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EDITORIAL

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Everyday violence(s) and visualities in Africa: An introduction

1. When the subject of violence is mentioned, we often tend to subjectively think
2. of it in at least four ways. First, we tend to regard violence as not-normal. It
3. more or less engenders feelings of shock, puzzlement and disbelief. It may
4. repulse. Violence is therefore often regarded – through much head-shaking
5. and hand-wringing – as unthinkable and irrational. It is ungraspable and
6. unspeakable – and accidental and occasional. Who, in their normal mind, could
7. do such a thing? Animals! Second, violence has concrete semantic prosody
8. with savagery, depravity, moral poverty and ethical deficiency. Those bound to
9. violence are also bound to an absence of morality and ethics. Third, violence
10. is associated with a class of people we may regard as bad people, or simply as
11. bad guys. These bad people are, invariably, categorical law-breakers. They are
12. identifiable as criminals, thugs, nut-cases, knife-wielders, rapists, wife-beaters,
13. molesters, genocidaires, assassins, terrorists, suicide bombers, anarchists, right-
14. wing (or left-wing) goons, tyrants, football hooligans, gangsters, tsotsis, rioters,
15. psychos, sociopaths and so on. As long as we retain our place off this list, we
16. have no use for violence. Finally, violence takes place, or at least starts, *out*
17. *there* – far away from familiar hearths.

These four ways of seeing violence are actually important ways of packaging it. Whenever we box and package the real world that is before us, we not only readily do so for our own preferred uses but are also expressing our deepest anxieties and blindspots. This sort of four-ribboned packaging of violence betrays at least two specific blindspots. First, we seldom regard ourselves as intrinsically violent beings; it is always someone else who commits violence. It is *them* who do it, not *us*. If we do it, a sound justification can always be found; such a justification points ostensibly and conveniently at *them*. Second, we exclusively see violence as essentially physical, graphic, quantifiable, empirical, mimetic and observable. This blindspot is apparent in the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of violence as ‘the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community’ (cited in Mboti 2014a: 39). We are, on this basis, able to speculate about the epistemological accounts of violence that are possible when we habitually construct violence in this simplistic way: violence as merely out there, the violence of others, with us as spectators, bystanders, interpreters and passers of judgement. Such accounts are limited by their collective aporias.

Discussions of violence in cinema and the ‘cinema of violence’ have tended to fixate on this limited definition of violence in its mimetic, graphic forms. Stevie Simkin, for example, traces ‘screen violence’ to horror movies and thrillers, and his definition of ‘violent cinema’ is linked with what he calls ‘the representation of the damaged body’ (2006: 5). Thus,

The terrain **this study** covers is expansive, from early modern revenge tragedy to urban vigilante movies of the 1970s, slasher movies of the 1980s, teen horror of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and recent ‘revenge’ movies such as *Man on Fire* (2004) and *Kill Bill*.

(2006: 5)

What Simkin is listing is the violent movie, according to Hollywood. Such movies depict mayhem, gore, blood, ripped guts, wounds, spoliation, revenge and death. Berenike Jung locates violence as the preserve of ‘action movies and their tradition of spectacular destruction’, while the representation of violence is equated to the ‘representation of ... atrocity’ (2010: 13). Ryan Doom’s (2009) study of the movies of the Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan, celebrates the carnage, murders, brutality and killings in *Blood Simple* (1985), *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), *Fargo* (1996), *The Ladykillers* (2004), *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and others. The ‘use of vehement brutality’, argues Doom (2009: xii), makes the work of the Coens distinctive. Barna Donovan’s (2010) study of violence in Hollywood films locates screen violence around the trope of ‘blood’, ‘guns’ and ‘testosterone’ and considers that audiences have a thirst for this kind of violence. Norman Denzin’s (2002) study of the ‘racial’ cinema of violence in Hollywood focuses simplistically on ‘hood movies’ and ‘gang violence’.

Asbjørn Grønstad (2008: 11) dismisses the preoccupation with graphic violence as ‘empirical cataloguing of ... heinous acts’ and as a fallacy of visuality. If the representation of violence ‘is at the core epistemological and ethical’ (Grønstad 2008: 10), then little is to be gained by assuming that violence can be empirically reproduced on-screen. I agree with Grønstad (2008: 13) that the defining feature of screen violence is, instead, its perpetual elusiveness and opacity. Grønstad recognizes that screen violence, because it is textual

and filmic, is necessarily 'elusive and recalcitrant' (2008: 9). To watch film as if we were social scientists is to subscribe to a defunct representationalism and 'logocentric crust' traceable to Aristotelian mimesis. Because films are not transparent, argues Grønstad, they cannot imitate. Grønstad argues for a 'figural cinema/figural violence' (2008: 14). At the core, such a visuality is amimetic. This politics of figurality calls for both a sublation of logocentrism and a new semiotic epistemology founded in the image.

This special issue conceptualizes violence in infinitely more interesting ways. It emphasizes the fact that violence is, in fact, not out there at all. Rather, it is all around us, all over us, and is – indeed – us. Not only is violence often invisible to the naked eye, but it is always implicating us such that *without us* there would be no violence. In fact, there is no single violence. Rather, violence is regarded in the plural. There are violences. Furthermore, the act of seeing of violences is, in this account, impossible on the basis of dominant, monocular ways of seeing. As such, there are plural visualities as opposed to any one organizing visuality. The trope of mimetic violence is not only layered on top of other amimetic tropes but is undermined by them. The articles presented here therefore encourage us to visualize violence critically. We are encouraged to see, first of all, the everyday worlds and subtexts that produce, reproduce and sustain significantly finer, less visible, quotidian violences and cultures of violence that *march in step* with our daily practices.

Contemporary African films delve into the subject of violence through a variety of visualities. Some films show violence in its Zizekian sense, as objective and systemic (Zizek 2008). In *Violence* (2008) Slavoj Zizek recounts the story of a worker suspected of stealing every evening, as he leaves the factory, the wheelbarrow that the worker rolls in front of him is carefully inspected. The guards, however, can find nothing as the wheelbarrow is always empty. Finally, the penny drops: what the worker is stealing are the wheelbarrows themselves! Zizek notes that the 'obvious signals of violence' that are at the forefront of our minds – acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict – are actually 'the most visible portion' of 'objective kinds of violence'. As such, it is important to 'learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a *dearly* identifiable agent' (Zizek 2008: 1). Instead, 'there is a need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts' (Zizek 2008: 1).

The Zizekian 'stepping back' move is reflected in Abderrahmane Sissako's films such as *Bamako* (2006) and *Timbuktu* (2014) and Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas* (1992). In *Bamako* the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank – and the rest of the world's financial institutions – are put on a fictitious trial in Mali's capital, Bamako, in an open-air courtyard amongst the washing, insects and dust. Hence,

The power of *Bamako* is in the unmasking of the Orwellian invisible violence that ordinary people have been massaged into not noticing or into not calling *it* by its proper names. Fingers are pointed at the real evil which had been masked as good, at the killers masked as messiahs, monsters dressed as guardians, criminals disguised as law-givers, and so on. More importantly, this is not done through slogans or lectures. Rather, the court proceedings are made to fuse into the fabric of the everyday. Daily life continues around the trial.

(Mboti 2014a: 46)

Mambety's *Hyenas*, on the other hand, is a parabolic adaptation of the tragicomic violence of neocolonialism. The town of Colobane is as credit-obsessed as Africa's donor-aid-dependent neocolonial nations. The final shots of the bulldozer tracks show the levelling violence of corrupt power and money. The image of the would-be murderers of Colobane dressed in cast-off rice bags foregrounds the systemic violence turning poor people into cannibals. In these movies, in the words of Grønstad (2008: 10), we witness 'figural violence', the 'violence aesthetic' and 'aesthetic violence'.

Other African films that 'step back' to show violence in its fully figural objective, systemic aspect are *Soleil O* (Hondo, 1967), *Black Girl* (Sembene, 1966), *Afrique Sur Seine* (Vieyra, 1955), *Sambizanga* (Maldoror, 1972), *Mortu Nega* (Gomes, 1988) and *Wend Kuuni* (Kabore, 1983). Other film-makers depict violence in the Fanonian sense, as liberatory and creative. Fanon considers that if 'violence ... ruled over the ordering of the colonial world' (1963: 40), then it is necessary to first disorder and then reorder the world through liberatory violence. Whereas the colonial masters saw the Mau Mau as 'savages' deserving violent reprisal and torture, the insurgents were in fact humanized liberators fighting for justice. Paradoxically, it was the British who were savages.

Still, other African film-makers treat violence as a perpetually and singularly destructive force (cf. Dovey 2009), a point illustrated in films such as Rehad Desai's *Miners Shot Down* (2014) and Khalo Matabane's *State of Violence* (2010). In fact, Dovey's definition of violence is based on screen adaptations of rape, war, murder and genocide in films such as *Fools* (Suleman, 1997), *A Walk in the Night* (Dube, 1998), *Cry the Beloved Country* (Roodt, 1995) and *Genesis* (Cheick Oumar Sissoko 1999). Finally, other films still are ambivalent (and allegorical and metaphorical) about the meaning of violence, as shown in Akin Omotoso's *Man on Ground* (2011), and in a variety of Nigerian video films (Adesokan 2012; Mboti 2014b).

In the end, the forms and types of violence that surround Africans go by different names, but all are built into and sustained by the fabric and 'ocular thickness' of everyday life (Mboti 2014a). These violences are neither things of the past nor things that only abnormal people do. Rather, *they are us*. Not only are such violences endemic to our socio-economic order, but they are quite normal. In such an account of violences, cinematic representations of rape, killings and beatings are to be seen not as authentic depictions of violence but, rather, as its symptoms and surpluses.

The visualities of violence addressed in this special issue draw attention to the fact that violence is at the heart of many contemporary traumas, oppressions and liberations. The articles presented here emphasize that the way we read representations of violence needs to be constantly subjected to rigorous contextualizing and historicizing, and on critical analytical frameworks. The articles go beyond the clichés of who causes and receives violence and what its visible and perceptible modes of expression supposedly are, to critical and nuanced appreciation of how violence is often social, structural and historical, and perhaps much more 'everyday' and permanent in its effects. Key to the purpose of this special issue is the critical appreciation of our role and place in the 'everydayness' of violence.

The special issue opens up critical conversation into the ways in which African films and films about Africa engage visually with the systemic, symbolic and graphic nature of violence. We assume that, compared to words and other linguistic signs, visual media have arguably more success

representing violence, its beginnings, durations and its aftermaths. The eight original papers therefore address how film-makers represent, express, explain, and dramatize violence in Africa, showing that African film-makers' definitions of violence are intrinsically richer, more profound, grounded and lived.

Maurice Vambe and Khatija Kahn critique the violence of spectacle and the spectacle violence in the film about the Rwandan genocide, *Shooting Dogs* (Caton-Jones, 2005). Vambe and Khan argue that the visibility of *Shooting Dogs* is a form of excessive signification. This is due to the film's failure to gaze beyond the horror of the genocide. Survivors of the genocide do not get sensitively represented. Rather, they are visualized out of the film. In the authors' view, filmic art significantly translates known realities into stories. Such stories, however, can be violent and distorting.

Keyan Tomaselli's article focuses on the first cinema-release South African film to be banned since the fall of apartheid, Jamil XT Qubeka's *Of Good Report* (2013), over concerns about child pornography. Tomaselli's introspective piece considers the potential dangers of censorship that the banning (and unbanning) presaged. The real issue, argues Tomaselli, is not the banning of *Of Good Report* per se but the future of the South African public sphere. The gradual whittling down of the 'hard won' South African public sphere concerns Tomaselli. The banning of Qubeka's movie, therefore, is seen as violent. The source of the violence is the state, through arbitrary use of the law. The state's violence is directed against the conducting of broader public debates that enable policy-makers to respond intelligently, accountably and appropriately to larger issues relating to the public sphere.

Tanja Sakota-Kokot's article critically examines depictions of Africa in selected Hollywood films, *The Constant Gardener* (Meirelles, 2005), *Black Hawk Down* (Scott, 2001), *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006) and *I Dreamed of Africa* (Hudson, 2000). Sakota-Kokot argues that these films fail to depict Africa as 'ordinary'. Instead, Africa is more or less always represented in extreme terms. This type of representation embodies a new type of prevalent symbolic violence that sustains racist colonial discourse. In *I Dreamed of Africa*, for example, when Africans hunt it is called poaching. However, when the white man Paolo does the same thing, it is called conservation. In what way is Paolo not a poacher? Solomon Vandy in *Blood Diamond*, like Jomo in *The Constant Gardener*, is a token. Danny Archer, on the other hand, is depicted as yet another white saviour of Africa whose past as a violent oppressor must be forgotten.

Like Sakota-Kokot's article, Okaka Dokotum's essay problematizes the assumed 'unordinariness' of Africa. Dokotum examines the use of the notion of 'TIA' (This is Africa) in Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond*. He argues that 'TIA' reflects the film's sinister representational logic of violence, which implies that, in Africa, violence is the order of the day. The patterns and motifs of violence in *Blood Diamond* are anchored in the racialized frame of representing not just violent death but also in the deployment of a specific image of Africa as a death-trap. Such a visibility of death invokes memories of dystopian colonial literary discourse about Sierra Leone as 'the white man's grave'.

Solomon Waliaula and Joseph Okong'o explore the cinematic visibility of violence in Kenya in the documentaries of Hillary Ng'weno. Ng'weno's documentary series 'The making of a nation' is seen as a reconstruction of significant events in the development of Kenya from colonialism to post-independence. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's notion of violence and Michel Foucault's analysis of power as both coercive and emancipative, the authors contend that

Ng'weno's work presents the paradox of violence: violence is a means of both dismantling and constructing the 'fabric' of a nation. Waliaula and Okong'o demonstrate that the documentaries incorporate both the 'everyday' and the 'the spectacular' aspects of violence.

John Mugubi explores the operation of violence as a symbolic tool of enunciation in four Kenyan films made following the contested elections of December 2007. Mugubi observes that most socio-political Kenyan films of the last decade manifest manifold shades of violence. He argues that *Wale Watu* and *Pieces for Peace*, for instance, show violence in its physical forms while *Benta* and *Nairobi Half Life* explore everyday violence on a much more figural tome.

Urther Rwafa and Washington Mushore discuss the violence of visual representation in a film about HIV/AIDS, *Musinsimuke* (Markham, 2001). Such violence is conveyed, in particular, through graphic cinematic displays of diseased bodies. Defacement, stigma and exclusion are all aspects of the visibility of disease of *Musinsimuke*. Rwafa and Mushore argue that their study of *Musinsimuke* proves that the epistemological understanding of violence necessarily embraces two important strands: the symbolic and the physical.

If war and peace are begun and ended by men, what is the place of women? Janice Spleth's study of Fanta Régina Nacro's war story, *La Nuit de la vérité/Night of Truth* (2004), foregrounds a gendered visibility of violence. Spleth notes that, traditionally, the war film has been a primarily masculine genre. True to form, the peace talks in *La Nuit de la vérité* are clearly controlled by the men. However, Nacro's representation of women demonstrates how their role in war has changed, and ultimately suggests that they have a role to play in the success of peace. Spleth's article explores narrative and cinematographic devices through which Nacro's film makes a place for women in the last chapter of the war story. Spleth situates Nacro's film in the context of recent scholarship that has sought to study violence and reconciliation in Africa from the perspective of gender.

The figural film favoured in this special issue is one that unveils and reveals 'the sedulous, material density of the image. To scrape away its ostensible layers is unfeasible; there is nothing, no other world, beyond its ocular thickness' (Grønstad 2008: 16). It is hoped that the papers presented here have, without being the last word, all succeeded to some degree in unveiling and revealing the full 'ocular thickness' (and ocular thinness) of African films that treat everyday violences.

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