

## Afrocyberpunk cinema: the postcolony finds its own use for things

The third chapter of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) instructs the reader to imagine 'the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis' as a map programmed to 'display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen':

Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million mega-bytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta... (57)

This image of the acceleration and intensification of the coming era of neo-liberal financialisation and globalisation indicates that power – information *and* capital – will continue to reside with those who already possess it. In contrast to the dazzling achromatic blaze of the east coast megalopolis, Africa – in the novel and in cyberpunk more generally – remains a dark continent: absent, tenebrous, disconnected; one of 'the black holes of informational capitalism' from which 'statistically speaking, there is no escape from the pain and destruction inflicted on the human condition' (Castells 167). Cyberpunk might be considered a literature of globalisation, providing 'a Cook's tour of the new global waystations' and 'a first crude inventory of the new world system' (Jameson *Archaeologies* 384, 385), but it nonetheless follows the Anglophone sf norm of neglecting, marginalising and excluding Africa, Africans and Afrodiasporic subjects.

Although initially formulated as a literary movement, cyberpunk understood itself as part of a broader cultural shift that was also evident in other media, including cinema. *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) and *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983) depicted a future Los Angeles and a contemporary Toronto that looked, in different ways, a lot like the grubby, hypercapitalist world *Neuromancer* described, and showed us media saturation, global communication networks, artificial beings, destabilised realities and biological transformations, while *Tron* (Lisberger 1982) used cutting edge digital technology to depict the imaginary space inside computers. As cyberpunk started to be perceived as a mode of sf rather than just the work of a handful of writers,<sup>1</sup> so began its 'sea-change into a more generalised cultural formation' (Foster xiv). Cyberpunk cinema, however, developed in fits and starts, an *Akira* (Otomo 1988) here, a *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (Tsukamoto 1989) there, until it achieved a belated apotheosis around the turn of the millennium;<sup>2</sup> and generally, like prose cyberpunk, it marginalised Africa and the diaspora. There are, for example, no African Americans in *Blade Runner* (see Dempsey; Locke; Silverman), despite its quintessentially cyberpunk vision of urban desolation; a handful of black actors are visible in *Tron*, playing no significant role; in *Videodrome*, the only trace of the disappeared continent is a downtown restaurant that looks initially like it could be North African, although it turns out to be Turkish perhaps, or possibly Greek.

This pattern of exclusion remains typical, with just a few exceptions, most obviously *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999).<sup>3</sup> However, in the new millennium, four African directors –

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<sup>1</sup> A perception embraced by Sterling when he edited *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986), which included work by such distinctly non-movement writers as Greg Bear and James Patrick Kelly.

<sup>2</sup> Other key films include *New Rose Hotel* (Ferrara 1998), *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg 1999), *Avalon* (Oshii 2001), *Electric Dragon 80,000 V* (Ishii 2001), *Cypher* (Natali 2002) and *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (Oshii 2004).

<sup>3</sup> *Johnny Mnemonic* (Longo 1995), *Strange Days* (Bigelow 1995) and *Virtuosity* (Leonard 1995) give roles of varying substance to Ice T, Angela Bassett and Denzel Washington respectively. Originally written for Will Smith, *The Matrix* and its sequels are committed to multicultural diversity, but also tend to exoticise and tribalise

French-Beninese Sylvester Ammoussou, French-Tunisian Nadia El Fani, South African Neill Blomkamp, Cameroonian Jean-Pierre Bekolo – have made cyberpunk films that reconnect Africa to the globalised world and imagine an array of futures for the continent.<sup>4</sup> These hybrid texts, generated by the interaction of local and global imaginaries, feature hackers, networks, artificial intelligences, run-down urban cores, gated communities, disembodied information, multinational corporations and punk-guerrilla resistance. They depict transgressions of national and corporeal borders, and envision resistance to corporate and state power by pitting the tactical against the strategic (see Lyotard) and, in terms this essay will privilege, the molecular against the molar (see Guattari). They go some way to curing the blind spot created by the blinding white light Gibson evoked. Before turning to them, this essay will consider that blindspot in more detail.

### Cyberpunk's Africa

In *Neuromancer*, Gibson identifies commodities by their make and model or by reference to their country of origin – ‘Shin’s pistol was a fifty-year-old Vietnamese imitation of a South American copy of a Walther PPK’ (29) – but in his globe- and near-Earth-orbit-trotting novel about a future in which capitalism has consolidated its hold on the entire planet, there are no corporations or trade names of African origin, and no mention of Africa or African countries. There are few traces even of the diaspora. The opening page mentions ‘a tall African whose cheekbones were ridged with precise rows of tribal scars’ (9), lending a little additional exoticism to Ratz’s Chiba City bar; much later, on Villa Straylight, Molly hides from a pair of fleetingly glimpsed black janitors (240–1). There are also the Zion space station’s Rastas, described by Mark Dery as bricoleurs figuring a harmonious and potentially utopian relationship with technology – a reading to which Samuel Delany responded sceptically:

You’ll forgive me if, as a black reader, I [don’t] leap up to proclaim this passing representation of a powerless and wholly non-oppositional set of black dropouts, by a Virginia-born white writer, as the coming of the black millennium in science fiction: but maybe that’s just a black thang... (751)<sup>5</sup>

These enervated orbital ghosts – their hearts shrunken from so much time in freefall, their bones brittle from ‘calcium loss’ (127), their Rastafarianism reduced to ganja and dub, and their dub easily replicated by a manipulative AI – are virtually all that is left of the continent, its peoples and their diaspora. They are the spectral remnant of yet another sf world-building genocide.

Published four years after *Neuromancer*, Bruce Sterling’s *Islands in the Net* (1988) was perceived as a more ‘realistic’ rendition of a global near future. In its placid capitalist utopia, free-market hegemony has reduced national sovereignty but also retreated from neoliberalism into a less obviously voracious and destructive form. The ‘developed world’

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their ethnic and sexual others, most obviously in the frenzied Zion rave in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski 2003), from which the vanilla protagonists discreetly withdraw (see Bould ‘Rough Guide’ 12–14).

<sup>4</sup> The influence of cyberpunk on the current explosion of African sf can also be seen in Lauren Beukes’s *Moxyland* (2008) and many of the stories in Ivor Hartmann’s *Afro-SF* (2012) and Ayodele Arigbau’s *Lagos 2060* (2013). See also African-American Andrea Hairston’s *Mindscape* (2006) and British-Trinidadian Anthony Joseph’s *The African Origins of UFOs* (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Delany promptly steps back from the *ad hominem* aspect of this to praise Gibson and *Neuromancer*’s achievements. And to point out that while the few pages devoted to Zion and its inhabitants are problematic, there are far more problematic (Heinlein’s *Farnham’s Freehold*) and interesting (Disch’s *Camp Concentration*) white authored sf novels to deal with, let alone the sf produced by black writers – himself, Octavia Butler, Steven Barnes. He also argues that the dry-run for the Rastas – the Lo-Teks of Gibson’s ‘Johnny Mnemonic’ – are ‘Gibson’s real romantic bricoleurs: they were not specifically black, but rather “fourth world” whites’ (753).

ensures that the 'developing world' is fed, albeit on a cheaply produced single cell protein, 'the national food of the Third World' (38). No one need go hungry any more – unless, of course, they live in Africa, where such aid enables primitive accumulation among gangster bosses, warlords and compradors.

Sterling introduces Africa through Worldrun, 'a global simulation ... invented as a forecasting tool for development agencies' that has, in a more 'glamorized version ... found its way onto the street' (10). Laura watches as

Long strips of the Earth's surface peeled by in a simulated satellite view. Cities glowed green with health or red with social disruption. Cryptic readouts raced across the bottom of the screen. Africa was a mess. 'It's always Africa, isn't it?' she said. (10)

The novel reiterates this sense of a desperate exceptionalism, reputedly positing Africa as the benchmark against which to measure the extent to which somewhere has escaped disaster, barbarism and backwardness, or risks falling into them. In this, Sterling anticipates the demoralising, predatory continental future that the futures industry projects for multinationals and NGOs, in which

African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiseration. ... Within an economy that runs on SF capital and market futurism, Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia. (Eshun 291-2)

Such projections usually propose corporate intervention, the extension and intensification of the market, as the only possible solution.

Towards the end of the novel, Laura, fleeing the group that has taken over Mali and plan to use the world's last remaining nuclear missiles in their war with Azania (i.e., South Africa), escapes into the desert:

Time passed, and the heat mounted sullenly as the miles passed. They were leaving the deep Sahara and crossing country with something more akin to soil. This had been grazing land once – they passed the mummies of dead cattle, ancient bone stick-puppets in cracked rags of leather.

She had never realised the scale of the African disaster. It was continental, planetary. They had travelled hundreds of miles without glimpsing another human being, without seeing anything but a few wheeling birds and the tracks of lizards. ... Atomic bombardment could hardly have made it worse. It would only make more of it. (386-387)

While the novel's American, Caribbean and Asian settings are fundamentally urban, its Africa consists of a prison, a refugee camp and this endless desert. The continent is nothing but catastrophe, always-already post-apocalyptic.

Admittedly, in cyberpunk, regardless of its setting, the apocalypse seems already to have happened, albeit quietly offstage. For Claire Sponsler, cyberpunk does not lament the 'decay of the urban zones' (257) but finds something positive in them. They are

a place of possibilities, a carnivalesque realm where anything goes and where there are no rules, only boundaries that can be easily transgressed', and where entry into

cyberspace, a disembodied realm of deracinated liberation, is ‘encouraged, not hampered, by ... urban decay. (261)

However, as Thomas Foster argues, the cultural context in which cyberpunk emerged included urban planning and redevelopment discourses in which the ‘language of urban “ruin,” “decay” or “blight”’ possessed ‘ideological and often specifically racist subtexts’; they encoded ways of talking about ‘racialized inner-city ghettos [rather] than cities in general’ (206). This is partially acknowledged in African American Steven Barnes’s *Streetlethal* (1983) and its sequels, uneasy blaxploitation fellow-travellers sharing some of cyberpunk’s concerns but none of its Young Turkism or yearning for the digital. Evoking black power, black pride, Afrotopianism, Afrocentricity and Pan-Africanism, Barnes transforms his protagonist, Aubry Knight, from a Luke Cage into a T’Challa, from a ‘buck’ stereotype into a property developer who rebuilds downtown Los Angeles – destroyed by economic depression, a major earthquake and the ensuing firestorm – into a matter-of-fact multiracial future.<sup>6</sup> The near-future *RoboCop* (Verhoeven 1987) occupies some similar ideological terrain. It opens with television news about besieged Pretoria’s white military government unveiling and asserting their preparedness to use a three-megaton neutron bomb as their last line of defence against, it is implied, those forces which have overthrown Apartheid throughout the rest of South Africa. An otherwise incoherent world-building throwaway, it resonates with a narrative in which the multinational Omni Consumer Products, with its predominantly white board and headquarters staff, takes over the policing of the declining and much more ethnically diverse Detroit. OCP plans to use military technology to pacify the old city – with its working class population, its unemployed, its homeless, its junkies, its petty criminals – and replace it with Delta City, a gleaming white metropolis. With little concern for the people they would displace, neoliberal city planners increasingly turned to such ‘spectacular urban’ renewal schemes as a way ‘to attract capital and people (of the right sort)’ (Harvey 92) to inner cities that had been starved of resources and demonised as blighted, violent spaces. By the time of *RoboCop 2* (Kershner 1990), Detroit has a comical black mayor struggling to avoid the city defaulting on an OCP loan, and in *RoboCop 3* (Dekker 1993), OCP begins the forced relocation of Cadillac Heights residents so the delayed redevelopment can proceed. The black desk sergeant Reed (Robert DoQui), one of the fixtures of the trilogy, finally snaps, turns in his badge – as do all his fundamentally decent police officers – and joins the resistance, effectively replacing their fallen black female leader, Bertha (CCH Pounder).

In contrast to such limited treatments of the racialised American urban core, George Alec Effinger’s *Marid Audran* trilogy (1987–91) displaces it onto an unnamed city in a late-22<sup>nd</sup> century Islam-dominated Levant.<sup>7</sup> Combining Orientalist conceptions of the sexually ambiguous Arab with Effinger’s own experience of New York’s East Village in the 1960s and New Orleans’s French Quarter (see Hambly), the novels’ key location is the Budayeen, the elusive city’s nightclub- and red-light district, home to numerous transvestites and transsexuals, many of whom are sex-workers whose clients are typically aware of their non-

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<sup>6</sup> Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) is set in the rotting urban core of downtown Toronto, cut off from the white-flight suburbs and left to die. It is precisely the racialised inner-city ghetto so transparently euphemised in neo-liberal development discourses, and so often deracinated by cyberpunk and its more exhilarated critical champions. At the same time, Hopkinson’s main characters are women of colour who challenge the action-heroine post-feminism of much cyberpunk, and the prominence they give to Obeah reproves Gibson’s too-easy use of voodoo in *Count Zero* (1988). See also Tony Puryear and Erika Alexander’s cyberpunk-influenced comic, *Concrete Park* (2013–).

<sup>7</sup> We learn that the city is over 500 miles but less than a 1000 miles from Mecca, and has a desert to the South. We know it is not Cairo or Alexandria or Damascus. The much earlier ‘The City on the Sand’ (1973) is set unequivocally in Africa but not in the Levant; however, it is only rather vaguely connected to the novels.

binary sex/gender identities. A similar displacement can be discerned in *Naked Lunch* (Cronenberg 1991), adapted from the ‘unfilmable’ 1959 novel of the same name by William Burroughs, himself frequently cited as a major influence on the movement writers. A peculiar blend of adaptation and hallucinogenic biopic, it depicts a fantastic alternative world full of Dickian instabilities and visceral Cronenbergian imagery. Coming halfway between the more obviously cyberpunk *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* (1999), it develops their concerns in a rather different idiom. Following opening titles that gesture towards the work of Saul Bass, the film opens in a decrepit and vaguely noirish New York. The colour palette is reminiscent of Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, and Ornette Coleman’s saxophone dominates the soundtrack. This is not period authenticity, but period stylisation. The remainder of the film takes place in Interzone, ‘a notorious free port on the North African coast, a haven for the mongrel scum of the earth, an engorged parasite on the underbelly of the west’. Like *Videodrome*’s restaurant, but on a grander scale, it is all an orientalist pastiche, a concatenation of worn-out images and stereotypes suffused by the memory of earlier representations, such as the Algiers Casbah in the proto-noir *Pépé le moko* (Duvivier 1937). Both New York and Interzone settings are entirely artificial, constructed on sound stages. Solid enough, but ultimately insubstantial, they are simulations that bear no relation at all to reality. Interzone, like the Budayeen, evades both the American city and North African realities.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Africa Paradis and Bedwin Hacker: hacking borders, building affiliations***

Cyberpunk cinema is rather an elusive phenomenon, sharing certain concerns – the mediatisation of everyday life, global flows of capital and information, virtual realities, cyborg bodies, genetic enhancements, artificial intelligences, the digital era, intimate technologies, technological disembodiment – but often in different and not always clearly related idioms. Afrocyberpunk cinema is no exception. Its conditions of production tend to result in films which demonstrate – through their budget, their look and sound, or their narrative – the flipside of a cyberpunk world centred on the flows of capital.

For example, *Africa Paradis* (Sylvestre Amoussou Benin/France 2006) belongs to a group of texts that rewrite the history of European imperialism and colonialism so as to imagine a world in which Africa came to global dominance, including French-Guianese Bertène Juminer’s *Bozambo’s Revenge* (1968), Djiboutian Abdourahman A. Waberi’s *In the United States of Africa* (2006), British-Nigerian Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots* (2008), and *Nostalgia III* (2009), the final film in Israeli-German Omer Fast’s *Nostalgia* triptych. Despite benefitting from a substantial Bucksbaum endowment and other sponsorships, Fast’s video installation envisions an African superpower that closely resembles 1970s Britain. The retrofuturist artefacts in his mise-en-scene imply futurity and alterity without the expense of designing and constructing proleptic technologies, while evoking nostalgia for all the futures that never came to be. At the same time, this drab austerity suggests a lack of faith in the film’s conceit, as if an alternative Africa could never succeed in being as modern as its real-world Western counterparts. The low-budget *Africa Paradis* faces a similar problem – depicting, on a small budget, a wealthy, technologically-advanced, democratic pan-African economic powerhouse that, by 2033, has supplanted a balkanised European Union swept by war, famines and epidemics.

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<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Jon Courtenay Grimwood’s *Arabesk* trilogy (2001–3) is set in a specific African city, Alexandria, but in an alternate world in which World War One never happened and the Ottoman Empire survived. However, such major changes seem to have left much of the texture of daily life intact – the designer labels, for example, are the same as in our world – and the alternate history has little in way of ontological consequence for the novels. G. Willow Wilson’s *Alif the Unseen* (2012), set in an unnamed emirate, is much more steeped in Islamic culture (Wilson converted to Islam while at University and lived in Cairo for a number of years), not least in its genre-bending depiction of computer hackers and mythical beings, such as djinn.

Consequently, the film's one key cyberpunk trope – computer hacking – can only briefly occupy the screen and with none of the elaborate, often exhilarating, imagery we now expect of science-fictional representations of electronic dataspaces.<sup>9</sup> In a France with 65% unemployment, computer engineer Olivier (Stéphane Roux) and schoolteacher Pauline (Charlotte Vermeil) hire people traffickers to smuggle them across the Mediterranean. They are promptly captured and detained. Against Pauline's wishes, Olivier subverts the security system of detention centre where they await deportation. As one might expect, this hacking is concerned with breaking through a barrier, with breaking out and breaking free. Olivier, however, does not ascend into some disembodied euphoria, or even hack into a system that will enable him to establish himself securely in his new country. Instead, he switches identities with a hit-and-run victim and settles in the immigrant ghetto. Officially dead, he descends into the tenuous existence of an illegal immigrant disguised as a guest worker.

Hacking is much more prominent role *Bedwin Hacker* (Nadia El Fani Morocco/Tunisia/France 2003). The film follows a young Tunisian woman, Kalt (Sonia Hamza), who is also the legendary hacker, Pirate Mirage, as she disrupts satellite television broadcasts in France – and Europe – by superimposing a cartoon of a camel over the image stream. Representing migrant workers and other postcolonial subjects, the camel bears such simple but important messages as 'We exist'. Julia (Muriel Solvay), codename Marianne, is at the forefront of efforts by the French secret service, the Défense Secrète du Territoire (DST), to track down the hacker. Her boyfriend, Chams (Tomer Sisley), a rather hapless Tunisian-born journalist awaiting his naturalisation papers, is unaware of what she does for a living. Through the Algerian musician Frida (Nadia Saiji), he meets Kalt, and they spend the night together. When she returns to Tunisia, he follows, under the pretext of pursuing a story about immigration and interviewing Kalt's uncle, the poet Am Salah (Bechir El Fani). He is also charged by Julia to investigate Kalt, who she knew at university – they were, it is later revealed, once lovers – and whom she suspects is Pirate Mirage. Ultimately, it is Chams who (unwittingly) risks his life to shut down Kalt's broadcast so as to prevent Julia arresting her. He returns to France with Julia; Kalt remains free.

Global media networks and hacking might be at the centre of *Bedwin Hacker*, but they are also oddly absent, barely depicted at all. For example, in the opening hack, a cartoon figure is superimposed over a television programme, accompanied by the sound of keyboard strokes; and Kalt's transmitter dish is just a pair of simple metal grids on a mechanically extending arm, which, when it is not in use, is concealed in a water butt. The DST's online pursuit of Kalt is represented by agents typing in front of screens with more-or-less conventional graphic user interfaces; they do not get the kind of elaborate interactive wall-screen used by the Pre-Crimes Unit in *Minority Report* (Spielberg 2002) or the as-standard virtual 3D screens enjoyed by the corporate drones in *Avatar* (Cameron 2009).<sup>10</sup> As is always the case, the depiction of information networks and hacking is determined by budgetary and

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, the mere appearance of a hacker in a film is not necessarily enough to make it cyberpunk, but the character's now tedious familiarity across media – whether as a threat to corporations and the state, or as one of their employees – does testify to cyberpunk's ubiquity; if nothing else, it is now part of the background noise of contemporary culture.

<sup>10</sup> There is a moment when it briefly looks like the film is depicting the interior of global information networks in a manner that not seen in a quarter of a century. Soon after Chams's obvious – and unsuccessful – attempt at espionage, the film cuts from Kalt sitting at her computer to a long tracking shot over circuit boards and other computer components. It recalls the sequence in *Scanners* (Cronenberg 1981) in which Cameron Vale (Steven Lack) telepathically infiltrates ConSec's computer network, which Cronenberg conveys by tracking over computer circuitry. In *Bedwin Hacker*, however, it rapidly becomes clear that something else is happening. The camera movement reveals that the components are scattered across the floor, surrounded by tools and rolls of duct tape. In fact, the sequence is the start of a flashback to Kalt and Julia as students and lovers building a computer.

technical constraints, but there is always-already a complex relationship between such determinants and the kind of story being told, and El Fani's focus is not so much on the technology as its social function.

Similarly, the thriller structure is stripped down to a bare armature, allowing her to shuttle her characters between Tunisia and France and thus to elaborate contrasts and comparisons between the everyday lives lived in – and between – both nations. Like *Africa Paradis*, *Bedwin Hacker* pictures an Africa – or, at least, a Tunisia – that is in some ways the utopian alternative to a dystopian Europe/France. This is not achieved by presenting Tunisia through the sumptuous visuals often found in festival/arthouse fare,<sup>11</sup> but through the unfolding of a complex logic. On the one hand, the film suggests that the freedoms of Tunisia, even under the Ben Ali regime, are preferable to a democratic France that is more dedicated to keeping its borders secure from migration than to the civil liberties of the people living within or entering those borders. On the other, it argues passionately against the notion of fixed identities, valorising nomadic over monadic subjectivities. In Félix Guattari's terms, it sets the molar order of 'signification that delimits objects, subjects, representations and their reference systems', represented by the state apparatus and the structures and institutions of the capitalist world order, at odds with the molecular order 'of flows, becomings, phase transitions and intensities' (418), represented by migrants, hackers and quasi-familial affiliations, in order to question the nature of borders and mobility, of globalisation and locality.

Early in the film, a police raid on a meeting of undocumented workers<sup>12</sup> reminds us that national borders are not physical locations but legal structures. They can materialise anywhere within the territory whose limits they also demarcate, and sometimes even outside that territory, as when Julia pursues Kalt into Tunisia. The interaction of molar and molecular levels is best demonstrated when Frida, who has no identification papers, is racially profiled and picked up by police. Kalt accompanies her to the station. The ensuing scene is oriented across the cop's desk. He alone can see the computer screen that gives him access to and incorporates him into the state's information apparatus. From the molar realm, the space of institutional authority, he commands the women to stop speaking in Arabic, and asks whether they can speak in French. His formal rote demand – 'Full name, address, residence permit number' – overrides their casual conversation about personal matters. Kalt's papers are fine and she is dismissed, but she stays to help her friend, an act of molecular resistance to molar authority. She pretends that Frida is a VIP unused to being addressed in such a manner, and uses her mobile phone to – apparently – request the assistance and intervention of the Moroccan ambassador. The cop assumes it is a ruse and, when Kalt tells Frida to run, he races after her, allowing Kalt just enough time to hack into the police system and provide Frida with a fake ID as the niece of the king of Morocco. This molecular simulation of a molar authority results in Frida's immediate release, and as Suzanne Gauch points out, the now apologetic cop does not even notice that 'the two women communicate in a Tunisian, not a Moroccan, dialect' (40).

Much of the Parisian narrative is set within the dark confines of the DST headquarters, where Julia and her colleagues, subject to a strict if blundering hierarchy, conduct counter-hacking operations. Julia's codename, Marianne, refers – with blunt irony – to her namesake, the allegorical revolutionary figure, first depicted by Jean-Michel Moreau in 1775. Chosen to represent the First Republic in 1792, the initially conservative figure was soon replaced by a more aggressive version, baring one breast as she leads men into revolutionary struggle, as in

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<sup>11</sup> The 'first Tunisian feature film shot on digital video', *Bedwin Hacker* was 'made on a shoestring budget' and thus favours 'grittier open vistas (often filmed on hand-held camera) and prosaic interiors' (Gauch 35).

<sup>12</sup> The sequence consciously recalls the police expulsion of three hundred African immigrants from Saint Ambroise church in Paris on 22 March 1996 that led to the founding of the *sans papiers* movement.

Delacroix's 1830 *Liberty Leading the People*. After the Reign of Terror (1793–4), she in turn was replaced by a more conservative, less confrontational version. Probably named as a portmanteau of the two most common French women's names of the time, Marianne also appeared as an otherwise anonymous young woman in many tales of the French Revolution. She can, therefore, be understood as a molecular figure, emerging in and from the popular imagination only to be appropriated and reified at the molar level of the state apparatus. The representative of Liberty became the symbol of the state, just as the Jacobin championing of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* ossified into the French national motto (and just as Julia is caught between herself and her identity as an agent of the state). The contradiction between such revolutionary values and the contemporary security state's anti-immigrant and anti-muslim hysteria – haunted by memories of the Algerian war of independence in particular – is emphasised by the film's focus on Kalt's life in Tunisia. Having rejected recruitment into the DST when she graduated, her ongoing, open-ended resistance to institutionalised authority makes her the kind of figure who could become the Marianne of a new molecular revolution.

In Tunisia, Kalt is repeatedly depicted as part of, and in relation to, a non-hierarchical group of family and friends, 'an independent-minded group that rejects mainstream gender roles, family structures, social norms, cultural essentialism and predictable political agendas' (Gauch 36). While Frida travels internationally to pursue her career in music, her husband, Mehdi (????), stays behind to raise their young daughter, Qmar (????). Kalt is training Qmar to use computers and relies on her assistance while hacking, but refuses to let the girl call her 'auntie' since the term conveys deference rather than equality. Kalt's cousin, Malika, is also a musician, and her husband is a PhD student who experiments with charms and magic, traditionally the domain of women. Am Salah happily, if a little distractedly, hosts this group and others, including a lesbian couple, in his home. He never disapproves of them drinking and smoking, just as no one ever comments on Kalt's casually-presented bisexuality. In such domestic scenes, the group are bound together by love and friendship, enjoying each other's company, laughing, playing and dancing together.<sup>13</sup>

From such lively and tender interconnectedness, such molecular affinities, emerge Kalt and Qmar's interruptions of the molar level, making and enabling further molecular connections. For example, one of their hacks superimposes on television broadcasts the message that if people 'hate the sound of boots' associated with the police and military wings of the state, then they should 'wear ... babouches tomorrow'. The film cuts to feet clad in North African slippers walking the streets of Paris; we see nothing that would allow us to identify the people involved and the 'impossibility of profiling' these people 'is suggestive of the crossracial, transnational appeal and repercussions of her "hacktivism"' (Gauch 41). Their next hack broadcasts the phone number of La Défense and an enigmatic instruction, which prompts the DST to shut down this major Parisian (and European) business district, 'home to many multinationals', rather than risk it being shut down by the hackers. Terror of molecular agency causes the molar to simulate the effect of that agency. The final hack – carrying the message 'We're not mirages. Are you? – identifies the reason for the state apparatus's reactions: the potential for molecular subjects, regardless of the nation in which they live, to recognise their shared position and extend bonds of affiliation beyond borders.

### **Neill Blomkamp: materialising, internalising, dissolving and reinscribing borders**

Even blockbuster afrocyberpunk cinema focuses on the neoliberal world order, on borders, and on embodiment rather than disembodiment. However, before turning to Blomkamp's \$30 million *District 9* (US/NZ/Canada/South Africa 2009) and \$115 million *Elysium* (US 2013), it is worth considering a pair of his short films whose miniscule budgets, rough edges and

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<sup>13</sup> This is not a film of simple binaries: there are hints of such affiliations in the Paris scenes, just as there are indications of state authority and surveillance in the Tunisian ones.



innovative storytelling lend them something of the punk sensibility missing from his more costly endeavours.

*Tetra Vaal* (Canada 2004) is an 80-second short depicting a near-future South Africa of brightly-lit urban decay, bustling streets and roadside stalls, goat herders, salvagers and shoot-outs. It is mostly actuality footage, shot in a fairly low-res digital format and presented as if a documentary filmmaker is on a police ride-along, having been hired to make a promotional film about new robot additions to the force patrolling Johannesburg. At its core is an ambivalence, a tension between the pleasure of seeing the (mostly) motion-captured robots, which are clearly not just men in suits, moving so persuasively through the environment, and the discomfort produced by seeing a heavily armed and more-or-less-literally dehumanised police presence.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, these special effects creations generate in the viewer a double-consciousness, a simultaneous belief and disbelief in the image.<sup>15</sup> No matter how ‘realistic’ the robots seem, no matter how convincing, they are also obviously at the same time not real. Both dissonant and consonant, they function as futuristic intrusions into the present, emphasising the perpetuation of contemporary social relations and power structures into an apparent – and credible – future. They dissolve ontological distinctions (real/imaginary, present/future, subject/object, human/machine) but reinforce social distinctions (civilian/police, community/state, subject/apparatus).<sup>16</sup>

Much the same occurs in *Tempbot* (US 2006), a 15-minute bitter-sweet comedy in which a similar robot – physically cut off from his fellow workers by the screens around his work-station, socially isolated by his non-human status and by the very nature of temping – discovers the awkwardness and alienation of precarious labour in an office cubicle. The ‘punchline’ of the film depends on characters never reacting to the tempbot as a robot, instead treating him as a human male, while he has little idea of how to behave like a human or around humans. A human temp, Mary Alice (Lynda Carter), tries to seduce him; confused, he withdraws his hand from where she has placed it on her breast. He is more interested in the new HR manager, Hildy (Kirsten Robek), who befriends him, unaware that he is stalking her. Unsure of how to express his feelings, he touches her breast. The inappropriateness of this (mis)learned behaviour arises from a complex politics of monadic subjectivity and bodily autonomy that is obviously beyond his programming, but also from the deep-rooted alienation evoked by the film’s conflation of labour and machine. It reinforces his otherness, and the ontological density of social conventions.

The elaboration of such conventions into biopolitical structures of governance is at the core of *Alive in Joburg* (Canada 2005) – a six-and-a-half minute short which builds on *Tetra Vaal*’s found-footage/pseudo-documentary technique – and the feature film Blomkamp developed from it, *District 9*. The latter is set in an alternative 2010, in a world in which an alien mothership appeared in the sky above Johannesburg in 1982, where it continues to hover, inactive. On board a million alien ‘prawns’ were discovered, apparently workers whose leadership caste succumbed to a fatal disease. The prawns were shuttled down to the city and housed under armed guard in the eponymous fenced-off shantytown. Nearly thirty years later, their population has almost doubled. Multinational United (MNU), a diversified corporation that is also the world’s second largest arms manufacturer, is tasked with forcibly relocating them to ‘Sanctuary Park’, a concentration camp two hundred miles outside of the city. Wikus van der Merwe (Sharlto Copley), the hapless corporate functionary in charge of

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<sup>14</sup> The robot design recalls the rabbit-eared cyborg Briareos from Masamune Shirow’s *Appleseed* manga (1985–89) and its anime spinoffs, but also resonates with *Star Wars*’s stormtroopers.

<sup>15</sup> On the complexity of watching special effects, see Bould, Pierson, and North.

<sup>16</sup> Elements of *Tetra Vaal* underpin Blomkamp’s \$49 million *Chappie* (US/Mexico 2015), a discordant mash-up of *RoboCop* and *Short Circuit* (Badham US 1986).

issuing the legally-mandated individual eviction notices, is infected by an alien substance which precipitates his metamorphosis into a human-alien hybrid.

Perhaps the most peculiar feature of the film is that the mass alien presence seems to have in no way altered South African history. While the prawns function as a Derridean supplement, both standing in for and displacing the Apartheid era black population, there is nothing to suggest that Apartheid ended sooner than 1994, or continued to a later date. Indeed, despite the film's aspirations to national allegory (see Jameson 'Third-World'), it does not even mention Apartheid but instead depicts a post-Apartheid present in which anti-prawn speciesism, homologous to anti-black racism, is primarily voiced by black South Africans; in an early vox pop sequence, six out of seven people espousing anti-prawn sentiments are black. When whites do describe the prawns, they use anti-black stereotypes – the aliens are lazy, not very smart, have poor hygiene, lack initiative – as if their institutional authority make them true this time round. Anti-Nigerian comments tend to come from white establishment figures who, drawing on contemporary moral panics and nationalist/racist hysteria, describe them as always and only criminal – as gang members who exploit the prawns, trade in weapons, run interspecies prostitution, and consume alien flesh in Muti rituals intended to give them the power to operate the prawns' genetically-keyed technology.<sup>17</sup> Other than humanising, out of narrative necessity, the prawn Christopher Johnson (Jason Cope) and his young son, Blomkamp unthinkingly reinforces these stereotypes. Ultimately, this might explain the silence around Apartheid since the racial logic upon which it was constructed clearly persists.<sup>18</sup>

In broad terms, the end of Apartheid saw black South Africans, previously consigned to *zoë* or bare life, move into the realm of *bios*, of political subjecthood and citizenship (see Agamben), a realm from which the prawns and the Nigerians are excluded, and from which the mutating Wikus is expelled. His banishment from the bland suburbs and blander MNU offices, from domestic and corporate life, is primarily figured through embodiment: a black substance drips from his nose onto his food; his stomach gurgles uncontrollably; vomit and shit erupt from him; his arm becomes something not-human. Typically, abjection is understood as a reminder of mortality as the foregrounded body – porous, in constant process and upheaval – threatens the sancity and security of the monadic subject. In *District 9*, it also threatens *zoë/bios* distinction by reminding us of the common materiality and interconnectedness it obscures and denies. This is best captured during the sequence in which MNU operatives take the infected Wikus from the hospital, sealed in a body-bag despite still being alive, and then subject him to experiments that strip him of personhood. His questions, protests and appeals to common humanity and basic decency do not even to register on the scientists who strap him into various alien weapon systems to see whether he can operate them, and force him to kill livestock and a prawn. They rob him of volition, using electric prods to force muscular contractions in his trigger finger. They treat him as mere biological material to be harvested for study, commodification and profit; no longer a subject, he becomes 'the most valuable business artefact on Earth'.

At the same time as reinforcing the biopolitical logic of racism, *District 9* also seeks to undermine it through emergent molecular affiliation and solidarity. In the face of lethal opposition, Wikus's selfish motives for working with Christopher Johnson evaporate, and the narrative culminates with a human-prawn hybrid locking himself into a *mecha* body so as to help a pair of aliens escape to their homeworld, from which they will return to save their kind. When Wikus climbs out of the damaged *mecha*, other prawns swarm in to protect him from

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<sup>17</sup> The credits list twelve characters as 'Nigerian Gangster' and four as 'Nigerian Hooker'.

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, *Alive in Joburg* twice refers to the Apartheid government, the second time noting its deliberate manipulation of the fears of the extremely conservative minority Afrikaans population; sadly, *District 9* lacks this kind of self-awareness.

being shot by Koobus Venter (David James), tearing the violent bigoted leader of MNU's mercenary force to shreds. However, the nature of their attack reinforces the view of them as little more than animals.<sup>19</sup>

*Elysium* is set in a mid-twenty-second century characterised by disease, pollution and overpopulation, according to introductory text over aerial establishing shots of a *favela*-ised Los Angeles (mostly played by Mexico City). The image cuts to a view of Earth from space that, despite the setting of the previous shots, is centred on the Middle East, with much of north Africa and Asia also visible. The dominant tone is brown, as if to imply global desertification is under weigh. The 'wealthiest inhabitants', we are told, 'fled the planet to preserve their way of life', and the virtual camera – evoking *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick US/UK 1968) – pans away to Elysium, a massive orbital space station. In this space-borne gated community, which resembles Don Davis's 1975 painting of an O'Neill space colony, *Interior of the Stanford Torus* (1975), a predominantly white population reside in luxurious, Mediterranean-ish mansions among plentiful greenery and water. While several shots of *Elysium*'s LA cityscape recall the opening of *Blade Runner*, in which white flight has also taken the wealthy (and white) to offworld colonies, Blomkamp eschews the hardboiled dystopianism of nocturnal neon and rain in favour of extrapolating something akin to Mike Davis's 'planet of slums'. In the ruins of downtown LA, abandoned corporate towers have been salvaged, retrofitted into ad hoc apartment buildings, by those left behind to rot; there are even houses on the former rooftop helipads. California's Latinisation is complete, with Max (Matt Damon), a former felon scraping a living building police robots on Armadyne's production line, almost the only Anglo inhabitant. It is doubly ironic then that he is the one person assaulted by the robocops who aggressively patrol the *favela*.

The erection of unassailable borders between the space-borne haves and the terrestrially-encumbered have-nots reaches far beyond legal apparatuses and deep into human consciousness. For example, Armadyne's founder, John Carlyle (William Fichtner) commutes down from Elysium to Los Angeles each day. His office overlooks the immense factory floor, but glass separates him from it. He is always well-dressed and immaculately groomed, with precise mannerisms and speech and such disdain for the planet and its inhabitants that in him class difference gains ontological weight. In a teleconference, he caustically dismisses critical board members after asking them, 'Do you think I enjoy breathing this air?', as if he were an alien on Earth. Minutes later, he storms through the factory, flanked by robot guards and with a handkerchief held to his mouth, to demand of the foreman responsible for Max's accidental saturation with lethal radiation why the production line has stopped; the moment the foreman begins to speak, Carlyle interrupts, telling him 'Don't breath on me. Cover your mouth'. Looking through the sickbay door window to where Max is lying on a single sheet on a battered gurney, Carlyle asks whether Max's skin will fall off, explaining 'I don't want to replace the bedding in there.' This moment articulates Carlyle's inhuman contempt, and his fear of contagion and border dissolution, through an utterly internalised economic logic.

In a similar vein, when President Patel (Faran Tahir) reprimands Defense Secretary Delacourt (Jodie Foster) for destroying 'undocumented shuttles' full of sick people trying to gain illegal access to Elysium's abundant medical facilities, she suggests that because he does not have children he fails to 'behave in a manner that is more conducive to the longevity of

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<sup>19</sup> Oddly, the aerial shot seems to allude to the footage of the Rodney King beating, further complicating matters. *Chappie* has a similarly potentially rich but confused ending, in which the eponymous autonomous artificial intelligence uploads the mind of his dying creator into a robot body similar to his own. Rather than destroying his creator, Chappie (Sharlto Copley) renders his maker equally but differently not-exactly-human. Chappie also creates a new robot body to download the recorded consciousness of Yo-Landi (Yo-Landi Visser), the now-dead woman he called 'mummy'. For no good reason, this robot is given a human face with female features, reasserting biological determinism through the unthinking imposition of gendered signifiers.

this habitat'. However, it is clear that she is less concerned with sustaining the artificial world than with perpetuating property and privilege: 'when they come for your house, for the house you built for your children and your children's children, it won't be PR and campaign promises that keep them out. It will be me.' She speaks the violence inherent in capitalist relations of production that lurks behind the pretence that the market, and social relations within such a system, somehow provides the possibility of equality.

The climactic gesture of the film fantasises the creation of a level playing field. Max sacrifices himself in order to make every inhabitant of the planet an Elysium citizen, rebooting the habitat's systems so as to reassign all the 'illegals' to the category of 'legal', effectively moving them from *zoë* to *bios*. Automated systems respond unquestioningly to this, despatching medical shuttles to the suffering world. That the resolution of this molecular insurgency depends on sacrificial white masculinity and a tenuous status update – it does nothing to challenge the power of inherited wealth and privilege – preserves rather than overthrows the system.

### ***Les Saignantes*: molecular alternative**

All of the films discussed so far contain cyberpunk images and ideas, but with the partial exception of *Tetra Vaal* none of them demonstrate the stylistic innovation, manifesto-issuing iconoclasm or punk swagger associated with, respectively, Gibson, Sterling and John Shirley. The African filmmaker who comes closest to combining these elements is Jean-Pierre Bekolo, 'a cagy and attitudinous guerrilla roaming the post-modern globalized mediascape' (Haynes 27). Consciously distinguishings himself from the generation of filmmakers exemplified by Ousmane Sembene, the Senegalese Marxist feminist 'father of African cinema', Bekolo rejects the didactic, social realist cinema which was so important role to anti-colonial and national liberation struggles before becoming the reified model against which European funding agencies judged the 'authentic Africanness' of potential film projects. He claims an alternative lineage for African cinema, descended from Senegalese Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (Senegal 1973). A playful, experimental, comical, improvisatory film about a disaffected young couple from Dakar who con and scam and steal in the hope of one day being able to reach Paris, it comes across as the work of an earthier, less didactic, African Godard. However, while Mambéty was ultimately committed to experimental cinema, Bekolo does not see experimentalism as 'incompatible' with appealing to 'general popular audiences' (Adesokan 132).

Consequently, he always engages with genre cinema, even though this creates funding problems: 'genre films are systematically rejected' by such organisations as the Agence de la Francophonie on the assumption that they will inevitably 'be caricatured and cliché' (qtd in Barlet 'Being African'). *Quartier Mozart* (Cameroon/France 1992), his debut feature, is an 'erotic comedy' (MacRae 249) and a 'supernatural fantasy' (Murphy and Williams 194), while *Le complot d'Aristote* (France/UK/Zimbabwe 1996), a sometimes comical, sometimes violent film-essay about the state of African cinema, makes clear his preference for imported action movies over earnest African cinema. According to Alexie Tcheuyap, *Les saignantes* (Cameroon 2005) draws elements from 'detective films, science fiction, action and horror ... even tragedy' (104, 118) and should be considered a film noir, 'not simply because of the macabre constructions that correlate corruption, cannibalism and sex' but also because of the way it looks:

It is shot from beginning to end in a continuous night, with very high contrast lighting of its dystopian African setting. The colour scheme of the film evokes mystery, danger and tension. Some surreal colour tonalities accentuate the 'noir' nature of the narrative: white flashes/moon, red hue, extravagant make-up, etc. The chilling lighting

effects give the film a sombre atmosphere. Death is everywhere; we are unsure whether characters are dead or alive, a fact compounded by a voice-over's announcement, 'We are all dead'. ... We are thus meant to inhabit a supernatural, dreamlike world where death sex and corruption govern. (115–16)

A series of captions interspersed through the film emphasise Bekolo's self-consciousness about genre:

How can you make an anticipation film in a country that has no future? ... How can you make an action film in a country where acting is subversive? ... How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party? ... How can you film a love story where love is impossible? ... How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is forbidden? ... How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after?

Genre mash-ups are just one of the ways in which Bekolo puts 'Western conventions ... in perspective, alternates, frustrates and parodies them to remind us not to become or remain trapped in someone else's constructed plot' (De Groof 116); his soundtracks likewise typically feature 'a good deal of American-influenced music, locally made' (Haynes 27). Such self-reflexivity and hybridisation – inevitably labelled postmodernist by Euro-American critics – creates a cinema at 'the interface between a global youth aesthetic (fast-paced editing, fashion-conscious characters, a fascination with celebrity culture) and an experimental approach that blurs both identities and genres' (Murphy and Williams 188).

Along with the tradition of didactic social realism, Bekolo also abandons the notion of an 'undifferentiated' African identity. Such unifying fictions were imperative to anticolonial struggles, but reified in the postcolony they underpin systems of power that privilege certain ethnic and religious groups over others, men over women, and the urban over the rural. As Achille Mbembe argues, the postcolony is simultaneously characterised by the multiplication, transformation and circulation of identities and comprised of 'a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that ... constitute a distinctive regime of violence' (102), by the molecular and the molar. It is 'impossible' to impose 'a single permanently stable system' upon such chaotic pluralism (108). Therefore, the molar generates 'a hollow pretense, a regime of unreality' to which the molecular – ordinary people – can 'simulate adherence' even as they contest it, frequently through a carnal, corporeal humour of scurrilous deflation focused on 'orifices, ... defecation, copulation, pomp, and extravagance' (108). For example, in *Quartier Mozart*, Mama Thecla (???) is a woman, although she claims also to have been a man who has made love to many women all around the world. When the teenage girl Samedi (Sandra Ola'a), nicknamed chef de quartier, expresses her curiosity about sex, the old witch enables her to periodically possess the local stud Myguy (Serge Amougou), who is intent on seducing her; his first attempt fails due to sudden impotence. Mama Thecla herself possesses the body of another local man, and undermines the culture of machismo by shrinking the genitals of any other man whose hand s/he shakes.

*Les saignantes* is set in Yaoundé in 2025. It opens with Majolie, who works as a prostitute, performing a rather elaborate sexual act with an older male client, Senor Jesus (Louis-Balthazar Amadangoleda). Suspended from a harness above him, she plays at (gymnastic) sexual domination, remaining out of his reach until she descends onto and rides him; at the same time, he plays at sexual subordination, content to be supine, to be unable to reach her and take more direct control, to be ridden. As the client, he retains control over the situation; as the sex-worker, however, she also in some way has control. This convoluted power relationship does not end just because sex with Majolie gives Jesus a fatal heart attack,

since it transpires he is a high-ranking government official, the 86-year-old Secretary General of the Civil Cabinet (SGCC). Even in death, he retains power over her. She enlists her friend Chouchou to help dispose of his corpse.

Mirroring the relationship between prostitute and client is that between film and audience. Majolie's heavily eroticised body is displayed not just for consumption by her diegetic client but also by her extra-diegetic clients, the cinema audience. This point is emphasised when the first thing Chouchou does on arriving at Majolie's flat is strip to her underwear and get as drunk as her friend; indeed, for all that the film construes them as exemplars of a feminine counterpower, they are also subjected to a gaze regime that recalls the most bootylicious of hip-hop videos.

The complex dynamic of power and counter-power is at the heart of Bekolo's film. As Aboubakar Sanogo writes,

the film figures the state as exploiter, as unaccountable, indeed as hyperlibidinous – as a monster adept at producing spectacle out of the dejection of its subjects. To respond to this, [Bekolo] imagines femininity as a recourse to forms of absolute power, an empowered femininity that challenges a masculinist, possessive state power that encroaches on every aspect of life, indeed on the body itself. (148)

In a telling moment, when the young women pay a butcher to dismember the SGCC's corpse and sell it as meat, Chouchou reaches inside her split-front dress for the cash while the butcher's chainsaw protrudes into the shot. This is one of many instances in the film in which Bekolo libidinises exchange, materialising the abstract economics that manipulates drives and desires, and foregrounding the real world of gendered power. Furthermore, since capitalism is, throughout the film, mapped on to state power, such moments also reveals the truth of representative democracy, since it too depends upon a rather fantastical notion of equal subjects, all of them equally rational agents, participating equally in an equalising field of power. This is mirrored, too, in the conundrum posed for audiences by the eroticised display of female bodies – a frequent lewdness that matches the images lurid blue, green and red hues – and the film's desire for its protagonists to exceed such reductions.

Bekolo does not construct women as merely victims, whether of the state, the market, patriarchy or the cinematic apparatus, but attempts to endow them with a fullness, which includes validating their enjoyment of their own libidinal energies, their playfulness, and their comfort in their own and with each other's bodies as they try on an array of clothes as they discuss their periods, as Chouchou holds Majolie when she recalls her mother, who died when she was a child, as they fall asleep together, as the drunken Majolie stands in a short dress, her legs apart, to urinate in the street. While Tcheuyap's description of them as 'young femme fatales: cynical, double-crossing and conniving' who 'use their corporeal bodies to realize selfish goals' (124) is rather unsympathetic, they do resemble such classical femmes fatale as Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944) and Gilda (Rita Hayworth) in *Gilda* (Vidor 1946) inasmuch as they are young, working class woman forced to take illicit action and make questionable choices because of their double exclusion from material well-being by a society rigged to favour middle class men.

The butcher disposes of the SGCC's body, but returns the head for Majolie and Chouchou to deal with on their own. When they attend a WIP – a wake for an important personality – they realise that their route to financial security involves holding such an event for Jesus, even if this means bribing a mortician to steal and decapitate a body and attach the SGCC's head to it. Simulating adherence to the rituals of the postcolony's 'regime of unreality', they use the WIP to lure the Minister of State (Emile Obossola M'bo) into giving

them a lucrative state contract to construct a new hospital. In exchange, they promise him sex, although they have no intention of fulfilling their end of the deal.

It never occurs to the Minister – ‘a sex maniac, a voodoo dictator, yet intelligent and handsome’ (Bekolo in Barlet) who collects and sniffs women’s underwear – not to abuse his power. Indeed, his inability to distinguish between power and its abuse undoes the illusion that such distinctions even exist. Such libidinal corruption is business-as-usual at all levels of the state. For example, when the young police officer Rokko (Alain Dzukam Simo) asks his Inspector ‘just how many beers’ they are ‘allowed to drink on duty’, he is told it depends upon how much money they can extort from the next car to drive past.

However, no one in the postcolony’s hollow pretense of a regime is free from the molecular counter-force embodied by the film’s female characters. When Chouchou first comes to Majolie’s aid, she receives the first of several phone calls from her mother, who is accompanied by four other middle-aged women in traditional dress. They represent mevoungou, a real-world rite performed by a secret society of Beti women in order to ‘restor[e] life in the face of serious events that could harm the community’; mevoungou is a ‘force of feminine nature’ associated with sex and ‘the female genitals’, although the same root word also ‘refers to cohabitation, offspring, progenitor’ (Bekolo in Barlet).<sup>20</sup> Over the course of the film, the young women are drawn into this web of counter-power by the older women, this alternative energy field, and ultimately use it – or it uses them – to defeat the Minister. Although their conflict culminates in mere physical combat, Majolie and Chouchou – feminist cyborg avengers networked into, or possessed by, the mevoungou’s molecular female counter-power – work as one, using a martial art that looks more like dancing, a joyous embodiment, than the violence practiced by the market and the state.

## Conclusion

Having noted some of the conditions under which these examples of afrocyberpunk cinema were produced, it is tempting to conclude with an expression often attributed to Gibson: ‘the future is already here, it’s just not very evenly distributed’. That is, after all, what these films show us, their visions of African and global futures determined, in multiple and complex ways, by the distribution of capital, information and technology. Blomkamp has access to Hollywood, and makes spectacular blockbusters; Amoussou and El Fani negotiate with the financing structures of former colonisers, and make sf in low-key realist mode that appeal to such sources; Bekolo, like Sembene before him, turned his back on first world funding and, unsurprisingly, his film is the only one not to have had a commercial DVD release. But that is only half the picture.

In his essay on ‘applied fiction’, Bekolo talks about how an old woman from his village would respond to hearing that in 1997 the computer Deep Blue beat chess Grandmaster Gary Kasparov. Not only does she not know anything about the players, she also knows nothing about chess. She would probably equate it with ‘*Songo*, a Cameroonian chess in which the one who wins is the one who gives away the most ... there is a radical difference of understanding between the two games’ (111). More than just a useful metaphor for thinking about the role of mevoungou in *Les saignantes*, it is also a clue to the other half of the picture.

While aspects of afrocyberpunk cinema look very familiar to western eyes, they use those pieces to play an often different game. *Neuromancer*’s famous failure to mention the United States implied a decline of nation-states and the coming domination of decentred

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<sup>20</sup> *Quartier Mozart* contains a similar group of elder women, ‘three hefty matrons’ in ‘African dress and head wrap’ who reappear throughout the film as a kind of ‘Greek chorus ... articulating the point of view of the community at large ... laughing at pain and disorder, ... validating the superiority of mature women by mocking the folly of men and younger females’ (MacRae 250).

networks, but the blazing white light of the Sprawl argues that in some respects, no matter how things fall apart, the centre will find ways to hold. *District 9* begins with a more radical, alien perspective. The arrival of the aliens in the global South suggests our geopolitics are irrelevant.<sup>21</sup> *Africa Paradis* goes even further in turning the world upside down and recentring it on (a not unproblematic) pan-African nation. *Bedwin Hacker* commits to a vision of human action continually combating the centration of power, taking it back from the molar and redistributing it on the molecular level. *Les saignantes* does not so much make kings of pawns as sweep away the board, recovering a molecular connectivity that can likewise sweep away the lewd corrupt power of the postcolony. And if Slavoj Žižek is correct that colonising nation-states have been replaced by the new colonial power of the deracinated global corporation, and we all now live in their colonies, then it is not just Cameroon or Tunisia or Benin or South Africa that should pay these films heed, but everyone last one of us.

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<sup>21</sup> If not entirely, since the spaceship arrives over South Africa, prompting Nnedi Okorafor’s critical response with *Lagoon* (2014).



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