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'Afropolitanism' as an Example of Contemporary Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. Afropolitanism, a term coined by the South-African theorist Achille Mbembe is summarized by him as "a stylistics and a politics, an aesthetics and a certain poetics of the world". He endeavours to identify Afropolitanism as a paradigm not only of personal modes of existence under globalised conditions, but also of contemporary artworks, and not only those originating from Africa. I will question this term in relation to Edouard Glissant's term of "composite cultures" since both try to respond to the inevitable cultural entanglements of artistic expressions not only from the Non-Western world. And I will provide an aesthetic example of an "affirmed and non-imposed (cultural) partition" (Glissant): Jean-Pierre Bekolo's Camerounian film *Le complot d'Aristote (*1995) which succeeds in parodying standardised Western film dramaturgy, but also the state of cinema in Africa. As he tries to prove Afropolitan aesthetics not only demonstrates the aesthetic/political interwovenness of cultural statements today, but also calls for the abandonment of the idea of individualism in favour of dividual self-understandings and artistic articulations.

"Afropolitanism is a stylistics and a politics, an aesthetics and a certain poetics of the world. It is a manner of being in the world which refuses, on principle, any form of victim identity – which does not mean that it is not conscious of the injustices and the violence which the law of the world inflicted on this continent and its people" (Mbembe 2016, p. 289).[2] The South-African theorist Achille Mbembe, author of this statement, endeavours to identify "Afropolitanism" as the paradigm of actual modes of existence of persons mainly from non-Western countries and of their complicated empowerments in the globalizing world. With Afropolitanism

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[1] Email: philott@arcor.de

[2] Mbembe, Achille (2016), *Ausgang aus der langen Nacht. Versuch über ein entkolonisiertes Afrika*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, p. 289.

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he provocatively refers to the concept of cosmopolitanism, the term Kant coined for the enlightened self-understanding of being a (bourgeois) citizen of the whole world. This term was recently actualized by the sociologist Ulrich Beck for a cosmopolitan sociology which aims to have the world-society in mind, but nevertheless refuses to understand it as a continuous territory where Western laws, values, scientific perspectives should be dominant and mandatory for everybody. He claims that quite the opposite is true: that in the era of globalization "there is no fixed point of observation from which local and national processes of change can be adequately analysed and understood" (Beck 2010, p. 19).[3] Beck sketches an inevitable epistemological relativism which urges sociological statements to indicate their spatial and temporal framing, the selection of their phenomena and to justify the choice of their analytical approach and its (Western) presuppositions.

Mbembe refers to cosmopolitanism in a different way when he refuses to connect Afropolitanism with "any form of victim identity" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 289); he has in mind actors who correspond to the Western idea of cosmopolitan people, self-assured African persons living and working in various metropolises. By refusing a certain cliché of African-ness, Mbembe may also allude to the historical exclusion implied in the term cosmopolitanism, since African people were not considered to be part of the Western enlightenment. In this sense, the term "Afropolitanism" supplements "cosmopolitanism" but provocatively includes the people of Africa and of the southern hemisphere; it also points at the fact that new actors have emerged who are generally better adapted to globalized conditions than Western people because they are used to the colonially imposed mixture of cultures and languages from birth onwards.

The idea of complementing the Western self-understanding with a supplementary one in order to bring about a "One-World" may have been inspired by the Caribbean poet Edouard Glissant, who called for the consideration of "Tout-Monde." He underlined the inevitable relationality

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[3] Beck, Ulrich (2010), 'Risikogesellschaft und die Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheiten', ibd. (ed.), *Große Armut, großer Reichtum. Zur Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheit*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, p. 19-40 (19).

and interconnectedness of the parts of this One-World in his seminal text "Poetiques de la relation"[4] at the beginning of the 1990s. In his view all cultures and their geopolitical "islands" interact with each other, rhizomatically[5] linked by rhythms of historical and actual repetition and difference much like the islands of the Caribbean archipelago. Edouard Glissant coined the term "cultures composites"[6] for this relational and hybrid model of cultures, of human existences and the works of art that go with it. He understands this concept as a paradigmatic one for all cultures ever subjugated to colonialism and to historical impositions of other cultures; he believes them to resemble each other with respect to their analogous history and its inevitably multi-layered and hybrid expression, whilst nonetheless differing in the language of their expression and local particularities. Obvious differences can in fact be observed between the English and French-speaking Caribbean islands, whilst the shared common destiny of indigenous heritage has been more or less eliminated, supplemented by cultural imports of African slaves and by different European powers imposing their languages and their different concepts of culture. Whereas French speaking islands developed significant forms of creolization, shifted the accent of French pronunciation and diffracted the entire rhythm of the spoken language so that the colonizer could no longer understand his own idiom, this was not so much the case in the English speaking territories, with their pidgins. When appraising the fact that the colonized subverted the imposed linguistic regime by transferring it into a regional patois or Creole, Glissant had a specific cultural composition in mind which does not exist in the same form on the Anglophone islands. What is important is Glissant's idea that the aesthetic differences within these cultural compositions, between the appropriated and the newly added or transformed elements, must not be synthesized, must remain audible and visible, and must betray the clashes between the different cultural signs.

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[4] Glissant, Edouard (1990), *Poétiques de la Relation*, Paris: Gallimard.

[5] Using this term of Deleuze/Guattari, Edouard Glissant calls this conception "une esthétique de la terre, dégagée des naivetés folkloriques, mais rhizomant dans la connaissance de nos cultures", Glissant, Edouard, Poétiques de la Relation, p. 164.

[6] Glissant, Edouard (1997), *Traité de Tout-Monde*, Paris: Gallimard.

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Keeping together apart – this is the formula of a composite culture in Glissant's sense. He wants to underline the inner tensions within artistic expressions because otherwise a homogenised culture could arise preparing the ground for subsequently organised folklorization and depersonalisation by the State, as Glissant warns. He pleads for a reinforcement of the heterogeneous character of the cultural composition in order to give voice to the divergent cultural layers.

Actualising Glissant's conception, Mbembe focuses on today's increased mixture of cultural elements within any one person's life, and especially in the lives of people from the southern hemisphere. "Afropolitanism" is intended as the name for their form of existence between different places and cultures, for their capacity to combine heterogeneous expressions and for realising "an interlocking of here and somewhere else", a "presence of elsewhere in here." (Mbembe 2016, p. 285)[7]. This description of cultural and spatiotemporal mixtures within a person's or a group's (fragmented) identity and their respective aesthetic stylisations does not include any sort of negativity; on the contrary, it affirms cultural entanglements and highlights the participation of African people in symbolic and economic value creating chains as a timely response to the challenges of globalization.

In its affirmation of personal participation in ubiquitous life style modes, the idea of Afropolitanism is also a compliment to another concept of Achille Mbembe which he unfolds in his *Critique de la Raison Nègre*[8] (2014) translated into German as "Kritik der schwarzen Vernunft" (note the symptomatic shift of *nègre* to black/*schwarz* in the German translation). In this text, he envisions the "*conditio nigra*" expanding to become the deracialised outset situation of all those who are not participants in economic and symbolic value creation chains, and continue to live in political disregard and medial invisibility. Whereas Afropolitanism highlights self-confident composite-cultural human and artistic existences, the *Critique* speaks of multitudes of fairly poor people who are forced to migrate, to look for jobs in foreign countries, and who do not deliberately

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[7] Mbembe, Achille (2016), *Ausgang aus der langen Nacht*.
[8] Mbembe, Achille (2014), *Critique de la raison nègre*, Paris: La Découverte.

deal with divergent cultural norms. In his two recent publications, Mbembe seems to focus on two different classes of population who both live composite-cultural identities – one being able to conceive of it as free choice, the other as indispensable for survival.

"Afropolitanism," which concerns us here, is valued for its timely mode of aesthetic and economic participation, for its expression of personal and artistic empowerment due to forms of appropriation and recombination. Becoming Afropolitan means accepting and intensifying a composite-cultural life, a (de-in)dividuated identity, a permanent intellectual and affective readjustment to varying contexts and their metastable integration into a necessarily dividuated particular style. Afropolitanism is an aesthetic attitude which acknowledges its constitution by local and globalized codes, its mixture of codes, affectivities and attitudes from African and other backgrounds and their innovative amalgamation. It is an attitude of people and contemporary artworks not only from the African continent, but of all aesthetic expressions which are aware of not being culturally pure, of deriving from different sources, appropriating given formats and transforming them in order to provide a timely response. Afropolitanism in a more general sense is the name for a becoming "normal" of cultural composites which cannot easily be identified or classified as "African."

I wonder if we can nevertheless speak of specific forms of Afropolitan aesthetics or if the fact that its expressions derive from different sources necessarily brings about formal amalgamations lacking a recognisable style. Today, when we all use the current *lingua franca*, the English language, creating new ways of speaking English, we normally do not expose the differences between our idiom and the appropriated one, and the possible tension between their idiomatic expressions. Instead, we try to melt them into one – hiding the "presence of elsewhere in here", betraying our affirmed alienation only by the errors we commit – and bringing about new accents and expressions in an extended range of pidgins.

A question remains as to how to conceive of the practice of Afropolitanism in artworks and their heterogeneous compositions. How does such an artwork proceed in order to constitute itself within given aesthetic norms and languages while exhibiting the disruptive assemblage of

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the appropriated and the newly added elements and their cultural tension? Mbembe provides no further explanation, whereas Glissant interestingly highlights the strategies of "desindividualisation" (Glissant 1990, p. 211) within the practice of creolization. Thanks to the diffractive use of the master idiom, the creole diversifies the French language, which thus loses its individual character. For Glissant, this is an adequate tactic to subvert the official cultural politics representing only individual persons and thereby hindering the perception of their common and non-individual, collective existence. He even calls for an "explosion" of the unified national culture and for an affirmed "dividuation,"[9] as I would call it: "*La créolisation emporte dans l'ouverture du multilinguisme et dans l'éclatement inoui des cultures. Mais l'eclatement des cultures n'est pas leur eparpillement, ni leur dilution mutuelle. Il est le signe violent de leur partage consenti, non imposé*" (Glissant 1990, p. 47). If I use the term dividuation – a prolongation of the term "dividual" used by Gilles Deleuze[10] in order to describe the non-individual character of time-based film images and their permanent metamorphosis – I am not trying to indicate divisions and exclusions, but the opposite: the term is supposed to translate the conviction that cultural expressions, when they expose the tensions between their culturally heterogeneous elements, should not be named "individuals," meaning literally "undivided" entities.

Here we come to the heart of our discussion: What does it mean to understand innovative culture tactics not as a form of de(con)struction, but as an "affirmed, non imposed partition (*partage consenti, non imposé*)"? A partition which at the same time means participation and division, being part and maintaining a certain distance, being together and a being apart with/of/from something which is a non-homogeneous composition? What does an artwork look like that does not mirror the fragmentation of former cultural expressions, but provides an aesthetic symbolization of affirmed differences between the participant elements? As far as I understand, creolisation, a certain poetic and decanonizing practice, is the auditive sign

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[9] Ott, Michaela (2018), *Dividuations. Theories of Participation,* London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[10] Deleuze, Gilles (1993), *Cinéma 1. L'Image-Mouvement*, Paris: Ed. De Minuit.

of a non-imposed and affirmed participation of all people within the postcolonial condition of the Caribbean islands.

Before discussing what kind of strategies Afropolitan aesthetics might offer for similar purposes, I would like to question further the concept of "partage" as an essential and seemingly self-contradictory procedure for aesthetic compositions today. For it indicates, on the one hand, the affirmed participation in symbolic, economic and technological systems borrowed from other (mainly Western) cultures and, on the other hand, their necessary diffraction, dividuation and transformation into particular expressions and aesthetic counter-strategies. This twofold procedure teaches us that participation and dividuation become possible only when we concede that we are always already imbedded in composite-cultural articulations, in (non-in)dividual semiotic codes and systems of enunciation. This is even more true for a life in the digitalized world, where digital images and sounds whose origin is often unknown to us are appropriated and put together into new cultural composites; such artistic practices are the result of non-imposed and affirmed partitions, bringing about (non-in)dividual articulations and, in the best case, joining them in a loose and epistemologically demanding way. They might stress their affirmed partition, acknowledging their entanglements in culturally different expressions while considering themselves as particular expressions. It is the privilege of artworks to voluntarily de-individualize given canonized forms by exposing their inherent and unnoticed diversity, subverting their universalized norm or their claim of uniqueness and parodying stereotypes by shifting between the actual and virtual status of aesthetic signs, by intensifying the conflicts within a narration and so on. They can criticize forms of negation of cultural codes on both sides and develop a hilarious play with the imposed and affirmed partition and their contradictions. They ask for a scrupulous analyse of their particular form of partition and of their aesthetic dividuation. I will present a filmic example which is excellent in parodying the own and the imposed cultural tradition at the same time.

I would claim that Afropolitanism has become an exemplary form of symbolic enunciation for self-reflective and affirmed participation in the globalized world. For non-Western cultures Afropolitanism seems the

obligatory form of expression because they have been forced into self-dividuations since colonial times and are used to combining different layers of expression: a local substrate, a nationwide superstrate and a globalized pidgin. In their art practices, they deal with local narratives, and possibly nationalized styles and globalized codes. If they want to realise films, they have to adapt to Western concepts, to economically enforced aesthetic formats and to narrative normings occurring between globalized film industries and TV standards worldwide. Today, Southern discourses respond to this imposition not so much by rejecting them and by exposing their murderous consequences as by appealing for models of expression and for aesthetic patterns to be adapted critically, to be reversed parody-fashion and to be amalgamated with local and globalized codes so that, ultimately, they become new variations of artistic expression without a clear cultural affiliation to be retraced. It is obvious that the concept of composite cultures today embraces different tactics. Of greatest interest are aesthetic forms of encounter that expose their reworkings of patterns and traditional formats, their subversive appropriations of stereotypes or fixed contents in the form of parody, caricature and so forth. We, the inhabitants of the West or the global North, should learn from them: symbolic statements today should aim to act out the given cultural differences, not opposing them to each other, but differentiating them in an aesthetically and epistemologically demanding way.

The curator Okwui Enwezor, who translates Glissant's ideas into the status of contemporary art practices and, much like Mbembe in his concept of Afropolitanism, recommends avoidance of both negative and positive stigmatising as an African or indigenous person or artwork, saying that one should obscure origins as much as possible, thus assuming a post-ethnic identity and avoiding being consigned by the art market to yet another niche (and marketed on that basis.)[11] He understands medial and composite-cultural (re)mixes and samplings as an excellent solution to the required constitution for contemporary art, and the best way of not being reduced to a simple African-ness and commodified as such. While Enwezor focuses on

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[11] Okwui Enwezor (2009), 'Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction', ibid., C*ontemporary African Art since 1980,* Bologna: Damiani, pp. 9-50.

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the (post)ethnical condition of the possibility of access to the globalized platforms of art, the cultural theorist Rey Chow concentrates on national cultures, underlining that the concept of culture in itself is a problem.[12] Similarly to Glissant, she highlights the fact that official culture is the result of political interests and of the systematic division of populations into ethnic groups by the state, attributing to them specific cultural practices and privileging certain articulations at the disadvantage of others. She nonetheless claims[13] that visual or narrative stereotyping may be indispensable for mutual social representation and for the recognisability of groups within a national frame, even if they are not desirable in the sense of producing violence.

Postcolonial recommendations of post-ethnic statements on the one side, of stereotyping on the other: The film *Le complot d'Aristote (*1995) of the Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo tries to respond to both. He plays with aesthetic and cultural stereotypes, with artistic formats and filmic norms, and exposes African-ness, or rather an imagined Africa as projected by the West. But the main thrust of his research refers to the question of what African cinema is today and what it can become considering the Western origin of film technology, its globally standardized dramaturgy and the inevitable financialisation of the film by Western production companies. Bekolo develops a sardonic play on the French term "cinéaste" and its English misunderstanding as "silly-ass," with divergent understandings of high and low cinema and so forth. The film parodies the Aristotelian and Hollywood film dramaturgy and its conception of narrative patterns and of affective aims and casts a critical eye on the status of cinema in Africa and the state of mind of African moviegoers, with digressions on prominent film genres such as Westerns and gangster movies. It also questions the image of Africa stereotypically produced in Western iconographies, and the way it always aims to bring about – in accordance with Aristotle's poetics – affects

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[12] Rey Chow (2002), "'Brushes with the-Other-as-Face: Stereotyping and Cross-Ethnic Representation', ibid., *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, p. 50-94.

[13] Rey Chow (1995),'On Cultural Studies', John Rajchman, *The Identity in Question,* New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 251-295.

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of pity and fear.

Screen shot from Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film "Aristotle's plot" 1995

Screen shot from Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film "Aristotle's plot" 1995

Screen shot from Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film "Aristotle's plot" 1995

Screen shot from Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film "Aristotle's plot" 1995

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Screen shot from Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film "Aristotle's plot" 1995

Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel has demonstrated not only single artworks, but the whole exhibition trying to become a composite-cultural expression, while defying the commodification of artworks and providing postcolonial perspectives. An exhibition such as documenta 14 is Afropolitan in the sense of being an affirmative partition which keeps together/apart so many different aesthetic statements and such a variety of culturally different expressions that it becomes impossible to synthesise the artworks into a coherent aesthetic or epistemological statement. It may be read as a concentrated and affirmed expression of aesthetic dividuations due to the heterogeneity of the assembled artistic articulations, of their aesthetic interferences with each other and of the tensions arising between them. Giant composite-cultural shows of this kind bring about new problems, namely the question of how to find an aesthetic compromise between the particular cultural compositions and a coherent expression of the whole exhibition, with the intention of intensifying the expression of being/together apart, the interlocking of here and elsewhere and so on.

To conclude, I would like to argue that, after all, we should not strive to define what a dividual cultural composition today should be in order not to produce new generalized aesthetic norms. Instead, we should pay attention to the minimally different expressions of cultural composites, the specific narrations in Afropolitan statements and their loosely coherent articulations. It is precisely the liberation from determined norms and the affirmed cultural entanglements which foster Afropolitan aesthetics. They can, of course, be realized in different complex ways and are not always heightened to the kind of parodistic game which Bekolo's film succeeds in unfolding. Afropolitan artworks will differ in their decisions on how to moderate their dividual character and how to accentuate the tensions between their components, including in relation to other globalized works of art.

As people of the West and the northern hemisphere, we should discover that we are necessarily part of these statements; therefore we should affirm our inevitable partition in the articulations of others and start to determine and to moderate our destiny of dividuation. This represents the only way not to lose our aesthetic particularity and our personal coherence within the contemporary normalities of continuous (in)voluntary dividuation.

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