness to deep culture to move beyond current pain and to the possibility of change. Another line from "Les Purs Sangs," says, "The Work of Man Has Only Just Begun" confirms the potent weaponry of the political artist.

# *Timbuktu* (2014)

### Sociopolitical Landscape

*Timbuktu* does not exhibit the fist-pounding rhetoric of *Bamako* but it is no less political. Using understatement, ambiguity, metaphor and irony, the film has global intentions and its immediate political agenda is to separate Islam from fundamentalism. By 2014 the fear of Islamic terrorism had become so acute that any understanding of Islam had been highjacked by news headline alarms. Sissako's agenda required a "gentle" approach to sensitize a western audience

to an understanding that Islam does not equal terrorism.

To sensitize the audience, Sissako avoids spoken rhetoric and adopts a visual treatment that becomes a sociopolitical landscape by way of symbolic motifs. The claustrophobic courtyard of *Bamako* opens wide frame in *Timbuktu,* to the space and place of the desert and ancient city of Timbuktu. In cultural studies and anthropology, there has been increased interest in the ways in which the geographic informs politics, aesthetics and symbolic space (Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003). Symbolism a stylistic feature of Third World Cinema depicts landscape that "ceases to be mere land or soil and acquires a phenomenal quality which integrates humans with the general drama of existence itself" (Gabriel, 2004, p.358). The film stretches across wide landscape and stretches backwards and forwards in time to depict ancient historic and economic contested space, settled and resettled for centuries, to inform rich complexities of the present including economies of water, tradition, artifacts, language, music, religion, land, and tribalism.

**Ancient Legacies**

> An entire generation of "Enlightened" European scholars worked hard to wipe out the cultural and intellectual contributions of Egypt and Nubia from European history. (Kelley, 2000, p.22)

At a press conference at the New York Film Festival, Sissako said that Timbuktu with its ancient histories was very important to him and Malians as it constitutes deep political and cultural meaning. The centuries-old city has born witness to layers of history and culture manifested by many waves of trade and conquests.

The city was founded in the 11th century as a major city in the Mali

Empire. It was first a hub for the traders of goods from the Saharan south and from Arab and Muslim traders from the north. They traded slaves, salt, gold and other precious metals.

Because many cultures converged, Timbuktu became a thriving centre for an advanced civilization. Religious centres were founded so that the traveling merchants could practice their faith. People learned Arabic to study the Koran and for commerce with Egypt and other lands. Over time, mosques became sites not only for the serious study of sacred texts but also for astronomy, mathematics, and science. Timbuktu became famous for housing and preserving manuscripts. It is important to note that most African scholars were not all writing in Arabic, but used the Arabic alphabet to phonetically spell Songhai and other oral languages. As a result of this intellectual flourishing, literacy was high among men, women and children.

Over the centuries there were many invasions and empires. Morocco invaded Timbuktu 1591 and Timbuktu began to decline. Perhaps the cause was the destructive occupation, but there was also a shift in commerce after Europe conquered the Americas. Timbuktu was a hub for land trade, but now much of the trade was done by sea. Subsequent invasions by Fulanis, the Tuaregs and the French in 1894 had their various damaging impacts. Mali became an independent state in 1960.

The significance of this background is for Sissako to place Africa in an ancient historical context with vibrant scholarly institutions, deep traditions and written cultures long before European intervention. Its importance is the reclaiming of Malian history and culture that can signify a new direction for an African future.

**Locating Place**

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By locating place, Sissako counters notions of national boundaries, formed by the colonialists. These are often less important than identifying with a language group or clan. Within this small region, the film reveals that it has never been homogenous. It is because of the Eurocentric view of a homogenous Africa that Sissako and other African filmmakers see the need to represent the local, the specific, and the community within a 'localized global' view (Mhando, 2000).

*Timbuktu* recreates, the invasion in 2012 of the Ansar Dine, a hardline militant religious group who armed with weapons from Libya after the fall of Gaddafi, occupied northern Mali, terrorized the population, and destroyed artifacts including 15th century mausoleums of Sufi Muslim saints. The Jihadis are only the latest occupiers to invade Mali. Amid local merchants, cow-herders, camel herders, and fishermen (with local traditions, multiple ethnicities, and the local dialects, of Tamasheq, Songhai and Bambara) came invaders speaking Arabic, French and English, Sissako indicates a city of heterogeneity "a very tolerant city" (Sissako from my notes from the press conference) and the residues of ancient contestations. However, the faltering language, misinterpretations, multiple translations, and misunderstandings, also indicate the limitations of the spoken word within the text. These suggest the limitations of the audience's own cultural conditioning. According to Derrida, language is not a reliable tool of communication. Sissako subverts cultural conditioning and language limitations by offering non-verbal visual and aural cues in order to open up space for cross-cultural understanding.

**Defanging the Jihadis**

In the same year of *Timbuktu's* release, there was the major box office success of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* taken from the story of Chris Kyle's *The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US Military History.* It is a simple

Manichean drama that re-writes history and the United States' role in Iraq portraying either one-dimensional Muslims as villainous extremists or scattered piles of corpses, the "collateral damage" of a "just" and "heroic" war. Sissako pluralizes and complicates his film in an attempt to once again critique an orientalist perspective and the totalizing and simplistic narratives of Hollywood cinema.

Our first encounter with the Jihadis is a wide shot of remote desert and rocks, with men standing around wearing headscarves and AK-47s over their shoulders; it is the generic look of how the west might have imagined Bin Laden's primitive cave hideout. A Land Cruiser pulls up with a blindfolded European further confirming heightened media references to hostages. We are set up to see rampaging violence as depicted nightly on western TVs. Sissako suggests that, as in the words of Cesaire citing Frobenius, "The idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention" (Cesaire p.53) with a soft and humorous counter-punch. The jihadis remove the blindfold from a relaxed "hostage" (who is seen later on as one of the jihadis) and begin to discuss his medications and generic brands. Sissako has destabilized the audience's expectations of primitive jihadis and in this way he offers a more nuanced depiction of often ideologically confused soldiers who are also unsure of their social position in the space. They hesitantly patrol the city and desert enforcing bans of music, soccer, uncovered women, and just hanging out.

Another scene contextualizes recruitment and undermines it. An ex-rapper has been converted and is recording his commitment to "Jihad". It is set in a television studio with a cameraman and an assistant attempting to record his declaration of allegiance to the Ansar Dine. He stumbles and the "director" tells him he is not sincere. The light used to light the "star" goes out and there is further fumbling in an effort to make it work. The scene is reflexive, humorous, and highlights a highly globalized and mediatized world.

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In an interview, Sissako was asked about the connection between *Bamako* and *Timbuktu.* With reference to the converted jihadi ex-rapper, Sissako answered:

> They ask him against whom he now fights. He says: 'Against the West.' And the jihadists says, 'No, you fight against *injustice.*' This says a lot, but it's not what you immediately think. What it means is that these kinds of people are in fact motivated by something that goes beyond religion. They are motivated by the reality of a rich world which does not share. (Sperling, 2014, n.p.)

Sissako makes a clear distinction between the portrayal of the Jihadis as extremists with that of the local Muslims. At one point, the Jihadis enter the local mosque with their shoes on, carrying weapons. The local imam, dressed in white says in a calm soft voice, and I am told in beautiful Arabic, that they are violating a sacred place, a place to "pray in peace." His long speech is for the audience to understand the interpretations of jihad, that for the imam it is a spiritual struggle within oneself against sin. He adds, "Here, in Timbuktu, those who dedicate themselves to the faith do so with their minds, not their guns." A little sheepishly, the Jihadis turn and leave the mosque. In an interview at the New York Film Festival, Sissako was asked about the portrayal of the jihadis. He said, "The jihadist is someone like us" and it is easy to see the connection between the economic refugee in *Bamako* under economic crisis making his way across the Sahara desert, and an equally desperate young man making a different choice made in *Timbuktu.*

Sissako's portrayals of women have symbolic implications with ancient references, particularly as many African societies were matriarchal, and Sissako suggests that their strength is a path to a future Africa. Senegalese filmmaker Oumane Sembene, who called himself a Marxist/ Feminist and a modern griot

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(cited in Delmas and Delmas, 1977, p.16) expressed similar ideas in an interview:

> Africa can't develop without the participation of its women…They have never been passive. At decisive moments of African history, women protested and struck. We are still searching for our destiny as Africans. Yet, in the society we are going to build, women will play an important role. (Pfaff, 1982, n.p)

Sissako's depiction of women, in direct opposition to the Jihadi's treatment of them, shows their acts of defiance in different ways. A woman selling fish defies the Jihadis when they demand she wear gloves and socks and dares them to cut off her hands. The jihadis roam the empty streets and roof tops trying to locate the source of singing. The singer, Fatoumata Diawara, is arrested for singing and is given 80 lashes; she emits a wailing song of defiance as they lash her. Satima, the wife of Kidane, maintains a quiet resistance while being pestered by Adbelkerim, the military commander of the Jihadis. He has a pitiful crush on her and after one of his visits to her Tuareg tent in the desert and her quiet rejection of him, he unloads his AK47 on a tuft of grass between the sensual sand dunes that appear like a woman's pubic hair. It is an absurdist scene, but within just a few seconds of gunshots, Sissako humorously comments on the Jihadi suppression of sex and their worship of the gun.

Sissako adds the dimension of the surreal with the figure of Zabou, who could be described as a mad woman, a witchdoctor, or possibly a griot. She carries a chicken and parades through the streets with trailing robes. With a sense of being outside any law, she defies the Jihadis and they leave her alone. In one scene, a Jihadi is cast under her spell and he dances in hallucinatory gyrating forms. Sissako has said in an interview that madness is perhaps the only logical response to the madness of violence. Zabou's inclusion in the film is an allusion to Césaire's wife, Suzanne, who wrote extensively on the appeal to

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"the domain of the strange, the marvelous and the fantastic" (Kelley, 2000, p.15). Kelley adds, "Here…the poet…preside[s] over the metamorphoses and the inversions of the world under the sign of hallucination and madness" (Kelley, 2000, p.15).

This is not to say that Sissako has spared condemnation of jihadi actions. We see whippings and a stoning of an adulterous couple. However, the African continent has been portrayed as mired in poverty and corruption, and endless wars. In *The Gods Must be Crazy*, the background is a frenzied fast-paced action of warlords and armies running amok. Sissako uses alternative political methods by slowing down the action and depicting petty hypocrisies. In doing so Sissako successfully undermines their power to attract and shows the absurdity of their fundamentalism without labeling them stereotypical monsters. Sissako shows their hypocrisy. In one scene after they have decreed soccer banned, the jihadis are seen arguing about the best European soccer team. Later, in a scene in an expanse of desert, locals are playing soccer without a ball. Heightened by European classical music, the scene becomes a humorous balletic performative space, and a site of defiance. When jihadis ride by on a motorbike, the locals pretend to be doing exercises.

**Contention Over Scarce Resources**

Two narratives, that at first do not appear to be connected occur within the film: the conflict of jihadist invasion and a conflict between two locals, a Tuareg goat and cow herder, Kidane and a west African fisherman Amadou. Interweaving through the desert and through the two narratives is a man dressed in green riding his motorbike. He collects and sells water to locals including Kidane and Amadou. Water is a leitmotiv in the film. Throughout Africa it is used as a greeting. Kidane mentions the significance of his daughter offering him greeting water. Water is a uniting theme in the film; images of the desert and the

scarcity of water are underlying tensions. When Timbuktu lost prominence, one explanation is that it was result of climate change. Timbuktu is 12 miles north of the Niger River. It was once an oasis with mango and palm trees but the desert has increasingly taken over. The wet season of the Niger doesn't reach the city any more and a canal built to link to the river has been filled with sand. Amadou and Kidane quarrel over access to water and Kidane accidentally shoots Amadou. After the shooting, there is a very wide long shot, and a long take of Kidane in his Tuareg traditional Berber robes. They drag him down as he struggles to walk through the shallow water with only the distant sounds of birds and splashing of water at dusk. This one long take is a metaphor for the conditions in Northern Mali of the scarcity of water, from desertification, climate change, overfishing, water pollution, and privatization of water under structural adjustment. It is the scarcity of water that has led to the shooting and the connection to guns, linking to the conditions that have contributed to Islamic extremism. Referring to Mali, Arsenault writes:

> Researchers have long warned of the risk that climate change would worsen conflict in many of the world's poorest regions, as different groups struggling to cope with poor rains and growing desertification, take up arms to fight over scarce resources. (Arsenault, 2015, n.p.)

## Aesthetics

### Symbolic Memory

Sissako's invocation of the mnemonic sign blurs past and present and form the production and dissemination in contemporary culture. Sissako uses the griot's world of the imaginary to expand the figurative to create a new and wider use of cinematic visual language. Australian anthropologist Jennifer Deger writing about media and the Yolngu, says that there is a "revelatory dynamic" to the

images seen on the screen. On the surface of things "the camera appears to show everything…[but] to a knowing audience, there are invisible 'underneath' or 'inside' meanings, connections and references embedded within the frame, to be seen and appreciated" (Deger, 2007, p.12). Sissako offers symbols to evoke deeper readings for African viewers for political purposes; he aims to reclaim the roots of traditional thought that is at odds with Enlightenment hegemony. In discussing *Bamako*, I referenced Ranciere's 'sentence-image' where there is an "aesthetic transformation in which language and image combine in ways that are not fully commensurate" (Film and Media Blog, 2014). Through ellipses and symbols, Sissako has built a political aesthetic using geographic and symbolic spaces that embrace the rhetoric of the visual and the senses to the cultural ties to culture and place. Sissako employs cinematography to capture symbolic references that remain unexplained. He says:

> I believe that in the West you want to know everything. All must be given. I do not think that life is like that… it is necessary to deprive you of something. (Fortin, 2008, n.p.)

The film begins with a beautiful image of a gazelle crossing the desert in silence. The silence is broken by shots and the voices of jihadis chasing it in a vehicle. The gazelle, a desert animal, has a symbolic reference to grace and beauty. It is commonly associated in Arabic literature with female beauty. In fact, the word gazelle comes from the Arabic "gazal" the term for love poems. It is the delicacy of the animal and its precarious existence in the desert that suggests the delicate balance of understandings thematized in the film.

Masks have been used thematically by many African filmmakers, most notably Ousmane Sembene. At the beginning of *Timbuktu,* a line of masks and statues stands in the middle of the desert and the jihadis shoot them to pieces. Masks represent the persistence of tribal Africa and are symbols of clans as opposed to belonging to regions, borders, or nation states. Some consider that

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the African mask is only fully complete when song, dance and the reciting of poetry accompany it. The masked dancer identifies with the ancestor he represents and whose power flows into the dancer and the community. It is a magical means through which the essence of the vital force from the ancestors is called up and made to empower the performers and the spectators. It is not a representation, but a manifestation, a rebirth of the world through ritual. The mask remains a contested object (Diawara, 2000, p.62-3). Diawara details its history:

> Arab traders arrived at the end of the 6th century. People became the slaves of the moors. After the Muslims, came the Christians. The Christians raided entire towns and villages and shackled men and women for the Atlantic slave trade…they knew that the best way to conquer Africans was to conquer their gods, and the best way to possess them was to possess their masks and statues. As one village after another fell in Africa, the missionaries burned some of the masks and saved others as trophies to be placed in museums in Europe. Now we are left with a religious void that neither Islam nor Christianity can fill. (Diawara, 2000, p.62-63)

The relationship of Tuareg herders, Kidane and his wife Satima hint at a place between that void. Their relationship is one of mutual respect, equality and tenderness.  Kidane accepts the death penalty for the death of Amadou according the laws of Islam. However, their Islam is also rooted in pre-Islamic cultural ties to place and Tuareg customs. The mask represents more than an ancient artifact; it is a claim to oral traditions and memory as against Eurocentric and strict Islamic conquest narratives.

In the film, the jihadis ban music and when they hear a beautiful song sung by a woman and her friends, the jihadis arrest and flog her. During her 80 lashes, she wails in pain and then sings a souring chant of revolt. The singer, Fatuoumata Diawara, is no incidental singer. She is a famous Malian

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actress/singer and activist who is well known in Africa and France and in many other parts of the world. When she learned of the jihadi invasion, she says "I needed to scream this song, *Wake up! We are losing Mali! We are losing our culture, our tradition, our origins, our roots!*" (McNicoll, 2000, n.p.).

Fatoumata Diawara says that music is at the heart of everything. It has a privileged position with respect to claims of identity and ideology; moreover, it can be subversive in dialogic aspects to reveal deeper meaning of recovering historical memory intentionally obscured by imperialism. In western cinema the image is always dominant. Music is used gratuitously for dramatic punctuation, to signify mood, as an emotional connection to the spectator, or it is the never-ceasing rush to action. In African cinema, music is stressed in terms of its cultural, poetic, and artistic functions in relation to oral tradition, usually the heritage of the *griot*; it works to evoke spaces where time slackens and opens up, giving way for ambiguity and reflection (Diawara). The importance of music reverberates beyond the African continent. Discussing the heritage of black music, Paul Gilroy says:

> The history and utility of black music...enable us to trace something of the
> means through which the unity of ethics and politics has been reproduced
> as a form of folk knowledge. This subculture often appears to be the
> intuitive expression of some racial essence but is in fact an elementary
> historical acquisition produced from the viscera of an alternative body of   cultural
> and political expression. (Gilroy, 2002, p.39)

**Poetry**

Sissako, inspired by Cesaire, was "involved in a poetics of cultural *invention"*(Scott, 2012). Part of the "invention" was to move back to a more natural language, to return to nature, to a process of "poetic knowledge born in

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the great silence of scientific knowledge"(Kelley, 2000, p.17).

> Joy
> bursts in the new sun
> and I speak:
> through knowing grasses time glides
> the branches were pecking at a peace of green flames
>   (Cesaire, Les Purs Sangs)

Just as Cesaire used organic imagery and "botanical precision...[to] "create tantalizing moments of revelation" (Taylor, 2015), Sissako employs nature, through cinema, not through the limitations of words, but through images, through ancient references and symbols. The invocation of the mnemonic in space, song, and sign are elements for his rhetorical/poetic treatment in *Timbuktu.* His wide frame opens up the landscape to nature. As an addendum in *Discourse* there is an interview with Haitian poet René Depestre, where Cesaire talks about poetry being a "process of disalienation and detoxification." A central visual feature of *Timbuktu* is the desert and it suggests a kind of sun-drenched detoxification where the shifting sands allow no authoritarian permanency to take hold, and at the same time, the desert connects people to the land, to those who understand it. Using images and symbols, Sissako uses the poetic image as a rhetorical tool in the process of "disalienation" and "detoxification" for silenced African voices in the global economy and to reclaim lost African heritage.

A number of western film reviewers may not have grasped the full import of the poetic message. They have responded to the poetry of the landscape of *Timbuktu* with phrases such as "fearless poetic response," "Like a great poet"(Sperling, 2015, n.p.), "Evocative as John Ford's American southwest (Michael Glover Smith, 2015, n.p.)", "It's a painful poem" (Rapold, 2015, n.p.) and "memorably magical"(Delgado, 2014, n.p.). At a press screening at the New York

Film Festival, a member of the press asked Sissako if *Lawrence of Arabia* influenced him (taken from my notes, 2014)*.* He answered curtly that he had never seen the film.

It is the *Lawrence of Arabia* factor that made 1960s political filmmakers avoid any suggestion of the exotic. However, the use of landscape is not an alien film style for African filmmakers. Manthia Diawara refers to this style as "Return to the Source" (Diawara)*.* Like *Timbuktu,* this style adopts the aesthetic of long takes with natural sounds emphasizing beautiful images inscribing the beauty of African landscape and people that is often advocated by European anthropologists (Diawara). While using many of these elements, this beauty style of the nostalgic and the exotic Other is not what Sissako is doing in *Timbuktu.* Sissako evokes the geography of place as a political strategy to reclaim rich African history and as Césaire believed that the communal of aspects pre-colonial Africa cultures that could contribute to future economic structures.

While using beautiful images, Sissako also disrupts them. Like *Bamako,* the film is made up of seemingly disconnected vignettes to create Sissako's theoretical aesthetics. A mosaic of identities and contradictions, both local and foreign disrupt the narrative to serve as counter a homogenous view of Africa and to serve to break the notion of the exotic. He avoids fetishizing Africans via an exclusionary split between Africa and the global economy by giving constant reminders of the global mediatized world.  The cow killed by Amadou is called GPS. Everyone, including the jihadis use cell phones. Sissako says:

> And the people there—I know them because I come from there—are *connected.*
> They know what is happening in the world. I wanted to show this to break any
> image that was exotic. For me the telephone was important because it's a part of
> life there. They search for a signal, it may not always work, but it's an important
> part of life.

Sissako is constructing a new political language for the cinema that is at once global and local. Cesaire has said, "I have always striven to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage" (Cesaire, 2000, p.83). Like Cesaire, who attempted to repurpose the French language, Sissako has created a new cinema, an intermixture of cinematic influences. He has borrowed from Hollywood, from auteur European cinema, from collective production from Third World cinema, and the ancient practices of the griot, employing combinations in experimental form but always to serve rhetorical purposes.

The deep meaning of the geographic and the symbolic, which act to balance and explain current absurdities and contradictions, acknowledges the culture of the people of Africa whom Sissako aspires to represent. If the westerner picks up any of it and calls it "poetic" then it functions as "softening" western audience reception against current fears and anxieties over Islam. Sissako perhaps had Cesaire in mind. "It is poetry and therefore revolt. It is an act of insurrection"(Cesaire, 2000, p.28). Diawara says that:

> Sissako uses poetry as a challenge to, even a refusal of, narrative linearization in his films to say that his film language forces us to think differently about African cinema and, ultimately, African politics. (Diawara, 2015, n.p.)

The film ends with the same image as it began with the washed out almost translucent image of a gazelle racing across the desert. It is fragile, graceful and beautiful. It is an Arabic symbol for love poetry. It is alive.

In times of neoliberal uncertainties, Sissako is not declaring Cesaire's commitment to a communist revolution, but he is demanding African economic/historic/cultural justice. His broader materialist historical context

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situates Africa in relation to the international globalization, not outside it, thus the Cesairean process of "disalienation." Giving voice to silenced African voices involves a paradigm shift from the portrayal of Africans as passive victims of "history", to reclaim African history and culture. Sissako rhetoric works on two levels. At one level, his structural choices include a Brechtian performative style to deal with the structural overview of economic inequalities. At another level, his ambiguity, understatement, poetry and metaphor reclaim a denied heritage, a "detoxification."

**Rhetorical Impact**

Sissako made his films as acts of resistance, to give voice to silenced Africa, to counter the dominance of western economic policies and the perceptions that justify them. The Cannes festival director, Thierry Fremaux, said, "Showcasing films from Africa helps bring African stories and issues to the world" (Szalai, 2014, n.p.). This muted response may have been expected. Before making *Bamako*, Sissako reported the advice given to him by of an old friend, a Malian judge: '[I] don't think this film will change anything. But you have to make it. Perhaps then they will know that we know' " (Lim, 2007, n.p.)

The film itself is a valuable document in that it is an accessible cinematic treatise on global structural adjustment. It has acute relevance for Latin American countries cited in the film as subject to economic structural adjustment programs pushed by the World Bank the International Monetary Fund and the US government in the 1990s.

Despite being released in 2006, the film has contemporary relevance for a US audience after the 2008 economic collapse and the Occupy and Tea Party movements. It is relevant for European countries, which later became subject to structural adjustment policies. The European economic crisis began in 2008 with

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Germany and France forcing members of the peripheral Eurozone, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Cyprus, to take loans that, as in Africa, were subject to conditionality, to privatization, deregulation, and openness to foreign direct investment and tax reform (Greer, 2014). Observing the similarities of structural adjustment, writer on international trade Mohamed Gueye writes in "Lessons not Learned" comments:

> Seen from Africa, the policies adopted in the euro crisis look a lot like structural adjustment. The Greek government was told to cut spending, reduce social protection and make its economy more competitive. Five years later, Greece is more indebted, poorer and less competitive. (Gueye, 2015, n.p.)

*Bamako,* shown at Cannes out of competition, received great critical attention and acclaim. While *Bamako* addressed globalization, there remained in some of the popular press a Eurocentric reading of the African "problem." However, *Bamako* had a serious life beyond the festival circuit. It was debated all over the world in the academy with interesting combinations of multiple disciplines including economists, African scholars and film departments. Gayatri Spivak wrote an essay in which she said, "*Bamako* offer[s] a means of addressing the global economic conditions as well as the power relations that circumscribe the agency and voice of the subaltern" (Spivak, 2016, p.1).

In 2007 *Bamako* was shown inside the hallowed halls of the World Bank. Sissako was able to discuss the issues with bank officials, and when Dominique Strauss-Kahn became head of the IMF, he was determined to at least attend to the reputation of the World Bank (Levine op.cit). Aminata Trarore continues to write, attend conferences and promote the film as a visual support for her campaigns against globalization.

In the UK in March 2007 a debate after a screening of *Bamako* was organized by Christian Aid, and a Muslim magazine Q-News, leading to an online

petition calling on Chancellor Gordon Brown and Secretary of State, Hilary Benn to push for fundamental reform of the IMF and WB. The petition was delivered to the IMF and WB meeting in Washington DC in April 2007. According to SIGNIS, "Hilary Benn responded by holding back £50 million of the UK's contribution of £1.3bn over the period 2005/08, triggering significant political and media debate" (SIGNIS, 2007, n.p.)

*Timbuktu* received wide distribution and critical acclaim and won the French Cesar, and an Cannes Ecumenical Jury Prize and the Francois Chalais Prize. Mauritania submitted the film for the 2015 Academy Award category for Best Foreign Language Film making it the first film that the African country had ever entered. *Timbuktu* was also shown at the New York Film Festival in 2014. At the festival, I talked with Ossama Mohammed, a Syrian filmmaker. He is a friend of Sissako's and I asked him what he thought of the film. He said "He was a little too polite. He didn't hit hard enough."

Sissako's African cinematic "poetry" has many film reviewers praising its lyricism, which then leads to the question of whether Sissako's light touch has diffused his political intentions. However, considering the film's purpose, to address world hysteria around "Islamic" terrorism, goaded by news broadcasts and the hyperrealism of Hollywood cinema, this was a necessary aesthetic choice. His method was to adopt the demeanor that the local Imam depicted in the film to show a very different Islam, an appeal to a quiet non-violent rationality. Sissako treads lightly with humour so that the sum total of his aesthetic addresses the need for a delicate balance of understandings.

However, the hysteria surrounding the notion of terrorism is not easily abated. An example of hysteria is a backlash against the film itself. Sissako's attempt at a light touch when depicting the morally confused jihadis led the mayor of Villiers-sur-Marne, a suburb of Paris, shortly after the *Charli Hebdo* shootings

to ban the film. He cancelled several screenings, claiming that it was an apology for terrorism. It was pulled from a Belgium festival because of a terrorist threat (Macnab, 2015). The pan-African FESPACO film festival, in Burkina Faso, also decided to pull the film from its lineup, for "security" reasons (Okeowo, 2015, n.p.).

Sissako's films have erupted into controversy in the news, editorials, news magazines, film reviews and social media. *Bamako* alerts global communities to the crimes of economic adjustment policies, contributing to an understanding of their own conditions with the global economy. The critical response to his work and the mediation of political and cultural controversy can be seen to have rhetorical impact.

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# CHAPTER THREE:

## Lars von Trier – A Lordly Racket/Artist Provocateur

### *Nymph( )maniac* (2014)

Sissako's films deal with the global dimensions of neoliberalism. Lars von Trier's work consciously evokes dystopian neoliberalism. Working at the crosscurrents of modernist and post-modernist historical and aesthetic modalities, von Trier challenges the audience, and critics alike, to experience the malaise of the current crisis. Von Trier uses a palpable visual rhetoric to plunge into the murky depths, the viscera of a nightmarish Europe, and at the same time he mixes his aesthetic with humour and playful digressions.

New Baroque might be the best term to describe von Trier's promiscuous and varied stylistic approaches in *Nymph( )maniac.* The derogatory phrase "lordly racket" (Panofsky and Heckscher, 1997, p.9) often used to describe the 17th century baroque aptly applies to von Trier. Characterized as "unusual", "beyond the norm," "bizarre," "extravagant," "irregular," "exuberant," "painful melancholy," "chaotic," and "vulgar" (Ndalianis, 2004, n.p.) it is expressed in various art forms as "dynamic structures that have no respect for rigid, closed, or static boundaries"(Ndalianis, 2004, n.p.) Many of these same particularities are also evidenced in the New Baroque. New Baroque, a contemporary manifestation of the 17th century phenomenon, is seen as a period of socio-political crisis.

The seventeenth century has been associated with the rapid growth of capitalism, which began with the slave trade. Imperial European governments invested in military technology, enabling Europe to defeat most non-European peoples. Economic expansion also led to socio-political and cultural shifts in Europe, resulting crises and upheavals. Seventeenth century Europe was

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marked by enclosure movements (forced removal of the peasantry from the commons), population growth (recovery from the black plague of the fourteenth century), a money economy, and the question of unequal development, all of which resulted in revolts and rebellions. The period was characterized by insecurity, violence, cruelty, chaos, uncertainty, despair and "by a deep fear of imminent catastrophe" (Jukola Art Community, 2012). The time has been described as, "One lived amid the ruins…as if desperate reaching out toward distant heaven…to outrun an encroaching darkness" (ibid.). Similiarly, New Baroque mirrors the current the economic/political conditions of crisis, experiencing similar radical economic, political and cultural shifts giving rise to similar aesthetic forms. Ndalianis comments, "Our era, "like the seventeenth-century era that ushered in the scientific revolution, [is] in the "eye of an epochal storm, in the middle of a gigantic transformation" of cultural and socioeconomic proportions (Ndalianis, quoting Guardini within his text, 2004).

Being associated with extreme crises, New Baroque is often discussed in relation to the doomsday scenarios and the entertainment spectacles of blockbuster movies and their franchises, such as the *Alien* or *Transformers* (Ndalianis, 2004)*.* These films represent anxiety without contextualizing them, but Gilles Deleuze sees the potential of new Baroque to be "a contemporary form of social-historical-artistic thinking in a decentered world"(Stam, 2015, p.244). In the hands of von Trier, New Baroque becomes a visual and critical interrogation of the structure of capitalism. Informed by the deep traumas of European history, von Trier delves deep "into the interiority of the neo-liberal economy in an attempt to extract its 'inside-outs'"(Corsin Jiménez, 2013, p.6). Walter Benjamin described the Baroque as an aesthetic that is "dedicated to fleshing out the tragic and phantasmagorical drama of capitalism" (cited in Corsin Jimenez, 2013, p.5). Von Trier's dark *mise-en scene* inhabits what is the 'unrepresentable voids' in capitalist culture.

If the seventeenth century was an expression of trauma and its art was a reaction to the "purity" and rigidity of classism, there were also cinematic periods of artistic expression, particularly in the 1920s and 1970s that marked shifts in economic and political security. Von Trier comes from this legacy: a long line of European political filmmakers, especially Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Bunuel and this inheritance reflects von Trier's application of many aspects of modernism and political radicalism.

Von Trier is particularly influenced by Godard with his reflexive reliance on fragments and his "weighty allusions and citations" (Morgan, 2013, p.1). This use of the reflexive separates new baroque from the seventeenth century because it actively invites the audience to participate in the artifice of von Trier's baroque film structure. He then telegraphs his use of the Baroque by directly referencing archaic medieval and baroque philosophical and artistic expressions.

Francesco Guardini also marks a difference between the two epochs in that seventeenth-century baroque leads to modernity "while Neobaroque moves away from it" (Ndalianis, 2014). New baroque is not heralding the dawn of the Enlightenment and has more "tragic and phantasmagorical" overtones. For von Trier, his film is a critical reassessment of the Enlightenment using the dissonant chords of the Baroque to suggest an "encroaching darkness" at the end of "progress".

The darkness at the end of progress suggests a postmodernist position and the term new baroque is often used interchangeably with the postmodernism. Von Trier experiments with postmodernist or new baroque. Viewed from an atypical angle, von Trier reveals the transitory nature of history, and pathologizes a dysfunctional economic system formed from an ideology posing as an empirical necessity.

While his work reflects back to his inheritance of political radicalism, his method of baroque polyphonic structure using symbolism, distance, humour, sensual imagery, and shock creates audience discomfort and imagery to stimulate the imagination and transform cinema in the present.

### *Enfant-terrible*

As a subversive strategy, von Trier might regard as success to occur when his critics fall into a state of apoplexy. Critics saw his films as a knee-jerk cinematic trope to express von Trier's nihilism and as further evidence of his troubled mental state. Gillian Wearing, writing in the *Guardian* said, "This is the only film I have seen that clearly seems directed by someone with mental issues." For Roger Ebert at *Time* magazine, his work "presented the spectacle of a director going mad". Scholar Elizabeth Stewart says that he has "a particular kind of masochism"(Stewart, 2005, n.p.). Lee Zachariah from *Concrete Playground* suggested that von Trier's films could be construed as "further evidence that his idea of provocative cinema is a rote combination of mental illnesses and genital close-ups". Others have accused him of rampant misogyny. Film scholar, Linda Williams dismissed *Nympho( )maniac* as a "product of heterosexual male imagination" where the "woman…is consistently punished in her desire for sex"(Williams, 2014, p.23). Others have dismissed his work as simply an example of postmodern excess. Linda Williams calls it, "clever mind/body games… a postmodern pastiche of pornography" (Williams, 2014, p.21) His accused self-defeating postmodernism, with its denial of history has led many to disregard his work as no more than an "agenda [to]… just to stir things up.

For von Trier, "madness" is the symptom of a society driven mad by the evils of neoliberalism, a pathology of the system, not the individual. He would happily embrace the Baroque term, a "lordly racket", an epithet to characterize his aesthetic choice of pain, transgression, and shock.

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The history of art is always "a history of transgressions" (Stam, 2015, p.146), and Lars von Trier is the latest in the European canon of violators of the sacrosanct "rules" of filmmaking. Like the deviant provocateurs who have gone before him, such as Godard, Pasolini, Fassbinder, Bunuel and others, he has evoked contentious responses accusing him of many heretical violations. Like his predecessors, his method is to stage his work in unexpected and difficult ways.

Von Trier's politics of madness and the aesthetic of new Baroque open up the possibility to reframe the social system and suggest the necessity for an alternative.

**Context – A Marxist Re-Evaluation of History**

A close analysis of von Trier's work reveals a visual aesthetic of European postmodern anxiety, but contrary to an "end of history" postmodernist position, von Trier re-evaluates history. Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* argues that current conditioned thinking accepts malaise, anxiety, and crisis as a "normalization of crisis." He says, "The power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all previous history"(Fisher, 2009, p.4). Von Trier's work consciously evokes a dystopia in order to interrogate the malaise of postmodernism and neoliberal economics.

As a means to re-visit history, von Trier traces the source of the current European crisis to explore historical/social forces that underpin contemporary stasis. Von Trier counters not only the postmodernist tendency to deny history, but also the portrayal of history as a positive unfaltering movement forward as progress. Von Trier's materialist view of history can be seen as the current interpreter of Marx/Brecht's critique of official history:

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Brecht singled out the affinity between canonical narrative forms and official history. The latter tends to treat history as an evolutionary development and understands the historical present as unhindered by the past. (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.48)

Marx/Brecht see historicism as a singular isolated event, which sees the past from a fixed position. Historical materialism, on the other hand, is a state of impermanence by which the past can inform the present. Their idea of history is not simply the appearance of the "historical" but requires a theoretical re-evaluation and deconstruction to understand the "causal network" underpinning the creation of the historical narratives of Enlightenment humanism that enables historians to control the past.

Von Trier is particularly concerned with "official" history that negates past trauma. We can borrow the term "document of barbarism" from Walter Benjamin who writes that historical documents "owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 1989, p.256).

Von Trier's work references historical traumas in previous films such the plague in *Epidemic* and fascism in *Europa.* He connects fascism with present neoliberalism and by exposing a hidden "barbarism," he assists in understanding current European crisis. For von Trier, fascism remains a traumatized focus point of past and present states. By returning again and again to the conception of trauma and violence, von Trier's "task [is] to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin, 1989, p.257) to expose what he sees as the toxic normalcy of the western cannon. He challenges the Enlightenment's notion of progress, of unified rationality, prosperity, equality, neoliberal thought. Marx labels these ideologies false consciousness associated with capitalist structure, which obscures the true

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power relations between the owners of the means of production and alienated labour whose skills are turned into market commodities.

## Aesthetics

Jameson's statement of anxiety comes close to Von Trier's political aesthetic of the dark underbelly of contemporary culture:

…this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror. (Jameson, 1991, p.5)

Using intertextuality, comingling the past and present, von Trier's new baroque aesthetics involves a labyrinthine structure. The references are fluid and stretch out beyond the frame. With a structural complexity of shattered glass, von Trier presents the dark aesthetic of postmodernist anxiety. From modernist class struggle and commodity culture, von Trier plunges deeper into the under layers of global capitalism's cultural referents. He deconstructs socially conditioned patterns of behavior of western capitalism. While his work is an imbrication of modernist and post-modernist historical and aesthetic modalities, he sees the limitations of both.

Von Trier adopts a Marxist Brechtian destabilizing tradition proposing "estrangement as a means of overcoming the 'naturalization' of social phenomena, [to elicit] their historical function" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.49). Von Trier's earlier films such as *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005) are clear Brechtian examples of the minimalist styles influenced by Godard and others. While *Nymph( )maniac* maintains a Brechtian philosophical approach of distance,

it adopts the humorous, sometimes carnivalesque style advocated by Brecht, but not adopted by 1960s practitioners. Another departure from a modernist perspective, as Koutsourakis points out, is that while von Trier embraces Brecht and some of the methods of his 1960s counterparts, there is "a different perception of the author/director's role in the sense that the artist is not the person who holds epistemological mastery and communicates an unequivocal piece of knowledge to the audience" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p. xix). Instead of aligning dialectical contradictions, von Trier "brings together points of tension that remain unresolved" (ibid. p.xix). In von Trier's own words, "When I was young the medium was enough…Now one should be able to use film for something…to raise questions, but not to answer them" (ibid. p.82)

The result is a rich interplay of stylistic sources, of "novelty, innovation, and the transformation of older forms" (Jameson, 1998, p.304) into a new political cinema by creating a polyphony of disharmonious elements associated with new Baroque.

**Postmodernism and its Discontents**

Postmodernism is often regarded as nihilist and is closely associated with von Trier's films. I would argue that von Trier's work is neither nihilist nor is it depolitized. Von Trier manifests a stark dystopia using images that destroy the appearance of the "natural order' to unmask the hidden ideology that postmodernism/neoliberalism is natural and inevitable.

*Nymph( )maniac Volume I* opens to a black screen with the sounds of dripping water; the sounds of water open to the images of half-lit gloom, of snow, of close ups of jagged rusted objects poking out from decaying brick walls. Water drips onto a trashcan. A feeling of a post apocalyptic age, of "centrelessness global capitalism", opens further to show a bleak brick alleyway. The camera

moves slowly through a black hole in the wall into blackness to the very loud sounds of "industrial metal." Two characters finally encounter each other, as if they are the last people on earth. At the close of the scene, Joe, badly beaten, asks for a cup of tea, with milk, a suggestion that going forward, bleakness might be broken with ironic distance. Seligman takes Joe to his joyless apartment with no evidence of natural light, with shabby yellowing/gray wallpaper, and only a few random objects on the walls. Dominating the claustrophobic space are piles of books, which are presented not as evidence of some lofty endeavor but as piles of dusty, worn-out objects.

Fisher says that not only has capitalism "normalized" our waking life but it has also "colonized the dreaming life of the population" (Fisher, 2009, p.8-9). Von Trier sets out to jolt the audience from its dreaming by depicting Europe as a nightmare, a dehumanized wasteland. He revisits the aesthetics of his predecessors. The "combination of film noir and dystopian aesthetics is a direct reference to Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). These references are "used as a set of historical materials and are not simply part of a postmodern pastiche aesthetics…Von Trier treats these intertextual references as materials which merit historical reassessment and reevaluation, and not as recycled 'dead styles'"(Koutsourakis, 2013, p.5). Von Trier continues an assessment of the historical legacies of World War II. The debris and decay announce a post-Enlightenment era. This is not a sign of von Trier's personal diagnosis of depression, as many have posited, but a political strategy to convey feelings of anxiety and disaster, of historical and cultural failure, in which the philosophies of the age of reason are questioned in the current historical period.

**Brecht**

There are no geographical or historical reference points. All the actors speak in multiple accents. Von Trier deliberately withholds a dramatic or

"realistic" setting whereby the audience is asked to explore empty spaces and struggle to make the connections on their own without the aid of a visual location, character identification, or meta-narrative. He asks the audience to evaluate any character representations without empathy or ideological blinders.

Von Trier has always broken the narrative in some way. In *Nymph( )maniac* it might appear that Von Trier has reversed this practice by directly introducing a narrative, and organizing the central structure of the film around Joe's tales of sexual adventure. However, von Trier's Brechtian approach with actors prevents them from fully inhabiting their characters as unified individuals. From the beginning to the end of *Nymph( )maniac*, we see the results of violence on the face of storyteller Joe. The camera focuses on her, but she is not offered to the audience as a battered female object in need of rescue. Visually and thematically, von Trier creates ambiguity and curiosity about Joe. She is Joe, the person who is the central character in the storytelling and in the re-enactments of the stories, but as she sits in bed and delivers her lines with Brechtian flatness, she is also outside the film, directly addressing the audience, asking the audience to consider her and her "story" from multiple angles, layers and contradictions. She is Joe, a character, an actor, a storyteller and a voice for von Trier. There is no straightforward unfolding of the tale. Her recollections are questioned and the reenactments of her tales do not endorse her as a subjective narrator as she, with a tongue-in-cheek nod to the audience, takes her cues from objects in Seligman's room.

> I'm sure it was quite natural for you to furnish your room as a monk's cell, but as an inspiration for the story chapter headings, it hasn't been easy. There's simply nothing left for me to use.

One thing that comes out of the contradictions is that "…embedded in von Trier's negative view of capitalism is a mistrust of moralist values predicated

upon abstract ideas of freedom" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.174) and the ideology of Enlightenment humanism. For example, after a humorous or troubling scene with dueling penises, Joe uses the word Negro and Seligman tells Joe that she "shouldn't use that word. It's not what you call politically correct." Joe responds:

> Well excuse me, but in my circles it's always been a mark of honour to call a spade a spade. Each time a word becomes prohibited, you remove a stone from the democratic foundation. Society demonstrates its impotence in the face of a concrete problem by removing words from the language…And I say that society is as cowardly as the people in it...qualities can be expressed in one word: Hypocrisy.

Seligman is also not a single person and while he represents an insipid humanist, he is also the intellectual who at times can be seen as representing von Trier's own bookish concerns and his postmodernist fracturing digressions. He also represents von Trier's own reflexive representation of his social status as an intellectual artist with a propensity to pontificate and an important interlocutor of social/political ills. The contradictions of audience identification aim at intensifying the social context and not to a connection to individual psychological motivations.

**Bad Taste**

Discomfort is a political strategy. For many, von Trier's "discomforts" produce an instant revulsion, because of his seemingly bad taste. Godard, especially in his later work was accused of this too.

Von Trier's work has been described as offensively violent and some might argue that it is gratuitously so.  Sexual violence links back to mid-century anti fascist themes in films like *The Night Porter*, *In the Realm of the Senses*, and *Salo* (White and Power, 2009, n.p.) and von Trier readdresses these themes for

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neoliberalism with the ever present danger of co-option which would subsume his most radical ideas. He is fully aware of his own contradiction of producing a commodity, but with this method, he attempts to resist the production of the spectator as consumer (Koutsourakis, 2013) "If there is one thing the middle class love, it is to have their guilt appeased by art that points out their errors" (Thatcher, 2013, n.p.). In order to provoke his audience von Trier must, like Godard, make his films "offensive" for an audience in the early 21 st century.

Von Trier has done this by adopting some of the aesthetics of Antonin Artaud, theorist of the Theater of Cruelty. Artaud sought to create a new theater that would reverse the 19th century trend toward psychologizing melodrama and bring to the theater its most destructive impulses – murder, crimes of blood, and sex. For Artaud, the audience was to be pushed to the paroxysm of intensity, a ritual to serve as a release valve for society (MacBean, 1975, p.53). Von Trier is not concerned with ritualized purgation but in transforming society through the demonstration of the destructive forces of violence in society. This was one of the political tools used by Brecht, Godard, Artaud, Pasolini, and Fassbinder before him to destabilize the old comforts and old taboos of cultural hegemony and to re-present them in a way that exposes the ideological roots that formed them. Brecht states that "public taste" is a "productive use of the medium" that "is concerned with the exposition of the familiar as commodity, so as to demonstrate the interrelation between aesthetics and politics" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.10).

**Sex and Cinema**

Von Trier's two-volume film *Nymph( )maniac* carries the provocative title suggestive of the 2008 movie *Diary of a Nymphomaniac* or still further back to the sex movies of the 1970s *Insatiable* or *Deep Throat*. Von Trier's publicity promoted a truly pornographic film with major stars, and even critics, engaged in explicit sex. The audience anticipates porn and as the reviews suggest, they are

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disappointed. Von Trier has challenged our expectations of sex and violence and cinema.

Unpleasure is anti-spectacle. "Filmmakers such as Godard and Farocki undermine voyeurism through a kind of erotic sabotage"(Stam, 2015, p.118) and von Trier's anti-spectacle approach aims to defamiliarize habitual viewing and draw attention to cinematic voyeurism associated with historical apathy (Koutsourakis, 2013). Today's audience has heightened expectations of the spectacle of sex and violence, but von Trier's scenes of violence do not carry the same "glamour" associated with traditional movie-going. Traditional S&M cinema, often associated with seedy red-velvet low-life surroundings, offers a safe way to journey into the dark side of people's imaginations without personal implications. Von Trier does the opposite. In mid-frame shots, he delivers violence with cold clinical distance. Von Trier introduces K, an S&M specialist, who works from a sparse, clinical, gray, unglamorous office suggesting a Kafkaesque bureaucratic end zone of von Trier's dystopian aesthetics, a nightmarish dehumanized Europe.

This method of distancing goes towards placing sexuality and violence in a broader social framework. The "instinct" of sexual desire is estranged, and the audience is asked to see the connection between sexuality and power and a critique of liberal ideals and institutional taboos. In the social context, the S&M scenes with K can be seen as Joe's quest for satisfaction in late capitalism's commodification of desire. K delivers what Joe wants with the cold calculation of doing his job. There are Nazi residues.

The 1960s revolutionary film practitioners proclaimed, "In our modern civilization we don't want sex, we want the spectacle of sex" (MacBean, 1975, p.47). Visual excesses maximize pleasurable consumption. Conventional cinema draws on the pleasure of the voyeuristic gaze, which is consumed without critical

engagement. "Cinema is a commodity itself that circulates successfully through its seductive power, and its seductiveness is very often encapsulated in the presence of the eroticized female body on the screen" (Mulvey, 1996, p.79). In Godard's Marxist period, he sought to de-fetishize cinema "by illuminating the fetishistic imbrication between woman as appearance and the dissembling nature of the late capitalist commodity" (ibid. p.8). However, Godard never fully abandoned the notion that equates "female beauty, almost ontologically, with cinema"(Mulvey, 1996, p.77). It is impossible not to think of the cinematic beauty of Godard's actresses, such as Jean Seberg, Anna Karina, Brigitte Bardot. "In Made in USA it is Anna Karina once again whose every gesture, every blink of the eyes, every swish of the hair is offered up to our visual caress"(MacBean, 1975, p.30).

If Godard's "iconography of the feminine on the screen was never totally freed from a fetishistic gloss" (Mulvey, 1996, p.88), von Trier is determined to complete the job. Without makeup or gloss, Joe's badly beaten face confronts the audience. The introduction of the moralizing language of "I am bad" so early in the film suggests that it will be the film's intention to explore such a loaded phrase. The audience is familiar with social, literary and cinema tropes of woman as victim and of woman as "bad," Is Joe "bad" as she says she is, or is she "bad" in the context of social morality? Is Joe a hero, a rebel, a whore, a victim?

*Nymph( )maniac* confronts cinema's fetish for the erotic commodity of the female body by choosing women actors who do not embody cinema's anticipated overtly sexualized female body. Joe's stories almost all relate to her many sexual encounters, but we do not see her as an erotic object. Both actors playing Joe are seen naked during many sex scenes, but the scenes are not shot for the erotic gaze. There is no designer lighting, no compartmentalized erotic body parts. Her body is usually full length and sex is mechanical, preventing the audience from taking part in an erotic experience. Stacey Martin who plays the

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young Joe, compares her sex scenes to "the mundane routine of grocery shopping…the sex scenes are just part of the film, rather than being shocking. It's not erotic at all" (Bess, 2014, n.p.).

Everything is scrupulously de-eroticized. When there are close ups of genitals, both male and female, they appear more like medical textbook illustrations, or they are humorous (as in the line of flaccid penises) but never erotic. The distancing of the sexual act, rather than arousing, asks the audience to reconsider the commodity fascination with erotic cinema.

In the first volume of *Nymph( )maniac*, we see a fun-loving Joe freely explore her body and innocently pronouning the joy of discovering her cunt. For some feminists this might appear at first as a celebration of women's freedom and the right to pleasure as men have been free to do. Joe could be seen as a hero who alone valiantly fights against liberal moralism with a resolute search for absolute control of her life. Free from "love distorts things" and she declares her right to "horny rebellion." In a scene with a sex addiction therapy group, Joe vehemently calls herself a nymphomaniac and refuses to call herself a sex addict. In this single speech, von Trier challenges society's moral foundations and at the same time, he challenges the privatizing of individual pathologies that prevent an understanding of systematic social causation.

**Capitalism and Desire**

> The most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us. (Fisher, 2009, p.15)

Critics have reacted to von Trier's explicit sex scenes and at the same time decried their lack of erotic desire. The film's title is not an entirely flippant PR

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gimmick. *Nymph( )maniac* can be read as an exploration of desire. Mulvey has said of Godard: "The director's fever is roused by and through the female body, as though, at the zero moment of creativity, Godard confronts bedrock and finds nothing left except the desire for desire"(Mulvey, 1996, p.89). This theme of desire for desire is carried to its ultimate dead end in *Nymph( )maniac.* Von Trier connects the sexual with the political (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.174). He sees that "natural instinct, namely sexual desire, is estranged. Metaphorically he uses the body of Joe to expose the social laws that regulate desire, that is, capitalist desire.

Joe's declaration that, "Society had no room for me, and I had no room for society, never had" can be read at one level as a rebellion against the constrictions of society. However, her fierce individualism can also be seen following Marx as the depersonalization of commodity culture and the "reification of the individual." While Joe stands for many things at once, her isolation and the nature of her desire represents her as a consumer. She bears some similarity to Eve Democracy, in Godard's *One Plus One*. Godard shows her as isolated and unable to communicate and, for Godard, she symbolizes the "rigidity of the Western individualist [which] ultimately leads us to a form of spiritual death…fundamentally self-absorbed, even narcissistic."(MacBean, 1975, p.90).

Joe wants pleasure so much that finally she feels nothing.  In order to feel again, she visits K, the S&M specialist/bureaucrat who represents power and perhaps powerlessness. If the K stands for Kafka, he is a petty bureaucrat who serves no real purpose but to perpetuate an endless futile quest. Referring to Kafka, Fisher sees "The quest to reach the ultimate authority who will finally resolve K's official status can never end…"(Fisher, 2009, p.49). With clinical observation, the audience is asked to consider the notion of desire and desire for desire's sake. As much as Joe wants to stand outside the system, she is part of it. Her natural desire has been corrupted and it becomes a pawn within the

system. Her deepest desires are theoretically and pragmatically handicapped. Fisher observes:

> To reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital…What needs to be kept in mind is *both* that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* it would be nothing without our co-operation. (ibid. p.15)

The fact that Joe is almost destroyed by the end of the film can be read, at the surface, as a condemnation of patriarchy and criticism of society's intolerance of deviance. However, von Trier is delving into a more complicated understanding of social relationships. The valiant Joe has reached the end zone of capitalist desire, desire as the engine for the accumulation of capital. Capitalism creates an addiction to desire in which human beings are "habitually enslaved into reactive and repetitive behaviors" (ibid. p.73) which cannot ultimately satisfy real needs, but which must continue to exploit. She represents the individualist, which "derives from an idealist standpoint that individuals can change morally, without altering the broader social mechanisms" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.173).

**Religion**

Organized religion, morality, and enlightenment thought are central themes that run through the film. "The Wife of Bath" also illuminates von Trier's attack on religion. Echoing Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which saw western Christianity as the ideology to suit capitalism, Elizabeth Bruenig says that it produced "the liberal individual, a kind of atomistic personhood "distinct from all other persons" (Bruenig, 2015, n.p.). She adds in "Gods and Profits"*:*

It seems the whole Enlightenment had a hand in creating this particular view of man—yet the concept was unknown to the people of the medieval and ancient worlds… it underwrites much free-market discourse about the primacy of the individual over the collective. (ibid.)

Von Trier, via Seligman, distinguishes the difference between the Christian church of the East and the West. He points out that the icons of the Eastern church show Mary and infant Jesus and emphasizes a journey towards happiness, while the Western church shows Jesus on the cross with the image of suffering. Joe says, "It won't be a story about traveling east from Rome towards the light, but rather the opposite." The image of Joe tied down and whipped by K exemplifies human suffering; this time the iconic image is of woman. As explained earlier, it is a distorted quest for desire. Daniel M. Bell in *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* argues that capitalism is not just an economic system, but a totalistic system, distorting human desires to serve its ends (Bell, 2012).

In a post-religion neoliberalist era Von Trier posits that the concepts of sin and suffering survive religious allegiance. By creating an unfamiliar context, the audience is asked to rethink the society's mores historically, not as binding fixed records.

**Medieval & Baroque & the Polyphony of Signs**

Throughout the film, there are many references to Bach and the German composers of the Baroque period by which von Trier telegraphs his ideological and aesthetic borrowings. Seligman describes The Devil's Tritone as music that works against expectation. Music is generally consonant, so a dissonant chord produces a strange emotional frisson, which has inspired composers to "explore the dark side in music"(Sloboda quoted in NPR, 2012).

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Von Trier, through Seligman, appears obsessed with archaic references that reach back before the Industrial Revolution to pre-capitalist societies especially to medieval and baroque times. Seligman says that, "Polyphony is from the Middle Ages… It's distinguished by the idea that, every voice is its own melody, but together in harmony" (from the film).

Also cattered throughout the film there are numerous references, to *The Canterbury Tales,* to *The Decameron,* to Bach. Chaucer's rich diversity of rhetorical forms in *The Canterbury Tales* is suitable to von Trier's Baroque cinematic style. Chaucer divided literature into high, middle, and low styles depicting oppositional of points of view. Helen Cooper, as well as Mikhail Bakhtin, see oppositions between the ordered and the grotesque, between Lent and Carnival, between officially approved culture and its riotous, and high-spirited underside. She says, "The sheer number of varying persons and stories renders the *Tales* as a set unable to arrive at any definite truth or reality."(Cooper, 1996, p.52).

"The Wife of Bath" suggests an historical period in which Joe's natural instinct for lusty adventures might have been freely expressed:

> Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
> I ever followed natural inclination
> Under the power of my constellation
> And was unable to deny, in truth,
> My chamber of Venus to a likely youth.
> > Prologue to The Wife of Bath (Chaucer, 2012)

Apart from the guiltless celebration of lustful pleasure, "The Wife of Bath" alludes to the matriarchal society in the golden age of King Arthur when women

had more power and opportunity. With the advent of the church, women were not allowed to participate in church doctrine and The Wife blames the entire religious establishment for its anti-feminist bias. She beats her fifth husband with the book he is reading because it is derogatory to women.

"The Wife of Bath" draws authority from her own experience and so does Joe. Seligman, representing many things, can be seen also as a representative of the high and middle voices of the Chaucer stylistic devices. He offers a clerical authority (and a repression of the sensual) that represents the dying gasps of the modernist agenda of canonical authority. Seligman grasps for literary connections to Joe's story, no matter how flimsy.  Seligman, also the good listener, is at pains to express more than once that he does not judge her, but as the film progresses, his understanding of what she is saying is beyond his literary capacity. As Joe says in *Volume II*, "You're not even listening." For von Trier, he is the humanist, which von Trier decries, "because of course, they maintain a neutral position" (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.85).

**Baroque Fragments & Intertextuality**

Polyphony is a major part of Baroque music with hits contrasts in musical tone creating the "seedbed for the Baroque notion of conflict" (Hylton, 1995, 171-176). Von Trier's many levels of narrative conflict and do not cohere. He combines richly woven textures and his themes splatter in disparate contexts. He breaks up the narrative dividing the film into chapters, each with their own digressions (like "The Silent Duck") that are unrelated to the progression of the narrative. These digressions, haphazard grabs at western references of disparate and non-linear utterances, support von Trier's structural strategy, to play with fragmentation in order to overcome the notion of inevitability. This fragmented construction ensures a resistance to dominant cinema and its expectations of a clear logical sequence of events (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.76).

*Nymph( )maniac's* complex narrative revolves around quotation. His intertextuality interweaves narratives and images from different centuries to critique historical progress and these references flourish in ambiguity.

As with Godard's stylistic concerns, von Trier uses digressions to interlock visual fragments from nature, history, and culture. The arbitrary nature of von Trier's method allows him to disrupt traditional trajectories in order to question the western canon and destabilize, with shock and parody, references from philosophy, poetry, novels, painting, music, history, and films, often through a parody and play.

Von Trier's polyphony of historical, literary, and cinema references could best be summed up as *discordia concors* or harmonious discord. As Stam puts it "an oxymoronic aesthetic can ingle attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain, harmony and dissonance" (2015, p.15).

**Nature**

One aspect of the Baroque is its "evocations of magical, transcendent and spiritual events…[which] represents a rich meditation on the special effect as a theatricalisation of that which haunts the materialist conception of technology, modernity, and history" (Crogan, 2004, n.p.). In *Nymph( )maniac,* baroque themes of transcendency, of "the aberration, the mystical, and the fantastic" (Ndalianis, 2004, n.p.) are seen in von Trier's botanical mythology and these themes mark a distinct contrast to his dark dystopia.

Throughout Joe's ordeal, she seeks solace in walking through parks and leafing through her herbarium.  Joe's father refers to the Ash tree as "the most beautiful tree…it was the World Tree in Norse mythology." He says,

When the ash tree was created, it made all the other trees in the forest jealous. It was the most beautiful tree. You couldn't say anything bad about it. Then, in the winter, when the ash tree lost all of its leaves, all the trees noticed the black buds and started laughing. 'Oh look! The ash tree has had its finger in the ashes.

The Ash, Fraxinus Excelsior, is akin to von Trier's own "harmonious discord." The Ash has its own contradictions.  For instance, male and female flowers can appear on the same tree, or a tree can be all male one year and all female the next year.

 The fact that the film's title is missing an "O" offers textual residues. There are references to nymphs associated with ancient mythologies and European folklore. In Greek mythology, for instance, the Meliae were nymphs of the ash tree, a class of sisterhood who appeared from the drops of blood spilled when Cronus castrated Uranus (White, 1914, p.545).

Just as the aging ash tree has vertical fissures, von Trier offers fissures that are not rationalized into a structured knowingness. Postmodernism's open endedness offers a polyphony of reference points to challenge social/political/scientific certainties. The richness of residues offers images, some stark, some offensively luxurious, some funny. Not all are to be explained, or more to the point, knowable. Von Trier questions rationality with its limitations to explain anything beyond the rigid and narrow parameters of jealously guarded scientific disciplines.

Throughout von Trier's work there are references to nature, mythology and folklore which aligns with Jameson who links the " Radical eclipse of Nature itself… as it was in precapitalist societies…[to] technology [that] may well serve as adequate shorthand to designate that enormous properly human and anti-

natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery – an alienated power–massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis"(Jameson, 1998, p.34-35).

It is von Trier's tendency to see hell in human causes reach back to the development of western thought and in its arrogance in believing humans can control everything. *AntiChrist*, for instance, is nature's revenge; it plunges into the depths of nature turned upside down as in Shakespeare's Macbeth, the animals "turn'd wild in nature." (Power and White, 2009). Justine's depression in *Melancholia* is related to her ability to observe life beyond the strictures of neoliberalist society. Echoing a 15th Century Italian painting, Justine, naked, bathes in nature in golden light like Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*. However, contrary to traditional painting perspective, she is not offered for the male gaze, but offers her body to the radiant light of the approaching death planet. In *Nymph( )maniac* there are splashes of nature that lift the film from a dark dystopia. Joe describes that when she was a child lying in tall grass, she had a spontaneous orgasm and was lifted up into the sky. Seligman does not understand because it defies scientific explanation. On the other hand, Joe's father shows her the souls of trees in winter. Towards the end of the film, Joe finds her own soul tree, an oak, cragged and exposed on a hill.

*Nymph( )maniac* begins and ends with Joe badly beaten in an alleyway. In between these two end points, this four-hour journey is not a narrative of one libertine woman. Just as his predecessors before him, Von Trier weaponizes his cinema against the banality of the western canon and exposes the crimes of neoliberalist capitalism.

He extends his aesthetic into a new Baroque aesthetic that is uniquely von Trier's. Like Chaucer's polyphony of styles, von Trier uses historical, literary, and cinema references designed to not simply fragment imaginary alignment, as if all

the pieces could fit neatly back together into a jigsaw puzzle. Using leaping allusions, he reworks cultural references with a strange power of association. His adventures of thought and expansive collisions of image, sound, digressions, and flashes of nature, are jolting, joking, bitter, but never nihilistic. He questions linear time, and joins Benjamin who sees the transformation of history as occurring in blasts of particular moments.

> A revolutionary historian should seiz[e] the image as it flashes by...to rescue 'tradition' from a 'conformism.. to set light to the sparks of hope in the past (Heathwood, 2014, n.p.).

His work of harmonious discord offers a tiny "hole in the grey curtain" (Fisher, 2009, p.80) of the dystopian present. Just as Joe says that she always demanded more from the sunset, von Trier plays with possibilities just out of reach from the strictures of social conditioning. Like fireworks that puncture the sky, explode in luminous colours, hover, and then dissolve, von Trier does not offer utopian solutions but offers "flashes" beyond the reach of the terror and stench of post-industrial society. In the torture scene with K, Joe manages to find some wiggle room by loosening the ropes that bind her just enough for her to move her pelvis and finally reach orgasm. For Fisher, there is wiggle room, glimmers that are historically significant:

> The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism.  From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again. (ibid. p.80)

Von Trier's new baroque reverberates beyond a singular meaning, ultimately leading to an articulation of a significant work.

**Rhetorical Impact**

Misunderstandings and contention surround von Trier's work. Much of the press has seen him as "the bad boy of Danish cinema or a pretentious, misogynist hack" (Stewart, 2014, n.p.). His defenders hail him as a great auteur. Some are repelled by his depressing nihilism, violence and sex. Some salivate over his personal psychological foibles. Many condemn him as a misogynist (for example, Linda Williams). Von Trier does not defend these contradictory and ambiguous labels and his "offenses" at Cannes could be seen as an effort to retain his provocateur/outsider credentials. As an "auteur" filmmaker who shows his films at film festivals, Von Trier walks a fine line between being subsumed by capitalist commodity film culture and finding an arena to ask sociopolitical questions. Like his predecessors, his method is to stage his work in unexpected and difficult ways to jolt an audience out of complacency.

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In an article, von Trier is asked to consider his position in the Euro-canon: 'I think I'm generally hated. There was a time in Denmark when you couldn't get into film school without saying you loathed my films." He adds proudly, "Tarkovsky saw one of my films and detested it. Anyway, I don't want to be some kind of Bergmanesque elder statesman,' he continues. 'He was interested in what other people did, and I'm not" (Husband, 2008). This response suggests a strategy to remain a deviant political provocateur.

Von Trier's portentous semi-treatises offer a disturbing distance in order to perceive and evaluate the depths of contemporary crisis and consider his history as "documents of barbarism and violence." Frustrating audience expectations by demanding more, his work is a devoted effort to not make his film viewers simply

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consumers but instead into as imaginative co-producers (Koutsourakis, 2013, p.29). One scholar said "Von Trier throws us ideas, and we fight like dogs over them" (Williams, 2009, n.p.).

There is enough meat on the bones to allow extended re-evaluation and scholarship of von Trier's works. His works will continue to be invaluable artistic texts that expose the social processes of neoliberalism, and some glimpse of something beyond.

# CHAPTER FOUR:

## Michael Moore - The *American* Subversive

### *Michael Moore in Trumpland* **(2016),** *Capitalism: A Love Story* **(***2009),* *Where to Invade Next* **(2016)**

Sissako and von Trier are able to work under the radar in the rarefied world of film festivals and art house cinemas, where concepts like "subversion" "disruption" and "irreverence" are de rigueur. With an uncanny knack for having a finger on the pulse of "the people," Moore has created a populist cinema that circulates at the Cineplex. Using comedy as a political weapon, Moore investigates, exposes, and subverts the cultural hegemony of American capitalism.

This chapter uses the trilogy of Moore's last three films, to explore the components of his cinema. The immersion of his films in mass entertainment has exposed Moore to a complicated and hostile terrain. Pointing a middle finger at the establishment, the press, and academia, has produced a firestorm around the reception of the films and at Moore himself who functions as agitator outside the text. The backlash has accused him of breaking the time-honoured codes of documentary filmmaking, but at another level, attempts to discredit him suggest a deeper alarm, that of a "betrayal" of American political traditions.

Despite bad press from the establishment, the popularity of Moore's films has grown. It comes from a climate of economic despair and increasing disorientation in the inner cities and the rust belts of the USA. This chapter contextualizes the economic-political conditions of Moore's films. These historical/economic themes are a central part of Moore's long personal/film history beginning with *Roger and Me* (1989) about the regional economic impact

of General Motors CEO Roger Smith's action of closing several auto plants in his hometown of Flint, Michigan, reducing GM's employees by 30,000 from 1978 to 1992. Moore revisits Flint and its economic decline again in later films, *Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint* (1992) and*The Big One* (1998), and expands to an overview of American dysfunction with *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Sicko* (2007) *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *Where to Invade Next* (2015), and *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016).

This body of work adds up to more than singular hot-button issues but provides a broader systemic view. Robert Stam points out that Moore moves:

> beyond the usual defensive apologetics of the Democratic Party...[and] takes the offensive by turning everything upside down. His work offers one corrective to a failure of the reformist left to creatively shape narratives that clarify the oppressive nature of capitalism as a system. (Stam, 2015, p.98)

While he is often seen as a bolt of lightning from out of the blue, Moore bears some resemblance to previous politically engaged filmmakers. I will explore Moore's placement within this historical legacy, and his breakout to define new political cinema. This chapter contextualizes the economic-political conditions of Moore's new populist films. I integrate documentary theory with a political/cultural analysis to explore the rhetorical manoeuvres that define Moore's cinema. I will also assess the ways in which documentary conventions, the American political tradition, and public interpretations clashed with his rhetorical aesthetic, attempting to undermine his political goals and cultural legitimacy.

## Documentary - Theoretical Background

While postmodernist theorists have questioned the "real," the observational and objective goals of the documentary tradition, public and

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mainstream media have remained entrenched with a particular understanding of what documentary should be. A naïve assumption, that the camera doesn't lie, has permeated the discussion of documentary film practices, particularly in the United States, throughout the 20th century. This assumption has persisted in relation to what many Americans still consider the "purest" form of documentary, called direct cinema, observational cinema, or American *cinéma verite*. Its practitioners claim that their ultimate purpose is based on the premise that the camera simply records what is there.

These unconscious protocols of dry objectivity and proof became the formal conventions of documentary. Derived from the narrative conventions of the newsreel, scientific study, and ethnography, this documentary form has reached a dead end. The average theatregoer or TV viewer, who associated documentaries with public television or the TV newsroom, saw documentary only as informational or educational. Brian Winston had called this form of documentary "a virtual guarantee of boredom" (Rogers, 2015, p.75).

This idea has served to maintain the hegemonic legitimacy of documentary as a document of record. Jonathan Kahana in *Intelligence Work, The Politics of American Documentary* sees the acceptance of "objective" is "consistent with the ideology of Cold War Liberalism" (Kahana, 2008, p.295). Geiger describes how Kahana sees that the ideal of direct cinema, as a unified or holistic American nation, in which the "explicit address to the national 'we', [in] television journalism becomes 'an apparatus of a national-security state,' relying on the documentary form as 'an instrument of truth' projects common national interests" (Geiger, 2011, p.192). Geiger, among others, links these ideas with cultural theorist Francois Lyotard who saw these ideas as western legacies of the Enlightenment. "These key assumptions–such as progressive or linear history, the absolute knowledge of science and common human understanding–were at the core of western belief systems."(ibid.)

**Reviewing the Record - Documentary as Resistance**

The premise of the realist tradition, which subjected Moore to much derision particularly in the US press, ignores the long history of political film. Moore could be considered the wild child of earlier politically committed documentarians. Dziga Vertov (1920s), Joris Ivens (1920s to 1970s), Jean Rouch (1940s-2000s) Emile de Antonio (1960s to 1980s), Chris Marker (1950s to 2000s), Peter Watkins (1960s to 2000s) and Patricio Guzmán (1960s to 2000s), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (1960s to 1990s), and many others, were part of a tradition that challenged notions of objectivity and truth to attempt social/political change.

Since the 1920s, there has always been a critique of the hegemony of the realist aesthetic (Rogers, 2015, p.75), with early disruptive practices of political documentaries particularly in the 1920s and 1960s. With the Soviet revolution, Dziga Vertov experimented with revolutionary form, linking artistic expression with political commitment. He rejected "realist" cinema as "bourgeois" in favour of exposing the process of filmmaking as revolutionary, to let 'the people' in on the act. In a direct line of influence from Vertov to Moore is the documentary work of French filmmakers, especially that of ethnographer Jean Rouch. Rouch resurrected Vertov's *Kino Pravda* translating it into French, *Cinema Verite,* and adopting Brechtian reflexivity as part of his political agenda. Erik Barnouw, defines the very distinct difference between American direct cinema and French *Cinema Verite:*

> The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of *cinema verite* tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; The Rouch *cinema verite* artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the

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role of uninvolved bystander; the *cinema verite* artist espoused that of provocateur. (Barsam, 1992, p.304)

According to Ruby, there is a "Western middle-class need to explore, document, explain, understand and hence, symbolically control the world" (cited in Rosenthal 2005, p.41). From this perspective, conventional documentaries have determined the Other, whether the exotic East, or the poor, the disadvantaged, the politically and economically powerless. Moore echoes his predecessors by connecting economic conditions and the portrayal of the underdog, the voiceless, the worker, the ordinary person. Moore's subversive cinema does not only give working class prominence, but portrays himself as one of them. His emphatic positioning of a socioeconomic "class," is an attack against established economic political power structures in the name of the "people."

Moore's use of the self-reflexive and political advocacy marks resemblance to European provocateurs. According to Thomas Waugh, an advocate of committed documentary, he says this documentary tradition always "refuses to meet any of the expectations of bourgeois aesthetics" (Waugh, 2011, p.13).

**A New Aesthetic**

The postmodernist era has opened up possibilities for redefining political cinema. Postmodernist-Marxist social critic Fredric Jameson points out that after World War II, the line was blurred between popular culture and high culture as a site for the creation of meaning and understanding (Jameson, 1991). A postmodernist space challenges the traditional oppositions between traditional and vernacular speech, between high art and popular culture, between academic knowledge and common sense.

Jacques Ranciere sees radical politics in the form of a new theatricality that "refuses the existing distribution of roles… where new social actors, performing on a redesigned public stage, recast their own role in order to have equal participation" (Cited in Stam, 2015, p.96). Moore breaks from the older political documentary tradition and "embraced pleasure, sobriety's nemesis, in the form of the performative, the emotional,..and the personal, ushering in a new era of 'anti-documentary' exhibitionism, entertainment, intimacy, and play" (Rangan, 2014, n.p.).

Michael Chanon sees Moore as making "a crucial shift in the documentary idiom, almost an epistemological break with the old idea of objectivity" (Chanon, 2007, p.241). Using some to the older practices of reflexive and self-conscious ideological content, Moore takes his films in a new ludic direction. In an interview, he declares, "Don't make a documentary -- make a MOVIE … documentarians [are like] Baptist preachers...This word "documentarian" -- I'm here today to declare that word dead" ("Michael Moore, Indiewire, 2014). He redesigns the public stage.

## Populism and the American Political Tradition

> People don't like to pay money to see something about politics and they don't pay money to see documentaries, so the success of this movie is all the more remarkable because of that. (CNN, 2004)

Moore's populist cinema marks a significant turning point in the reception of the documentary. Documentary had been marginalized in an informational-educational backwater and a theatrical run for a documentary was not a box office consideration. *Roger and Me* (1989), was the most successful documentary in American history at the time. This was surpassed by *Fahrenheit 911* (2004), which grossed over $222 million in worldwide sales, the highest grossing documentary of all time (Wikipedia).

Moore's populist formula that has worked to not only attract a core base, but which has also attracted large sections of the population throughout the United States. Waugh defines political filmmakers as those that form solidarity with groups or coalitions such as the working class and the left, which and take on activist positions (Waugh, 2011). Moore takes an activist position *within* mass entertainment, the purview of the "enemy." From a critical standpoint, the 1970s Frankfurt School saw people conditioned by a "mass-mediated" culture to be passive objects of capitalist consumerism and commodification, but attempts to critique, let alone undermine it, have largely been from outside observation particularly by cultural studies scholars.

Moore cuts out the middle person, the academic, the institution, the party and using mass media as a political strategy to interrogate media that "produces and defines the boundaries of permissible political discourse and subsequently a significant part of the political tradition in America" (Archer, 2010, p.2).

Populism, of the left and the right, has been described in dismissive and condescending terms as a "pathology of democracy" (Miller et al, 2005), or, as the American historian Richard Hofstadter said in the 1960s, a "paranoid style of politics" (Hofstadter, 1964, n.p.). I will argue that populist movements serve as warning signs of political crisis. In both Europe and the US, populist movements have erupted at times when political norms of the establishment are in direct conflict with people's economic opportunities, fears and hopes. These eruptions can become catalysts for political change. Arditi's book *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* explores the positive outcomes of populism and also the danger of its appeal that can lead to, "charismatic to leaders who present themselves as self-styled saviors, or lead people to seek the sense of belonging offered by aggressive forms of nationalism, uncompromising religious sects, or violent urban tribe (Arditi, 2007, p.26).

Moore's populism, can be placed within Marxist and third-world discourses, which accords with Margaret Canovan's definition that Populism can be understood as an appeal to 'the people' against both the established power structures and dominant ideas and values (Carnovan, 1999, p.2-16). Moore's direct attack on dominant ideas and the possibility of political desire, is what Deleuze and Guattari call schizophrenia; it must be "seen not as pathology but as a subversive disordering of bourgeois thought processes" (Nieves, 2005, p.167).

Moore emerges from economic anxiety which coincides with global economic crisis, as evidenced by European right wing anti-immigration agitation and new left populist movements and parties, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. This marks a reawakening of public debate, a rekindling what political theorist Chantal Mouffe calls the "political." She argues that in a post Cold War and globalized economy, we are living in a "post-political world, in which the problems of societies are resolved by notions of universal human values, liberal consensus, and human rights rather than the a comprehensive structural assessment of neoliberalism (Muddle, 2015).

The fact that Moore has emerged as a thorn in the side of the US establishment cannot be fully appreciated until Moore is placed in the historical context of American populism. While strands of populism go back to the American Revolution, a more solidified US populist movement began in the1890s in the South and West. It sought to regulate the railroads, protect farmers (and later factory workers) from corporate interests and espoused a graduated income tax to regulate wealthy Americans and corporations into equity taxation (Belton, 1996, p.7) However, populist dissent has not found fertile ground in the US. There has been a distinct and singular adherence to American liberalism, a "fixed, dogmatic lliberalism" (Hartz, 1991 p.9) that has halted dissent in the US. American political theorist, Louis Hartz, sees America as an inherently liberal

nation, "the only daughter of the Enlightenment" (Hartz, 1991). Liberalism in this sense refers to property rights, individualism, and rationalism, often with close attachments to the idea of progress, market economics, and freedom. In contrast, ideas against the liberal tradition as those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Marx were able to function contiguously in Europe. The rise of the Syriza socialist party in Greece is not an alien concept in the European context. Hartz saw the US as having an "irrational obsession with market capitalism that, at times, subverted private rights and personal liberty" (Archer, 2010, p.3). Explaining the failure of socialism to take a hold in the US, Hartz saw pervasive, unthinking consensual acceptance of classic liberalism. He insisted, "two centuries of liberal dominance had left Americans in a state of blindness, robbed of alternative perspectives" (Arlen, p.2).

The restraints on alternative thinking were, in part, a desire to subordinate political variety to a dominant authority and democratic culture. As such, American politics is structured to sustain the characteristics of winner-takes-all, first-past-the-post, single-member districts that have encouraged a two-party system. Third-party candidates are often dismissed as "spoilers." The two-party system tilts towards the centre so that sharp political differences over underlying socioeconomic issues become blunted or even ignored (Judis, 2016, n.p).

A transformation of political dissent from "spoilers" to criminal disloyalty was fed by sensational accusations of espionage in the late 1940s and early 1950s against Alger Hiss, Judith Coplon, and Ethel and Julius Rosenberg and the McCarthy era. There were suggestions that McCarthyism rose out of Populism, but Michael Paul Rogin argues that McCarthyism was not a mass movement of the 'radical' right, but rather the product of routine conservative politics...created by the actions and inactions of conservative and liberal elites Rogin,1984).

Rogin saw a distinctly American phenomenon, the fear of subversive,

from the racial conflicts of the early republic to the Hollywood anti-Communism of Ronald Reagan. Political monsters—the Indian cannibal, the black rapist, the demon rum, the bomb-throwing anarchist, the many-tentacled Communist conspiracy, the agents of international terrorism—are familiar figures in the dream life that so often dominates American political consciousness. (Rogin, 1988, abstract)

Rogin developed the idea of the countersubversive, the fear of the subversive, which becomes an unconscious value system through a "perceived utility as an independent reference for an individuals' everyday reality" (Archer 2010, p.10). Mass media reinforces it with a simultaneous "inundation of the audience with repetitive symbols function to assure individuals of social hierarchies...as 'literal interpretations of society" (ibid.).

Fearing alien penetration, the countersubversive interprets grassroots or popular initiatives as signs of alien invasion and subsequently sees individuals and select groups as members of conspiratorial evil. The creation of these monsters is essential for the countersubversive in order to give shape to anxieties and allow indulgence of dangerous desires (ibid.). Moore is subject to demonization that allows the countersubversive establishment in the name of national security to dominate.

Populism in America must overcome countersubversive conditioning. Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau argue for populism (Muddle, 2015, n.p.). In their view, populism actually constitutes the essence of democratic politics that can be good for democracy; it is liberalism that is the real problem. Moore's populism, using "ludic and adventurous" (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p.355) cinema constructs a popular bond with an audience to defy dominant channels of corporate media and provide unreported political perspectives. By offering a resistant perspective, disempowered communities can find a framework of

understanding. Echoing Jurgen Habermas, Matthew Bernstein points out that "Moore has brought us, as viewers and citizens, (hereinafter I have adapted the term 'citizen viewers' in this thesis) exactly to the place where democratic discussion and deliberation should exist: a debate-however messy-over ideas, not in the controlled 'publicity' that has taken its place in the public sphere" (Bernstein, 2010, p.233).

By defying corporate media and attempting to redefine the boundaries of permissible political discourse, Moore represents the conspiratorial alien. He threatens to awaken the American political consciousness and its blind belief in liberal democracy. Establishment media have reacted with fear, fear of the subversive, and have mobilized a well-established demonization process.

## *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016)

*Michael Moore in Trumpland* was released very quickly to persuade people to vote for Hilary Clinton. Shot over two nights in the staunch Republican county of Wilmington, Ohio, it was a last-ditch effort to stop Trump's election by appealing to Trump's and Bernie Sanders' voters.

This section will concentrate on the first half of *Trumpland,* the second half being a plea to vote for Hilary Clinton. Beyond the fact that it is a very good example of the immediacy of a film to serve direct political action, and has topical currency, it is a one hour thirteen minute staged performance that offers an opportunity to unpack the performative skills Moore has honed over the past 27 years. Moore uses a variety of components to create his cinema, which can broken down in the following sub-headings**:**

**The Populism of Trump and Moore**

The film displays Moore's populist performance as he exposes the populism of Donald Trump. In as much as the film centers on the possible election of Donald Trump, and the fact that Moore mentions Hitler, there is a coterminous association with two forms of populism as discussed by Arditi.

Hannah Arendt, Wilhelm Reich and many others have explored the populist phenomenon with the rise of Adolf Hitler as an example of "aggressive nationalism" and "self-style saviors." 1920s Germany had a very vulnerable economy built on foreign capital, loans from the United States, and dependency on foreign trade. With the Great Depression, German families were ruined and many were cast into poverty and desperation. Looking for a solution, any solution, they turned to Hitler, who told the German people that, "…*he would make Germany great again"*(Politics USA).

Similarities with the current USA economic collapse and vulnerabilities gave rise to Trump, who ran on the slogan, "Make America Great Again." Before the November 8, 2016 US election, Michael Moore was singular in his uncanny prediction: "This wretched, ignorant, dangerous part-time clown and full time sociopath is going to be our next president. President Trump. Go ahead and say the words, 'cause you'll be saying them for the next four years: "PRESIDENT TRUMP." Moore tried to warn the Hilary supporters that they were living in a bubble, that rationality wasn't working, and that "Trying to soothe yourself with the facts – *77% of the electorate are women, people of color, young adults under 35 and Trump can't win a majority of any of them!"* – or logic – *"people aren't going to vote for a buffoon or against their own best interests!"* – is your brain's way of trying to protect you from trauma."

**Clown/Clown**

The clown as a theatrical device, has been deployed since Leonardo da Vinci. It has been used as the butt of political jokes to gain perspective or to diffuse political power. Moore's filmed performance in the Ohio theatre links him to the ancient performative device of the clown from the popular theatre tradition. Over the years, Moore has created his clown persona as a political weapon to reveal hypocrisy. Moore's corpulence and mischief-making, resembles the most notable of them all, the full-blown outrageous but true, Falstaff. Falstaff has been one of theatre's favorites, who in Shakespeare's plays, he the counterpoint to "jingoism and mythmaking" (Winterson, 2017, n.p.). Like Falstaff, Moore uses his comic energy to connect with 'the people', to connect to the incorrigible rogue in all of us.

Moore is not the first political filmmaker to use the comedic association with an Everyman persona as clown. For example, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's first feature *Muerte de un Burocrata* (*Death of a Bureacrat*) (1966) comedy is used for political comment:

> But no amount of legalisms can obscure the names to which Gutierrez Alea dedicates his film: Luis Buñuel, Laurel and Hardy, Marilyn Monroe, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and even Jean Vigo. The films hero is a bewildered, hapless Everyman, a Keaton-Lloyd-Chaplin rolled into one, tilting at spinning windmills of red tape. (Rich,1980, p.29-30).

Media has been awash with references to Trump and clown and references to Hitler. For example in a Washington Post op.ed, Richard Cohen's headline reads, "Trump isn't Hitler. But United States could be another Germany" (Cohen, 2016, n.p.).

Some criticism of the film is that it is not as "biting and bombastic"[1] as Moore's previous films. The character of the clown can also be used as counter art. Moore's "hapless Everyman" in this film tacks in a different direction.  How to stop the clown? Moore becomes a counter clown to Trump's clown depiction in the press. Trump's faux, down home "say it like it is" act could only be countered by a working class schlub with his own "say it like it is" Flint, Michigan working class credentials.

> Moore's broad appeal to a mainstream audience partly derives from his unkempt, hamburger-eating, baseball-cap wearing Americanness. As the shuffling, potbellied embodiment of the working class, a distilled quintessence of Midwestern normalcy, he is the very antithesis of the right-wing bogeyman—the effete latte-sipping liberal (Stam, 2015, p.94)

In *Trumpland,* Moore does not do cheap jabs at clown Trump as everyone else in the media was doing. He uses his clown persona to "find common ground" with the Trump voter who overlaps with Moore's politically and economically disenfranchised working class base. "I'm worried, an angry white guy. We had a good run, 10,000 years. He uses humorous allusion to create the context for Trump's popularity, empathizing with them: "They're not racists, or rednecks".  With colloquial language and humour he goes to foundational concerns-they are hurting from loss of jobs, from foreclosures, car repos-penniless, homeless, divorced. In other words, he says, "fucked up." He references Trump standing at a Ford Motor factory during the Michigan primary, when he threatened the corporation that if they went ahead with their planned closure of that factory and moved to Mexico, he would slap a 35% tariff on any Mexican-built cars shipped back to the United States. Moore says, "It was sweet, sweet music to the ears of the working class in Michigan."

The subtext for Moore's engagement with the Trump voter is to acknowledge the significant changes to the US white working class in the US. From the mid-1970s onwards, there was a dramatic a shift from the traditional industrial manufacture.

> Today, only about a sixth of white working class holds manufacturing jobs...in fact, the entire goods-producing sector, which includes construction, mining and agriculture, provides less than three in ten white working class jobs.(Teixeira, 2008, p.6)

As a result the white working class shifted political allegiance from pro-Democratic to pro-Republican, especially at the presidential level.

In a tone of solidarity, Moore understood the terrain. He says, "From Green Bay to Pittsburgh, this, my friends, is the middle of England – broken, depressed, struggling, the smokestacks strewn across the countryside with the carcass of what we used to call the Middle Class. Angry, embittered working (and nonworking) people who were lied to by the trickle-down of Reagan and abandoned by Democrats…" (Moore, 2016, n.p.) Facing the audience, in a few deft strokes of populist rhetoric, he encapsulates the current economic crisis and desperate anger that can produce a Trump. He says that the election of Trump will be the "Molotov cocktail, a hand-grenade to the establishment on both sides. He goes on, "Trump's election is going to be the biggest fuck-you in human history" and describes Trump's supporters as "Rightfully angry people. I get it. You wanted to send a message. You had righteous anger, justifiable anger...You used the ballot as an anger management tool…and it's going to feel good, for a day, possibly a week, even a month…" (*Michael Moore in Trumpland*)

His strategies are not used for emotional attachment to a "savior", but the opposite. Like Vertov, Moore sees his films as raising the consciousness of the audience as a way to "bring Marxist truth to the masses" (Ruby, 1980, p.168). He aims to cut through media inertia, and what passes for political commentary, to

address the malignancies of global capitalism.  As a *New Yorker* article observed, Moore is:

> … a genius of political satire, deploying his persona—as a populist socialist skeptic with a superb sense of humor and a chess player's skill at media positioning… Laid out with meticulously researched…combative yet deeply empathetic practical politics, even turns it into a political weapon of the sort that's seemingly ready-made to combat Trump, whose candidacy, after all, is itself purely a product of the celebrity industry. (Brody, 2016, n.p.)

**Comedy As Political Tool**

> The great political criminals must be exposed and exposed especially to laughter. They are not great political criminals, but people who permitted great political crimes, which is something entirely different…. If the ruling classes permit a small crook to become a great crook, he is not entitled to a privileged position in our view of history…One may say that tragedy deals with the sufferings of mankind in a less serious way than comedy. (Young-Bruehl, 2004, p.331)

Brecht wrote these notes for the play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* a satirical allegory of the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany prior to World War II. In an interview, Moore says, "The best comedians used to be the people who were the angriest. Their humour was the flip side of their anger" (Georgakas and Saltz, 1998, p.4). Moore's use of humour aligns with Brecht's argument – that comedy should be taken more seriously-because comedy exposes not only the crimes of individuals, but the structures that support them preventing the glorification of evil that can happen in tragedy.

**Carnival as Resistance**

Close to the beginning of the film, Moore points to the balcony where he says that he has been sensitive to the Trump voter by separating "Muslim-looking people" with a drone hovering over them. And he points to the "Mexican-looking people" with a cardboard wall being built around them. One reviewer says, "It's good for some cheap laughs, but ultimately pretty hacky" (Colburn, 2016, n.p.).

"Hacky" is what Moore wants. With seventy-three minutes in the theatre, Moore's performance is more akin American vaudevillian theatrical traditions, of the concert saloon, freak show, dime museum (Tray, 2006) than to documentaries of sobriety. It is in defiance of hegemonic protocols; he turns everything upside down and celebrates carnivalesque vulgarity. He dares to do what we "cowed by moral disapproval of others" would not dare say or do (Dalrymple, 2015).

Moore, personified as a potbellied Falstaffian, chooses a mode of communication for 'the people' and offers cultural studies optimism with "the insurgent energies of Bakhtin's carnival" (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p.340). Moore is a "multiple: part *faux naïf,* part portly lord of misrule, part agit-prop provocateur, part stand-up comic, part moralist, and part satirist"(Stam, 2015, p.95).

Carnival has a long history of transgressive practice. Rozaliya Yaneva in *Misrule and Reversals Carnivalesque Performances in Christopher Marlowe's Plays* traces the history of carnival, which "produced symbolic imagery and had one of the greatest influences on European culture and comic drama" (Yaneva, 2012, p.8). Its popularity over centuries was that,

> Carnival and other popular festive forms were the preferred medium of communication for the common people, since these anonymous public forms offered a way to express unauthorized political opinions and suggestions (ibid. p.11).

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Moore was the first to apply carnival strategies to the theatrical documentary, but the tradition is not new. Moore has said he has been influenced by Monty Python, *Mad* magazine, *National Lampoom,* and the BBC's *That Was the Week That Was* (Cineaste)*.* With postmodern openness, there has been an invigoration of the carnivalesque to address political dis-ease, adopted by comedians (Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert), entertainers and other forms of a resistance that form a locus for other action. Moore has created space for creativity and other permutations to mock established and authoritarian order, which has stimulated new meanings, social commentaries and interpretations (Yaneva, ibid. p.8).

Carnival is a powerful form of resistance to economic deprivation, and to imposed normative ideas of establishment social control.  Drawing on Bakhtin, Yaneva says that the use of "misrule" becomes a form of "social experimentation, in which utopian fantasies are performed and collective desires for a better life are expressed" (Yaneva, 2012, p.13).

## *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) – History and Structural Analysis US Capitalism

Its timing is exquisite, coming in the wake of the biggest financial collapse in living memory. (Moor in an interview with Chris McGreal 2010)

*Capitalism: A Love Story* is a structural analysis prompted by current conditions. It is an urgent response the economic crisis of 2008, but it doesn't just cover the bank shenanigans as the news and films at the Cineplex were depicting; he steps back and traces the historical roots of the current crisis, that

of capitalism itself. Over twenty-seven years, Moore has developed a carnivalesque persona, to connect with citizen viewers. The theatrical components of his shtick were outlined in *Trumpland.* Using this cultural credit from previous films, Moore takes a risk in challenging the sacred cows of American liberalism with less MM carnivalesque performative pieces, and asks viewers to take a deeper political/economic look into the ills convulsing the country.

## Historic/Economic Context

*Capitalism: A Love Story* is a culmination of the themes of previous films: "Moore's other films focused on symptoms. This one tackles the disease" (New York Magazine, 2009, n.p.). Tracing the history of American capitalism, Moore details the seeds of the present day crisis from the depression, the consequences of WWII, and the capitalist mobilization of the 1970s which brought about the sea change in economic policy.

With no-apologies advocacy, Moore sends up a red flare. As Fisher has said, "capitalism can proceed perfectly well, in some ways better, without anyone making a case for it" (2009, p.12). Michael Moore names it, pulls it to center stage and addresses the most challenging of all subjects – popularizing the dry subject of economics-and attacking the sacred cow of all sacred cows -- US neoliberalism. Economic conditions have worsened and with increasing alarm from the 2008 crisis, neoliberals were forced to name it. As Moore whispers facetiously in a voice-over, "the big C" we see George W. Bush at the White House forced to defend it: "Capitalism is the best system ever devised."

In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis with millions left unemployed, underemployed, shaken and bitter, journalists, politicians and bloggers focused

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on the leading players in the unfolding drama. While the banks too-big-to-fail banks were being bailed out, many who were outraged that the bankers weren't jailed formed the grass roots (in the beginning) and well-organized Tea Party. There has also been a cultural shift with films and beginning to take a closer look at the ills of Wall Street, such as *Wall Street*, *The Big Short, Margin Call, The Wolf of Wall Street,* and *Too Big to Fail*. However, these films' depiction of banking excess misses the point. The *Wolf of Wall Street* by Martin Scorsese, for instance, was a box office success, praised for the acting performance of depraved characters, but as Dana Stevens, a member of the New York Film Critics Circle, wrote it was "Epic in size, claustrophobically narrow in scope" (2013, n.p.) Fisher cites Zizek who points out that "anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism…the villain in Hollywood films will turn out to be the 'evil corporation' (Fisher, 2009, p.12). By focusing on the excesses of the banks and the government's mishandling of the crisis, it deflects the systemic causes of the crisis – "a sign, perhaps, that [it is] at the level of the political unconscious"(Fisher, 2009, p.63).

Michael Moore makes a case for a hard look the entire structural edifice:

I didn't make the movie just to get a few of the CEOs put in jail. I tried to speak to a much greater thing here, that we have an economic system that's unfair. It's unjust. It's not democratic, and I want to see a new economic order in the 21st century. (The Daily Beast, 2009, n.p.)

Replacing the bankers with another set of bankers does nothing; the problem lies at a deeper level of structural dysfunction. Marx and Engels predicted that capitalism would collapse under the weight of its own contradictions and Michael Moore along with neo-Marxists are acutely aware of the ephemerality of the modern economic system. The film details the gigantic holes in the system, especially the world of finance and its connections to the

corridors of power. The overall argument is that the form of US capitalism is a flawed system that lacks logical sense. Moore avoids the experts, the academics or the economists, and airs out his argument with a friend, Wallace Shawn. He also consults a priest and they conclude that "Capitalism is an evil, and you cannot regulate evil"(from the film) because as Fisher describes, "the vices are engendered by structure…[a] shadowy centerless impersonality" (Fisher, 2009, p.68) that promotes greed and an inversion of priority. Individual welfare is seen as more important than general welfare. Moore dismantles the myth. Despite the fact that America is a touted as a democracy, capitalism is practiced as a financial oligarchy or as the film shows through leaked memos from Citigroup analysts, a plutonomy. A plutonomy is  "where economic growth is powered by and largely consumed by the wealthy few" (from the film).

**Structure of the Film**

Moore employs an ever-present voice-over narrative frequently used in the politically critical documentaries of the 1930s. He takes fragments  from home movies, and mainstream old news coverage, old films, old TV shows, and old advertising, to create credibility and familiarity with the audience, and recontextualizes the material for critical analysis to counter historical and cultural normative values.

The film is roughly divided into three non-sequential threads of argument. The first stage is a look back to a more prosperous time. Technicolor pinks and turquoise pastels, sherbet colours of mint green and electric blues form the colour scheme for the formica and chrome furniture of the 1950s. Using old films and advertising showing a typical immaculate housewife gracefully opening a pink refrigerator or a family happily sitting around a TV, Moore uses the glamour of commodities to highlight American technological prosperity. He says, "If this was capitalism, I loved it... and so did everyone else." Christine Spengler

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suggests that this "bolster[s] support for socially conservative legislation". However, Moore reformulates this clichéd vision of 1950s America as "counternostalgia founded on a different economic vision" (2009, p. 62). There is an economic reason for the golden age. Moore says, "During these years a lot of people got rich and they had to pay a top tax rate of 90%/%" and this funded the nation's infrastructure. A solid economic foundation was high taxes, strong unions, and a growing American middle class (Phillips, 2015, p.176).

The second thread of his argument is economic collapse. Moore intercuts scenes of the fall of ancient Rome with scenes of contemporary US so that images of a Roman dictator are connected to former vice president Dick Cheney. This analogy between the fall of Rome and contemporary American liberalism in not new, as it is usually associated with American liberalism and moral decadence. Moore "reconstructs this narrative and, while still borrowing imagery from the past, constitutes a radical nostalgia, what Jennifer Ladino calls "'counter nostalgic', which serves 'to revisit a dynamic past and invert or exploit official narratives in ways that challenge dominant histories" (Gounaridou, 2010, p.137-8). In Moore's narration, Rome "could not conceal the seeds of decay, the unhealthy dependence of the economy on slaves, the disparity between rich and poor." Moore's purpose is not to depict Rome's moral decline but to point out an economy of greed and the corruption of government (Phillips, 2015, p.176).

The film builds towards a dramatically unfolding, post 2008 bank bailout in which the audience is asked to review media footage as President Bush and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson (former head of banking giant Goldman Sachs) try to pass a bailout of the banks through the House of Representatives over the course of a weekend. The initial bill failed because of angry phone calls from the general electorate. However, the bill was passed shortly after by the efforts of lobbyists and some politicians worried about facing re-election. Moore's hypothesis is that capitalism has a firm grip because of the amount of US money

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in the system and therefore its influence inhibits the possibility of alternative thinking.

We see the consequences of the collapse. There is less of his Everyperson reflexive mode driving the film and we see families being evicted, filming the event themselves, with their own camcorders and cellphones directly addressing the camera. Joblessness and foreclosures provide the personal and emotional counterpoint to Moore's depiction of systemic greed. Suggesting the Marxist alienation of worker helplessness, the film begins with the aftermath, the bailout with a number of vignettes from rustbelt towns where we witness sheriffs breaking down doors with eviction orders. With tears people face the camera, "Why do you do this to hard working people? We're middle class, trying to make a living." And another, "There is rebellion between people who have nothing and the people who got it all…nothing in between."

There are many examples of Moore calls the "evil" system such as the company Condo Vultures, whose "straight up capitalism, tak[es] advantage of others' misfortunes," and another of blue chip corporations taking out life insurance policies on their youngest staff members, hoping to turn a profit in case of an untimely death.

The third thread in Moore's thesis is to offer concrete alternatives to contemporary neoliberal economics. In an optimistic counter-play using the images of the 1950s prosperity still vivid from earlier in the film, Moore shows never-seen before footage of President Roosevelt in 1944 calling for a second Bill of Rights guaranteeing the right to a living wage, access to health care and education, stating that "true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security…People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made."

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Moore posits two methods that could be used to rectify economic unbalance. For the first, Moore looks at post-WWII Europe and Japan, who re-built their socioeconomic structure from post-war rubble.

The second is not an imagined socialist utopia, but possibilities through organized grass roots activism citing a workers' sit-in at the Republic Window and Door Company and their final win against the Bank of America. Moore urges those sympathetic to his views to take to the streets and begin a working class revolution with the objective of shifting political and economic power back to the 99 percent. In an age of pessimistic foreclosure of the possibility of change, he has created the locus for a call to action, which continues beyond the screening of the film as Moore appears in rallies organizes them, and participates in other actions.

Moore's films and TV shows stage "events"; he dares to do what we cowed by the disapproval of others, would not dare say or do (Dalrymple, 2015). Moore's interventions challenge the representations of corporate capital. There are less of Moore's signature performative actions in this film, but they are used at key points. He is the schlub who ambles up the steps of corporate headquarters trying to see the CEO of GM; he drives around in an armoured truck to the big banks on Wall Street demanding the money the banks owe to the people. At the end of the film, Moore is seen wrapping yellow crime scene tape around a Wall Street bank. He says,

> Crimes have been committed in this building.  I am here to make a citizen's arrest. Please come down and step away from the building. Don't be afraid. Federal prison is a nice place.

These MM events serve as punctuations, as a re-orientation of knowledge, of expectations. The mimicry of the yellow tape official signage

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usurps the use of space turning it inside out from what Jacques Ranciere would call "the 'police order', which is "designed to keep people within their circumscribed roles and routines of everyday life in conformity with the needs of capital" (cited in McKee, 2016, p.134).

## *Where to Invade Next* (2015) - Utopia Now

> Contrasting European and North African social programs... with feckless American styles ...to sham[e] the United States, Moore deliberately misrepresents — and misunderstands -- how the melting pot boils. (White, 2016 n.p)

This is final film in the trilogy I use in surveying Michael Moore's political cinema. *Michael Moore in Trumpland* dealt with the immediacy of the present. *Capitalism: A Love Story* dealt with the historical roots underlying the present crisis. *Where to Invade Next* might appear to present a flippant rosy picture of a utopian Europe, but Moore is asking a serious question. He is asking Americans to consider whether the American version of neoliberalism can function any longer. It is a proposal for the future-now, offering alternatives to current US social policies. Moore "invades" Europe to "capture" socialist ideas in order to awaken Americans to possible alternatives. Hartz, writing in the 1950s, wanted to awaken Americans from their "dogmatic slumber", so that they could finally come to terms with the specificity of their liberal experience.  He believed that alternatives were possible if only Americans would develop an impetus for self-scrutiny. One solution was to "make [the] journey to Europe. By alerting his countrymen to acute defects within their national experience, and showing how these defects inhibited Americans from understanding themselves and understanding their place within the world, Harz sought insight in the imaginative possibilities outside the United States (Arlen, 2016, p.5).

Moore's *Where to Invade Next* is a film demonstration of Hartz's theoretical work. Jon Schwarz from the Intercept identifies his piece, "'Where to Invade Next' as the most subversive movie Michael Moore has Ever Made". He says,

> So where could anyone go from there? Once you've done   capitalism...But *Where to Invade Next* demonstrates there is...It's not speculation about how human nature will be after the revolution. (Schwartz, 2016, n.p.)

As a naive American, Moore "invades" Europe and North Africa "picking the flowers, not the weeds" as examples of a social contract that supports the people, not the corporations. The planting of the US flag at each idea that he "steals" becomes the leitmotif for the film, a counter to the patriotic use of the flag for US military conquests.

As part of his activist agenda, Moore announces that the film is part of the Bernie Sanders campaign showing concrete examples of Bernie Sanders' socialist domestic platform. Moore visits "socialist" countries. In France he sits with school children as they spend an hour eating chef prepared healthy and delicious school lunches. He travels to Finland to understand its education system that scores at the top; they have little homework and are encouraged to use free time to be free thinkers. He travels to Portugal where they have decriminalized drugs and compares it to US drug policy of jailing drug users as "21st century slavery". He talks with the father of a child who was killed in Norway's Breivik massacre; the father is against capital punishment. Also in Norway, a segment in a Norwegian prison shows prisoners with unarmed guards, using knives in the kitchen, free to walk around. Moore contrasts this with images of brutalization inside US prisons especially against on young black men.

Even more sobering is when Moore observes German school children examining comprehensively the legacy of the Holocaust. Moore then cuts to a historical montage of US slavery that leads up to Ferguson, the police shooting of a young unarmed black man that sparked the Ferguson protests and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Some critics thought that the film's depiction of the alternatives were too rosy, too upbeat:

> Even documentaries need dramatic tension; this one is comprised solely of contented people being informed that their lives are tickety-boo. (Gilbey, 2016)

Moore's intentions are deliberately in the realm of the possible. Towards the end of the film, Michael Moore stands at the remnants of the Berlin Wall:

> Built to stand forever. Impenetrable. It lasted less than 30 years. Yeah. And, in a night, it was over. I remember that, and around the same time, Mandela got out of prison and then became the president of South Africa. And those two events-- like, from that moment on in my life, I was like, "Oh, I get it. Anything can happen… It's like, three years ago, gay marriage in the United States was outlawed in every state–Yeah-Now law of the land… I've turned into this kind of crazy optimist.

Optimism marks a sea change that is undergoing current political thinking. In order to assess Moore's political valence, the rest of this chapter places Moore in a broader political context, a re-evaluation of political post-modernism.

In periods of upheaval such as the current period of cultural and financial dislocation, literature, films and music reflect dystopian conditions but it is also fertile ground for utopian ideas to be re-imagined. Stam argues:

Subversive cinema often plays with various modalities of the counter-factual. While the dystopian counter factual hyperbolizes the pathologies of the cynical ethos promoted by global capitalism, the utopian counterfactual prods us to imagine more generous alternative social arrangements. (Stam, 2015, p.97-98)

Many critics had attacked Moore for criticizing the capitalist system without offering an alternative. In fact, Moore does offer alternatives in the form of resistance and sit-ins in *Capitalism: A Love Story*, but in *Where to Invade Next* he shows fully implemented government policies, not by imagining an abstract utopian future but by showing examples of "concrete utopias", that are practiced in various parts of the world in order to frame an alternative to the economic, environmental, and political despair as perceived in the US. The film was criticized for being too utopian, a word that has been, "so tarnished that it has recently been used almost interchangeably with its evil twin, dystopia" (Kaipur, 2016, n.p.). Perspectives are shifting. Jameson observes, "In the last years, utopia has again changed its meaning and has become the rallying cry for left and progressive forces" (cited by Kapur, 2016, n.p.),

"Not long ago, utopianism was a mark of naïveté or fanaticism, or even of solidarity with political coercion; today, *anti*-utopianism is denigrated as a form of political cynicism and complicity with the global forces of oppression. (Kapur, 2016, n.p.)

While Marx and Engels dismissed "bourgeois utopian socialism," many of the Marxist principles of rejecting individualism and supporting collectivism, egalitarianism, remain part positive ideas today, which Moore applies in *Where to Invade Next*.

In the era of Trump, Michael Moore and the Bernie Sanders movement suggest a rejuvenated Marxism. In *Capitalism: A Love Story*, Moore uses FDR's proposal for a Second Bill of Rights as part of American idealism. "The nineteen-

thirties witnessed a short-lived flowering of New Deal utopias, government-created coöperatives built to generate employment" (Kapur, 2016, n.p.). Erik Reece in his book *Utopia Drive* says, "Things will only get worse if we *don't* engage in some serious utopian thinking" (Reece, 2016, n.p.)

Chris Jennings in *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (2016) laments "a deficit of imagination" in our era, and argues that, "uncoupled from utopian ends, even the most incisive social critique falls short" (cited in Kapur, 2016). In *Where to Invade Next*, Moore offers examples of what the US can borrow from Europe and Tunisia in order to create a more egalitarian America.

**Backlash**

> Moore has used stridency, partisanship, and snark to despoil an art form and demean political discourse. (Armand White, "*Where to Invade Next* degrades satire; Payne brings the pain" National Review, Feb. 12, 2016)

It has not been since1960s filmmaking activism that a filmmaker has been subjected to some of the most fierce derision over his films. Moore himself has had hundreds of death threats. A right wing radio host, Glenn Beck says he would like to kill Michael Moore himself. After a planted bomb at his house, and a knife attack, Moore travels with bodyguards. The establishment press has picked his documentaries apart calling them dishonest. The fury suggests that he has awakened more; the establishment media have reacted with fear and have charged him with almost criminal disloyalty towards American democracy.

In 1989 when *Roger and Me* was not nominated for an Academy Award "because it doesn't qualify as a documentary" (Hartl, 1990, n.p.). Moore responded, "We violated the two rules of documentary filmmaking. Our film is entertaining and people are going to see it" (ibid.) *Roger and Me* achieved

widespread distribution, even playing in shopping mall theaters. Commenting on the Academy decision, John Hartl of the Seattle Times said, "Whenever a documentary becomes a success, the twin charges of fakery and exploitation are almost invariably leveled at it" (Hartl, 1990, n.p.).

It is understandable that the corporate owned press, representing Rogin's "countersubsive" were angered, calling him a "Jackass for Lefties"(Berstein, 2010, p.113) One film blogger, referring to *Capitalism: A Love Story* wrote, "This isn't a documentary, it's a call to the streets, shouted through a bullhorn" (Whitty, 2009, n.p.). However, certain members of the left also saw him as "over the top", too crass, or sentimental. One academic blogger wrote, "…we crashed against his populist sentimentalism. This, as we know, is manipulative and, essentially, anti-intellectual"(Martin Alegre, 2011, n.p.). Stam counters:

> Moore at times makes an unabashed appeal to emotion, not in the name of sentimentality and facile affect but rather in hopes of touching on socially generated emotions of outrage and sympathy, anger and love.

The fear of the subversive was subsumed by criticizing Moore's films in terms of conventional codes of documentary practice. Critics were quick to point out that the editing was out of chronological order, which naively ignores the structural editing choices of all documentaries including American *cinéma verite*. He was also attacked for lack of objectivity. The pretense of neutrality has always been at the heart of the ideological dilemma in documentary in that it hides inherent bias giving conventional documentaries a false air of honesty.

For some critics, *Where We Invade Next* was an indictment of America, evidence that Moore was anti-American:

> Middle Americans who see the film will recoil at seeing their country reduced to a place where the devil drags the hindmost to a violent, racist hell. Green, 2016, n.p.)

Referring to *Fahrenheit 911*, TV journalist Katie Couric criticizes Moore for his lack of ideological balance. She asks Moore why he didn't show Saddam Hussein as a horrible leader. Moore responds:

> You guys did such a good job of—telling us how tyrannical and horrible he was. You already did that. What—the question should be posed to NBC and all other news agencies: Why didn't you show us that the people we are going to bomb in a few days are these people, human beings who are living normal lives, kids flying kites, people just trying to get by in their daily existence...We killed civilians and we don't know how many thousands of civilians we killed...and nobody covered that. And so for two hours, I am going to cover it. I'm going to—out of four years. (Zac Attack, 2004)

A particular point of contention, exploited by his opponents, is his reflexive Everyperson persona in the film, which was perceived as narcissistic. Robert Stam points out that the "standard complaints about Moore's 'narcissism' really constitute a kind of *genre mistake*, where the critic judges an artistic text according to generically inappropriate categories" (Stam, 2015, p.94). His carefully calculated performance was misconstrued according to outmoded notions of documentary protocols that ignore the history of advocacy-oriented documentaries. In an effort to derail his political effectiveness, Moore's defiance of conventional documentary codes gave the press ammunition to frame his work as untrustworthy.

By using a contraposition between the 1% on the one side and Moore's citizen viewers, Moore has declared a cultural war. The level of backlash could be regarded as a provocateur's success.

**Rhetorical Impact**

Time Magazine named Moore one of the world's most influential people. (Stein 2005).

The above might appear in contradiction to the following quote:

> Moore has always been a guerrilla filmmaker, but in *Where to Invade Next*, his provocations dig deep below the surface of politics. He has made an act of guerrilla humanity. (Gleiberman, 2015, n.p.)

The reason he is included in this thesis is to explore the Moore phenomenon, an ability to walk a tight rope between popular success and a guerrilla rhetorical dismantling of the firm and narrow grip of hegemonic political parameters.

The post bank bailout suggests business as usual, but as Fisher points out the financial crisis of 2008 has:

> led to the relaxing of a certain kind of mental paralysis. We are now in a political landscape littered with what Alex Williams called 'ideological rubble'–it is year zero again, and a space has been cleared for a new anti-capitalism to emerge. (Fisher, 2009, p.78)

Moore's documentaries ignited public debate and his popularity through multi-media channels has exposed millions of people to counter-hegemonic ideas. He would like to see his films as tools for social justice by making the powerful accountable and has garnered some responses. There were criticisms of Moore from the Senate and the White House that prompted Moore to say, "Wow, they're *afraid* of this movie, [Sicko] they believe it can actually create a revolution" (Moog Rogue, 2010, n.p.).

One film or a set of films does not qualify as a movement, but Moore's films have cracked open the hegemony of neoliberalism in the US creating space for the terms "capitalism" and "socialism" to enter mainstream debate. In

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discussing the power of political documentary, Kahana sees documentary as a contribution to the social imagination:

> The use of documentary film by intellectuals, activists, government agencies, and community groups constitutes a national-public form of culture and demonstrates how documentary collects and delivers the evidence of the American experience to the public sphere, where it lends force to political movements and gives substance to the social imaginary. (Kahana, 2008, dust jacket)

Moore's contribution to the social imagination is the creation of a deliberating public culture with a mass audience. In a Guardian interview Moore was asked, "Why he hasn't managed to persuade the downtrodden, uninsured, exploited masses to revolt?" "My films don't have instant impact because they're dense with ideas that people have not thought about," he says (McGreal, 2010). He adds, "One movie maybe can't make a difference," Moore says. "What do I want [my audiences] to do? Obviously I want them to be engaged in their democracy. I want them to get off the bench and become active" (ibid.)

There were other significant tangible outcomes. In the same interview Moore cites the vice-president of the Cigna health insurance turned whistleblower. After the film *Sicko* was released, he said, "the other health insurance companies got together and pooled their resources to smear me and the film…to try and stop people from going to see it because he said, everything Michael Moore said in *Sicko* was true, and we were afraid this film would be a tipping point."

The power of Moore films is their contribution to populist progressive forces in the creation of infrastructures for sustained work. His citizen viewer base carries elements of empowerment: "Fans are poachers who get to keep

what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundations for the construction of an alternative cultural community"(Stam, 2000, p.134). *Where to Invade Next* supported a political campaign. Moore's last-minute film, *Michael Moore in Trumpland* was offered free in movie theatres and free downloads in an effort to influence Trump and Clinton voters.

His films have been able to support the imagination of other radical movements. McKee associates Carnival with "precapitalist dis-alienation celebrated by the Situationists" which "breaks down the barriers of capital and releases…creativity… It throws beauty back into the streets, streets in which people begin to really live again" (McKee, 2012, p.60). For example, protest movements around the world used the carnivalesque aesthetic of banners, costumes, puppetry, masks and creative shut-ins, shut-outs, and die-ins including "Carnival Against Capital" held in Quebec City during the April 2001 Free Trade Area of the Americas summit, which sought to extend the neoliberal regime of NAFTA from Canada to Chile" (ibid. p.58). Other movements such as the Battle at Seattle, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and the Climate Change movements, adopted shared slogans like the 1% and the 99%. Imaginative powers are created by the MM event, sharing carnivalesque aesthetics, events, and visual vocabulary. Michael Moore's use of the yellow "do not cross" crime tape was used by Occupy Wall Street which branched out to "occupy" foreclosed houses.

> Instead of 'Do Not Cross, 'however, they read 'Occupy', at once a verbal injunction and a visual and physical cue related to the partitioning of space…Thus, the tape visually conjugated the figure of the crime scene—a place of forensic investigation of violence—with that to the construction zone, an area of unfinished collective work and potentiality. (ibid., p.130)

1970s art historian Rosalyn Deutsche writes that "fidelity to the event" requires that we "persist in the rupture" so that subjects can exist around the locus of a call to action beyond what was previously known or deemed possible" (idid., p.23).

Moore's rhetorical movies circulate ideas and function as a debatable space for the current climate of economic anxiety. He has invigorated public discourse with the text and has prompted further discussion about political issues becoming something beyond the text not only in mainstream media and alternatives, but also in workspaces, homes, the streets, and traditional political spheres.

# CONCLUSION

The current stage of neoliberalism has witnessed a narrowing of political potential and a deeply entrenched inertia expressed with the oft-quoted phrase, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson and Žizek at various times). However, economic crisis has shown that postmodernist identity politics and neo-colonialism have reached an ideological dead-end.

Anxiety caused by a series of economic crises and financial collapse has produced a fault line, a fundamental shift, a reawakening, to the urgency of the present.  New political filmmakers have emerged to explain, interrogate or combat the malaise, just as earlier political filmmakers have done before them. The filmmakers are far removed from the 1970s grainy political films, and their films are not a return to revolutionary nostalgia, but confront fundamental historical materialism, in order to step back from the *Extreme Present* (Basar, Coupland and Obrist, 2015) to contextualize and examine current conditions. The filmmakers for this thesis were selected for their distinctiveness and because they cover different geographic locations. Collectively they serve as an overall global barometer of the shifts in thinking and expression in the current socio/political/cinematic landscape.

The filmmakers have adopted of the best lessons of modernism and postmodernism. Triggered by economic political urgency, they employ an anti-canonical aesthetic of "political modernism" in the form of revolutionary Marxist/Brechtian theory and extend political film form by adapting, adopting, and blending, various formal approaches. They adopt postmodernist strategies by rejecting grand narratives, favoring heterogeneity, fragmentation and humour. Using Bakhtin's notion of irreverence and pleasure, Eisenstein's "blows and

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shocks", and aspects of conventional cinema and the slick world of commercial television, they create unique and divergent cinemas.

Abderrahmane Sissako uses Marxist Surrealist poetry as a revolutionary tool to transcend "miserabalism" and the marginalization of African people. His non-Eurocentric positioning offers distance and context to enrich an understanding of global capitalism. Outlining the historical and theoretical justifications from the Enlightenment to current day capitalist destruction, Lars von Trier makes tangible a visceral stench of neoliberalism. He offers some space for historical transformation. His work can be seen as the most defeatist of the three filmmakers or the most revolutionary; it can be seen as the most revolutionary is as much as it requires a complete overthrow of the economic structure and its cultural paradigms. Michael Moore is a direct political interrogator and his work, not confined to art-house cinemas, has produced new left populism. Working within mainstream commercial media and using laughter to criticize American neoliberalism has resulted in intense media backlash. However, beyond the text and the mainstream press, his films contribute to counter movements, as instruments in grass roots political action.

The films form a political analysis of contemporary economic/political crisis. Terry Eagleton has said:

> Capitalism is the sorcerer's apprentice: it has summoned up powers which have spun wildly out of control and now threaten to destroy us. (2011, p.236)

With the election of Donald Trump, the two great threats to human survival, that of the military and that of the environment seem even more urgent. Counter movements, such as environmentalists, the Black Lives Matter, and the possible links between indigenous fights for land and non-indigenous anti-capitalist struggles need more films that contribute to our understanding of the "beast that breeds" (ibid., p.236) the fundamental causes of the current crisis. The films discussed in this thesis to some degree or another are tools for change

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because they illuminate controversial ideologies, take subversive positions, and offer alternative possibilities. I have been guided by the theoretical critiques of Brecht, Jameson, Rancière, Badiou, and Deleuze to explore the possibility of a new political cinema. As Mark Fisher has pointed out:

> As Badiou has forcefully insisted, an effective anti-capitalism must be a rival to Capital, not a reaction to it; there can be no return to pre-capitalist territorialities. Anti-capitalism must oppose Capital's globalism with its own, authentic, universality. (Fisher, 2009, p.79)

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