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Rutgers
University
Press
New Brunswick,
New Jersey and
London

JAN 18 2006

Who Was Afraid of Patrice Lumumba? Terror and the Ethical Imagination in *Lumumba*: *La Mort du Prophète*

I. Images/Imaginations

It has been argued that the violation of human rights springs from a failure of the imagination: that one who severely abuses another is able to do so in direct proportion to his inability to imagine not only the pain of the other, but also the existential condition of that other human as human. This is not the calculated dehumanization enabling such historical atrocities as the transatlantic slave trade, the genocide of indigenous peoples of the Americas, or the Nazi Holocaust, wherein great rhetorical pains were taken to construct populations as subhuman by attributing to them the status of savage (noble or otherwise), animal (beast of burden), or the infamous "vermin" of Hitler's vernacular. What we witness here might rather be described as the inability of perpetrators to imagine those they abuse as fully human beyond the corporeal circumstance of the body—or beyond the circumstantial evidence of family ties, labor, or political positioning. It is, finally, the inability to imagine an Other in terms of the higher-order human credentials of desire, hope, dream, love.

Alternatively, however, it may be argued that what we witness in the abuse of humans by other humans is precisely the heightened capacity for such imagining, such that the perpetrator not only *imagines* the dream life of his Other, but incorporates that knowledge into his modus operandi for inflicting pain and terror. In this scenario, well documented by Elaine Scarry in her revelation of the torturer's exacting introduction of shards of the domestic world into the broader landscape of terror and pain, the power accrued by the torturer in proportion to his production of pain depends upon imagining the needs, fears, desires, and vulnerabilities of the Other for the circular project of devising ever more creative ways of inflicting pain.¹ The same point may be posited for terrorism, inasmuch as the terrorist culturally constructed as alienated, antisocial, and eager to do

whatever "necessary" to achieve a set of political or social ideals overlaps with the torturer, who employs similarly "unthinkable" methods in service of a set of ideals or orders passed along a putative chain of command. For the purposes of this essay, the terrorist (like the torturer) will be defined in the most basic sense as one who seeks to produce a highly fearful populace by employing violence on individual or mass scales in service of desired political or social ends. One overlap between these otherwise distinct categories is the ability (or attempt, however misguided) to imagine others in the vulnerability of their human desire and pain. This ability is, I would argue, essential to the work of torture and terror in the most pragmatic—and least hyped—sense.

Moving to consider cultural images of and texts about extreme violence, the problem of representation might arguably be based upon a failure of imagination occasioned by stultified generic forms. In a discussion of the trope of film violence in a contemporary context, J. David Slocum describes the "exhaustion of given cinematic forms or modes of production" as part of the condition governing postmodern cultural production (2004, 16). That sense of formal "exhaustion" aptly describes the use of images of Others from Africa, Asia, and Latin America as differentiated receptors of human rights violations, neither subject to nor protected by the rule of law and international human rights conventions, perpetually in crisis of one sort or another. Circulation of such images in the Western world is so common as to preclude audience imagining of humans occupying a range of subject positions as humans in the richness of that understanding. Such richness is diluted precisely by the limited attribution of (universal) human rights to the subject position occupied by white, Western individuals, neatly balanced by the description of national/racial/ethnic others as both perpetrators and victims of the violations of such rights. Not surprisingly, this pervasive structuring of images is obscured as a given in the way of the classical Althusserian ideological apparatus. As I have argued elsewhere, such failure of the imagination has largely to do with the use of classical Hollywood generic formulas to "tell" stories of historical atrocity, a phenomenon that invariably produces audience suspense for the fate of a Western individual in the midst of a danger zone by using "native" bodies, undeveloped generic markers rather than actual characters, as code for the threat to the Western body.² In light of the proliferation of global inquiry and its accompanying violence, and of the complicity of media images in these processes, I continue to vigorously advance a challenge that cultural texts—even, especially, Hollywood blockbusters—expand their generic repertoire to include strategies typically perceived as experimental and currently utilized by filmmakers concerned with the ethics of representing extreme historical events, including those construed as terrorist in nature.

The argument that formulaic studio productions are driven by mass audience desire for familiar generic forms is a commonplace that seems to foreclose upon expansion of the market to accommodate "experimental" films.³ However, the seal of such circular logic may be opened by training our critical gaze upon the masses of twenty-first-century film-goers, including even the very young, well-

rained by immersion in their cultural milieus in the techniques of postmodern narrative and representation—the very strategies with which directors of cinematic texts most successful in advancing ethical frames for telling the muddled stories of pain and terror are experimenting. The contexts and goals of such techniques may differ, but some of the most basic postmodern strategies of fragmented storylines, temporal uncertainty, and shifting points of view, for instance, have been thoroughly interpellated as part of our fundamental encounters with texts. The point of my digression here is that representations that gesture toward the ethical arguments necessitated by the gravity of the events they reference or imagine do so by seeking a framework through which to transcend the bonds of identity difference informing such events, to enable viewers to fully imagine the humans that they encounter on screen who participate in or suffer from such events. Such frameworks most often diverge from formulaic genre pieces.

Clearly this is not to say that these strategies offer pat solutions to the problems of representation; however, if much dominant image production succumbs to generic forms that reproduce the identity formations informing power imbalance and the global distribution of violence, then alternate forms might consciously produce images of identity grounded in an ethic of human rights. To trace this ethic to its earliest origins in religious, philosophical, and political texts is to follow a strain of thought defining the “good” and the “right” as that which seeks to use divinely ordained human nature, individual reason, or some combination therein to compensate for gaps between the “powerful” and the “weak,” to protect relatively disempowered humans (in classical texts, the proverbial “stranger” or “foreigner”; in Enlightenment theory, the “Other”) from aggression and bodily harm. In the form with most promise in the post-World War II new world order—that is, the documents and conventions initiated by and following the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights—this ethic defines and protects the inherent dignity of all persons, regardless of status or identity. In terms of image production, then, narratives informed by an ethic of human rights might attempt to transcend the proscriptions of identity by redistributing full subjectivity and rights, thereby producing a concomitant relief of the prevailing postmodern sense of generic “exhaustion.”

Indeed, I will argue here that the power of Raoul Peck’s *Lumumba: La Mort du Prophète* may be attributed at least in part to its infusion of an ethic of human rights into a historical narrative that, with its rootedness in conflicts of race, class, and nation, could easily fall prey to fossilized depictions of identity structures housed in tired generic formulas. While it may seem paradoxical to argue that the introduction of a representational ethic into a cinematic text necessitates postmodern narrative strategies, it is precisely this combination that steers Peck’s film past the pitfalls of identity and image production that I have been discussing. The film’s reflexivity transmits a consciousness of the intrinsic instability of images and words—and thereby the impossibility of locating truths through them—and the

paradoxical, coeval necessity of creating alternative narratives to reclaim history and memory from erasure by dominant government and media sources. Thus, Peck’s metanarrative on image production rightly theorizes images and their circulation as inherently mythic and violent, particularly in their attachment to generic forms; however, it also offers a vision of their potential as vehicles for the imagination, for the imagining of humans. This essay will explore the latter point, advancing a reading of Peck’s film that highlights its activation of what I will call an ethical imagination. In particular, I will investigate postmodern representational strategies used to present an interpretive narrative about the violation of basic human rights and its legacy in the Congo through the lens of the “story” of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. I will focus upon two representational strategies in particular: the juxtaposition of images distanced from one another in real time and space, and the opening of gaps between image and narration. These strategies help audiences to be “made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation” (Nussbaum 1995, xvi) by particularizing aspects of human identity (race, class, gender, nation) while universalizing aspects of human experience (desire, pain). The ethical imagination in this context also animates the latent potential in the universalist language of human rights that has continually been nullified by violations based upon particularities of racial, class, gendered, and national identity.

Finally, a consideration of this film as an encounter between postmodern narrative structures and more traditional human rights theoretical perspectives situates my focus upon the concept of terror in its application to those constructed as terrorists and those who bear the brunt of terror—often, paradoxically, one and the same person. Specifically, the film names terror as the violation of human rights by colonialists, imperialists, Western diplomats, and their elite African partners over a long history of domination and brutality in the Congo, exposing the way in which the label *terrorist* was applied as an empty—or, perhaps, wildly overdetermined—signifier to the nation’s first and only elected prime minister to mask what history has revealed to be a collective assassination plot.

II. Telling the Story

The common critical characterization of *Lumumba: La Mort du Prophète* as a “film essay” is especially appropriate given that the film performs many of the most effective acrobatics of the postmodern essay, manipulating temporality, voice, and point-of-view to present a central thesis woven from multiple narrative strands.⁴ This central thesis transcends the structures of identity, as Peck asserts: “My main goal was neither to idealize Lumumba as a hero nor to denounce the CIA, the UN, and Belgium for their roles in his death. It was to make a film that would be of use to the future of Africa and the third world because it showed the

mechanism of power" (quoted in Taubin 2001). In this way, the film indicts buried [post]colonial violence (arguably the force behind the "mechanism of power" to which Peck refers) as source of the ever-widening neocolonial gap between first and third worlds; source of the uneven flow of resources that sustains this gap; and source of the inability of people to imagine one another as sentient beings, particularly across this gap.

The death of Patrice Lumumba is one of the more complex episodes in Cold War and imperialist histories, involving the conspiratorial plotting of Belgian and U.S. officials, accusations of partisanship and imperialist intervention on the part of the UN, and one of the worst political betrayals of postindependence African history (Joseph Mobutu's coup against Patrice Lumumba).⁵ Given Lumumba's status as symbol of the hope of a majority of Congolese people for a just and peaceful Congo liberated from the brutal tyranny of over a hundred years of Belgian rule, his assassination, especially the mystery that shrouded its circumstances and the whereabouts of his remains, was exquisitely traumatic. Indeed, the story of his murder might be read as emblematic of the multitude of murders and disappearances that marked both the colonial period of Belgian rule and the thirty-one years of Mobutu's dictatorship, as well as of the violence that has continued in the years of intertribal feuding since Mobutu was deposed. Especially given that the rebel group that overthrew Mobutu was headed by a former Lumumba supporter (Laurent Kabila, assassinated shortly after gaining power, whose son currently has a loose grip on the reins of power), many intellectuals both within and outside the region believe it is only by revisiting and tending to this earliest wound at the moment of independence that the Democratic Republic of Congo can live up to its name and achieve some measure of stability, prosperity, and justice.⁶

In *Lumumba: La Mort du Prophète*, Peck risks speaking the story of the unspeakable death of Patrice Lumumba (tortured, shot, dismembered, and burned) as part of an exhumation meant to move Congo out of the impasse rooted in his unsung bones. Such a serious task requires serious representational acuity, and Peck creates a narrative pastiche—one borrowing from the best of Latin American magic realism, European postmodernism, and Afro-Caribbean *oraliture*—that does a more significant justice to this story than a genre piece or standard documentary could. Virtually all critical review of the film has affirmed the efficacy of this technique. In his review in *African Arts*, Abdul-Karim Mustapha comments that the combination of film techniques "exemplifies the very antagonism intrinsic to the topic: no one genre, it seems, can best capture the truths and differentiated representations of Lumumba." Significantly, however, Mustapha asserts that *La Mort du Prophète* is "no avant-garde protestation from the metropole; it is, by its own modality of ethical relations, an attempt to define a completely new topography of memory in the postcolonial period, beyond literature and art, that accommodates the wisdom and anxieties of historical subjects" (1999, par. 8–9). Mustapha's point preempts the predictable critique that the film, inasmuch as it represents an instance of the postmodern narrative *metis* under increasing

critical fire for its impenetrability to the viewers it might address and its remove from the material realities it describes, might invite. It also invites us to consider what Mustapha terms the film's "modality of ethical relations," which I interpret as the specific grounding of its ethical imagination in the tenets of human rights.

In her work on the literary imagination and public life, Martha Nussbaum defends "the literary imagination precisely because it seems . . . an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (1995, xvi). For Nussbaum, this literary imagination is as defensible as legal, economic, and other forms of "rational" public discourse about the good and the right, a necessary component of that discourse precisely because "our society is full of refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion, refusals from which none of us is free" (xvii). I will quote from Nussbaum at length:

Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves . . . literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences. In their very mode of address to their imagined reader, they convey the sense that there are links of possibility, at least on a very general level, between the characters and the reader. The reader's emotions and imagination are highly active as a result, and it is the nature of this activity, and its relevance for public thinking, that interests me. (5)

For my part, Nussbaum's reference to action (*active*, *activity*—or for my purposes here, *activate*) is central to my thesis that narrative—literary and cinematic—can encode an ethical imagination. It is precisely this imaginative activity, engaging at once the emotions and the intellect, which distinguishes the ethical imagination from the emotionally slippery (and often quite suspect) identification produced by empathy. In its formal definition, empathy implies the "power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation" (*Oxford English Dictionary* online). The problem here is that one's personality may overwhelm the "object of contemplation"; as Saidiya Hartman has compellingly argued in the context of abolitionism, the evocation of empathy as an activist strategy meant effectively erasing the suffering of the "object" (in this case, the slave), replacing her with the subject's imagining of her own body in pain. Such obliteration of the subject, of the corporeal experience of that subject, nullifies the ethic of human rights in its attention to the particularities of individual bodily experiences of harm.

Significant to my discussion here is the fact that early usage of the term focused specifically upon empathy as the function necessary to the contemplation of art. Applying a postmodern accent to Nussbaum's argument, then, we might entertain the notion that stories of power imbalances couched in standard generic formulas—the sentimental novel or adventure film, for instance—produce an empathic response in viewers, one that might induce a sense of fellow-feeling with the text and its characters, while leaving those power imbalances essentially

untouched in larger intellectual or material contexts. On the other hand, an ethical imagination induced by a text that invigorates standard narrative procedures such as point-of-view and temporality requires emotional and intellectual activity on the part of the viewer. Ideally, this activity would extend beyond a projection of the viewer's personality into the text in an empathic or sympathetic identification that incites pity for those who suffer violations of their human rights in the film while simultaneously directing the viewer to identify with the position of power in the film according to generic interpretive cues.

Such activation is especially important given that the ethical imagination I analyze here is grounded in a notion of human rights that competes with other "ethical imaginations" relevant to the subjects of terror and torture; in particular, those produced in dominant discourses and generic forms. Narratives and images activating the kind of ethical imagination that I envision here remain nondominant and relatively "experimental" as compared with the circulation of images of terror in dominant discourses in both media and policy-making realms—not to mention as those two realms overlap and reinforce one another. The most obvious current example of an ethical imagination activated by a complex weave of dominant media and policy discourses delivered in a variety of generic forms is the one evoked by the Bush administration's "War on Terror." This narrative, as *unethical* as critics might find it, evokes nothing if not a discourse of *ethics* in its language of good versus evil, of destruction versus civilization, and its effects are infinitely more far-reaching, pragmatic, and consequential than those of the kinds of texts I analyze here. At the risk of staging yet another apocalyptic battle (between "good" ethical narratives and "bad" ethical narratives), let me simply state the obvious: that the role and function of all such narratives are particularly slippery in their contributions to the complex processes by which we make meaning in the so-called age of information. However, it is worthy of note that much dominant media/policy discourse that evokes an ethical imagination with regard to the subject of terror in the post-9/11 moment relies precisely upon those generic forms and identity structures that the ethical imagination I analyze in Peck's work seeks to transcend. In this case, the ethical imagination activated by a combination of postmodern narrative strategies and human rights tenets, instigates, finally, a negotiation of and for meaning—rather than offering a received narrative truth—within a text that provides interpretive clues to viewers based upon a revelation of the mechanisms of power in the context of human rights frameworks.

III. Closing the Gap: Time, Space, and Image

Peck's image work enacting such ethical imagination occurs early in the film. Panning the camera in tight close-up over a still photo of a meeting featuring Lumumba in a group of mostly white men, Peck narrates his imagined version of

the events and people captured there. "I can't help wondering what these people are doing here," he tells us, as the camera scans the faces in the photo. "Some appear bored, some are there by coincidence, others against their will. A strange Flemish painting: The Press Conference." Notice the slippage from the speculative ("wondering") to the declarative ("some appear") mode of telling, indicating the critical entry of the narrator into the world of the image in the way that Nussbaum envisions. On the one hand, this technique highlights the unreliability of the image in conveying stable information to its witnesses, crucial for the film's project of exposing the quality of *certainity* characterizing preemptive counterterrorist narratives, advanced as inherently stable in their naming of perceived threats and providing the basis for violent ("defensive") action. On the other hand, once we have determined and accepted this unreliability, we are free to imagine humans occupying a variety of subject positions *as* humans, with foibles and strengths, hopes and dreams, yet connected in their humanness (universality) and in their individuality (particularity). My presumption that the imagining made possible in this context is for the "good," avoiding the erasure of experience to which the empathic relationship is vulnerable, is founded in the location of interpretive cues in Peck's text that direct viewers to perceive humans in their relationship to mechanisms of power, as opposed to through the lens of familiar structures of identity that delimit our ability to identify the humans we encounter on screen *as human*. Peck's imagined repositioning of the documentary image (photo) into an artistic tradition (the Flemish painting) also highlights the mode of address that he envisions for the other documentary images viewers will encounter in the film: the identification occasioned by the event that is art, by the production of an imagined universe connecting artist, viewer, and text in that highly emotive, intellectual potentiality posited by Nussbaum and furthered by the utilization of a variety of narrative and generic forms.

Later in the film, Peck turns his camera to another historical photo. This time it is a colonial-era image of white and black workers posed around an old wooden building. I reproduce the narration in its entirety here:

Looking at these photos, I ask myself what these faces might hide. What dream, what secret, do these men have in common. This one bears his wife, this one too. This one is a strict Christian, but an incorrigible gambler. This one loves music, but prefers to get drunk on palm wine. This one dreams of sailing to the country of the whites he admires. This one would like to be a cook, or at least a soldier. This one cannot read, but pays for his eldest son to study at the University of Louvain. And then the others . . . they too have their dreams, their illusions, their destiny, all reunited by chance in this faded photograph. Reunited through a king's ambition.

During this voice-over narration, the camera pans steadily across the photo without zooming in on any individual until quite late in the scene. The deictic "this" one or "that," unanchored in an individual human of a particular race in this historical document of a moment when race was a crucial determinant of one's fate,

embodies the kind of universality imagined in twenty-first-century international human rights frameworks: the universal attribution of the complexities of human desire to individuals as they operate within groups without distinguishing based upon membership in that group.

Again, Peck's entrance into these images as the narrative voice that activates them resists some of the pitfalls of imagining others commonly associated with empathic identification. For instance, the camera refuses to focus upon any one man when describing failings, weaknesses, or violence (those he imagines beating their wives; the Christian gambler; the music-lover who succumbs to the lures of palm wine); however, it zooms in for close-ups when describing the men's dreams, the source of a positive shared humanity (sailing away to a different country; becoming a cook or soldier; sending a son to study at university). In each of these instances, the imaginings of the narrator counteract (by complicating) the preemptive reading of humans according to the historically grounded racial or class positions they seem to occupy at first glance: the camera/narration reveals the interpellation of a black man into the culture of the colonizer via his dream of "sailing away" to the country of the whites he admires; the pragmatism of the black man who dreams of holding a certain position—with a potential backup plan—within the economic schema available under colonial administration; and the desire of the white man, whose privilege in relation to the black workers in the photo is compromised by his class position, for the common dream of providing a better life for his child. Finally, the narration makes clear that what these men share, what their faces hide, is in part determined by the (otherwise hidden) workings of power: the sway of their lives according to the whim of a greedy king.

Even as Peck complicates the notion of guilt and innocence based upon identity categories by individualizing historical and contemporary Belgians and Africans in terms of the humanness of their desire, the juxtaposition of image and narration, the cue given to viewers to look beneath the images and narratives of individual humans to find the obscure mechanisms of power that so often structure lives and events, presents the desire of the film itself: to create a narrative of justice and human rights from the competing stories—from Europe and Africa, past and present—that work to obscure them. It is precisely this point, the palpability of this desire, literally, on the part of the text, that Karim-Abdul Mustapha identified in his exploration of the "modality of ethical relations" in the film: here are the "wisdom and anxieties of historical subjects," presented in and accommodated by the ethical imagination activated by the film's postmodern narrative speculations.

IV. Opening the Gap: Image and Narration

The second major strategy utilized by Peck to enact an ethical imagination able to interrogate some of our most commonly held assumptions about the distribu-

tion of pain and, alternatively, of human rights in a global context is the split between image and narration. In this technique, the screen images do not correspond to the substance of the narration, or the narration is voiced to a black screen. While this technique is employed throughout the film, I will focus here upon the scenes that describe the aftermath of the torture and murder of Lumumba. This strategy achieves two effects: first, it draws attention to narratives that have begun to take on the force of myth such that the particularities of their construction over time—how the dominant versions of these events ultimately transcend or stand in for the events themselves and what those dominant versions hide, the specificity of their myriad connections to other events; and perhaps even the kernels of their truths—are lost. Second, the split between image and narration draws attention to what many scholars of human rights describe using the concept of the *unspeakable*, that is, atrocities so horrific that they cannot be imaged or spoken without denigrating their victims and survivors.⁷ Using this strategy allows Peck to observe an ethic of witnessing with regard to atrocity inasmuch as he does not show the violence itself but rather describes it or questions it, using image not to reinforce or "tell" the violence so much as to provide a lexicon of symbols that draws viewer attention to its origins and effects.

One element in this lexicon is the anonymous European faces that appear throughout the film in the streets of a pointedly cold, white, wintry Brussels; these faces populate the film's narration of the assassination of Lumumba. This scene is climactic not only for its manifest content, but also because it signals the moment, much hailed throughout the film, when Patrice returns from the dead to "tickle the feet of the guilty." In thinking about this "return," it is helpful to turn to critic Jeanne Garane, who situates the film in the context of independent African diasporic cinema that, in spite of its postmodern techniques of image production, participates in "an esthetics of orality" (2001, 151). Specifically, "in using the camera to bear witness, Peck imprints documentary form with a Haitian 'creole' version of orality that succeeds in giving voice to the dead paragon of African Independence through a metaphoric 'resuscitation' and 'possession' reminiscent of certain Haitian *vodou* practices" (157). Lumumba, "the prophet," enacts the ancestral return through bodily possession characteristic of *vodou*; Garane argues that "indeed, 'the prophet's' invisible presence progressively invades or 'possesses' the film, as a *loa* would a human body" (158). This possession culminates at the end of the film, when Peck finally narrates the story of Lumumba's assassination.

"Shhhhhh" Peck cautions, as his camera watches a group of small children pass by in Brussels. "This is not for their ears." And so we wait in silence with the camera until these inappropriate witnesses pass. This introduction to the explicit narrative of Lumumba's physical experience of torture and death invokes Peck's ethical position with regard to speaking the unspeakable, a position that is furthered by the split between the narration and the screen images. The assassination is narrated in reverse order: first, the exhumation, dismemberment, and dissolution of the body parts in acid, then the murder itself. This reversal may be

read through the lens of the film's emphasis upon history, memory, and human rights, first, as it positions the murderers' destruction of memory and history via the desecration of Lumumba's remains as an act of terror with massive consequences for an entire nation well into the future; and second, as it identifies that desecration as perhaps the most cogent indicator of the utter disregard for and violation of Lumumba's innate dignity, which is the foundation of universal human rights in the modern era.⁸

As Peck narrates the details of this exhumation, viewers witness a black-tie party in contemporary Brussels. The camera passes through the formal receiving line, the voices of the party-goers muted in the background. Peck intones: "They dig up the body, they cut, they saw, they burn. They get drunk on whisky. Most of the corpse's parts are dissolved by the acid," while his camera witnesses the flow of champagne into flutes at the bar, the guests sipping. The gap opened between the images and the narration holds the suggestion of complicity, of collective responsibility, at the film's center. The wealth and comfort (symbolized by the champagne with its indexical connection to the petrol and acid described in the voice-over) enjoyed by the guests at this party, by the masses of anonymous Europeans we have witnessed over the course of the film, is supported, the scene suggests, by the exploitation and death of Congolese people. Patrice Lumumba died so that the lifestyle of these Europeans—and that of their North American allies and elite African partners—could continue, uninterrupted, fueled by the neocolonial relations that Joseph Mobutu would secure over the thirty years of his dictatorship. In this narration that refuses the temptation of fulfilling audience desire for the self-referential spectacle of violence, Peck rescues Lumumba's death from the sensationalized media mythology that has swallowed the particularities of his bodily experience. The film retrieves, re-presents, and bears witness to Patrice Lumumba's suffering, his loss of dignity, simultaneously indicting as his murderers the currents of power, the overwhelming desires for profit, and the seemingly infinite varieties of human cruelty and brutality that characterize imperialist history.

V. Whose Terror?

To complicate my earlier comments regarding the relative (in)consequence of "nondominant" narratives such as Peck's in the whirlwind of government and media accounts of terror circulating in the public sphere, I hasten to note that Raoul Peck's Lumumba films, released in 1993 and 2000, respectively, have been critically considered alongside Ludo de Witte's 1999 study of Lumumba's assassination as catalysts for a Belgian parliamentary inquiry into the circumstances of Lumumba's death that resulted in a formal apology to the Congolese people and to the members of Lumumba's family. Indeed, Brian Uryuhart, assistant to UN

Undersecretary Ralph Bunche at the time of Lumumba's election and subsequent assassination, uses a review of the book together with Peck's second Lumumba film, the biopic *Lumumba* (2001), as a platform against which to reassert the well-circulated (dominant) narrative of Lumumba as a dangerous, quick-tempered demagogue with whom international diplomatic personnel were unable to work in rational terms:

Lumumba became increasingly autocratic, mercurial, and irresponsible. He frightened and alienated his government colleagues and . . . made them receptive . . . to Belgian and other intrigues against him . . . We had hoped to work with him but . . . Lumumba preferred abusive rhetoric, ultimatums, threats, and demands for instant results and threatened the UN operation with violent expulsion and bloodshed after he appealed to the Soviet Union for military assistance. (2001, 7)

Uryuhart's statement represents the rhetorical mix of character flaws and political faux pas that brewed the myth of Lumumba as communist/terrorist threat. In this construction we witness the epistemological paradox at the heart of the term *terror*: source of and justification for some of the most consequential political, military, and policy decisions, it is impossible to grasp in concrete terms, to know. As Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass argue, "terrorist signifiers are free-floating, and their meanings derive from language itself" (1996, xi). Careful reading of Uryuhart's comments indicates that it is Patrice Lumumba's character failings (autocracy? mercurial-ness? irresponsibility?) rather than concrete acts that "frighten" his government colleagues such that they are *made to be receptive* to intrigue (read: assassination plots). As in many dominant narratives of communism and/or terrorism, agency with regard to violent action is removed from the historical actors, discursively re-placed as blame upon the historical victim of the ultimate human rights violation. This discursive process was initiated at least in part because the language used to describe Patrice Lumumba during and just after his "meteoric rise to power," hyperbolic in both its positive and negative charges, invariably signified *threat*, a category central to terrorism discourse. The question is, threat to whom? Threat to what? What threat? Who was afraid of Patrice Lumumba?

La Mort du Prophète offers a clear answer to that question by identifying the sources of power in the region at the moment of Congo's independence: the United States, Belgium, and, to a lesser extent, the UN (certainly not, the film argues, Patrice Lumumba, man or prime minister). Who wasn't afraid of Patrice Lumumba? Joseph Mobutu, just the man for these international entities to arm, support, and prop up in place of Lumumba, who would be "neutralized" by African henchmen under their half-averted eyes. This narrative is certainly not original, as Zulaika and Douglass assert, the scenario of U.S. support for tyrants and dictators in place of democratically elected but socialist-leaning governments was typical of Cold War foreign policy: "If the dictator was a beast, he was our

least on our leash and with little potential for contaminating his neighbors, whereas the political metaphor regarding the terrorist/Communist possibility was the feared "domino effect" (1996, 21). The infinite irony—and sorrow—is that the beast of choice (Mobutu) remained anywhere but on his leash over the next thirty years, and the "contamination" he produced is still being witnessed in violent insurgencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and its neighbors, Rwanda and Uganda.

Not surprisingly, the language of eliminating the threat (e.g., the discourse of "counterterror") is as unstable as the threat ("terror") itself, as evidenced by comments of the cabinet director of the Belgian Liberal Reforming Party interviewed in *La Mort du Prophète*:

During December there is a feeling which crystallizes at all levels that if we want to see a government capable of governing at Leopoldville we have to neutralize Lumumba. In my mind the term neutralize can mean house arrest, for others expatriation, for others liquidation . . . At that time there was nobody to take the decision to liquidate the former Prime Minister. We all wanted him to leave to prevent no further danger to those in the center of things, that is to say, President Kasa Vubu.

The slippage in the term *neutralize* here is chilling enough without considering the nonbalance regarding the referent upon which it might settle; in spite of the casual nature of the cabinet minister's etymological meanderings, *house arrest* is a far cry from the *liquidation* he so weakly disavows. Of import to our discussion here is the admonition that Lumumba be neutralized in order that he present no "further danger to those in the center of things." While the phrase is qualified in its reference to the notorious puppet of the West, Kasa Vubu, "those in the center of things" nicely suggests the problems and pitfalls of those "centers" of power and domination in the name of which so many atrocities have been historically committed: the metropolis and the mainstream.

Significant to any discussion of terror in the context of Western policy in Africa in the 1960s is the Cold War, and the blurred distinction between the categories *communist* and *terrorist*. If Patrice Lumumba was perceived as a threat, it was a communist threat, a term that had, in Cold War parlance, become increasingly conflated with the nomenclature of terrorism. The fear that Lumumba would turn to the Soviet Union for support against the internal and external forces arrayed against him ultimately justified the CIA plot to assassinate Lumumba with a poisoned tube of toothpaste. In the exhausted real-life formula of the Cold War intelligence intrigue, this plot was thickened (and foiled or aided, depending upon who tells the story) by Mobutu's preemptive delivery of Lumumba into the hands of his Katangese enemies, a move that meant certain death for Lumumba after a period of several days of torture and humiliation. It is instructive in this context to consider the dominant, lingering Cold War narrative of the communist threat as a plea to an ethical imagination that competes with the one I describe in

this essay, minus the investment in the basic rights of humans. For those assigned to neutralize Lumumba (as for so many other governmental, military, and extralegal agents throughout history who have "just followed orders" according to an ethically charged policy narrative of security, protection, and the "good" life for citizens), the assassination attempt would be legitimated precisely by the activation of an ethical discourse of (defending) democracy and freedom (or, more precisely, capitalism). What such ethical imaginaries fail to recognize is the extent to which they slip into the language and tactics of terror(ism) themselves (witness the poisoned toothpaste), thereby undercutting the foundations of democracy in the rule of law that they (often) seek to defend. The human rights-based ethical imagination activated by Peck's film exposes this paradox, the lie of "counterterrorism" perpetrated through terrorist methods, naming the violations of rights by government agents *as* violations, a project closely linked to imagining the victims of those violations *as* human.

Ultimately, then, what Peck's film accomplishes in ways that histories such as De Witte's and polemical apologies like Uquart's cannot is a critique of the media construction of terror that reveals how dominant forces including Belgium and the United States used images to create a narrative of Lumumba as a "terrorist" threat and in turn used terror to alleviate that threat. Speaking from an ethos of human rights, the narrative of "the Lumumba story" indicates that the practice of terror in Leopold Congo, 1960—that is, documented instances of torture and murder, rather than its as yet unrealized threat—can be traced to the forces who claimed an investment in its "neutralization": the United States, the UN, and the Belgians.⁹

Considered from this vantage point, *La Mort du Prophète* may be analyzed in its entirety as an argument about media complicity (including the filmmaker's own) in creating and perpetrating the kinds of narratives of terror that produced the suffering of Lumumba; however, the scene that most explicitly addresses this process and its effects occurs just after Peck shares with his viewers the fact that Mobutu's Secret Service has made it impossible for him to film in Zaïre. "Black holes, images in my head," Peck ruminates, "Are these black holes more corrosive than the images they hide? There are images . . . and those that make them." This meditation upon the ethics of images and their production accompanies the camera as it pans through a hotel lobby to zero in on a TV screen bearing a montage of highly familiar generic images—romance, fight scenes, car chases—that seems to gain speed and dramatic weight as the sequence continues, ending with a point-blank shooting that cuts quickly to an image of actor Nicholas Cage, arms spread wide, head thrown back, screaming in a way that, though silenced on the sound track, seems emblematic of the frenzied, undistinguishable roar that is, finally, the media construction of its "events." As the montage progresses, the narrator tells us: "Some journalists wrote Lumumba, the go-getter dictator. The first Negro of the so-called state. Mister Uranium. The Elvis Presley of African politics. The crazy Prime Minister. They wrote: The ambitious manipulator. The push

politician. The negro with the goatse beard. Lumumba the dwarf. The apprentice dictator. Half-charlatan, half-missionary." The scene indicts reportage about Lumumba as a kind of fictionalized genre study, a dramatic narrative presented as truth and fueling the real-life truth and consequences of the cloak-and-dagger drama that resulted in Lumumba's death. Later, the camera rests momentarily upon a poster with an uncanny resemblance to a cinematic publicity shot that bears the bold title *LA MORT DU DIABLE* ("death of the devil") as a frame to Lumumba's visage. It is this cinematic construction of Lumumba as devil that Peck signifies—and seeks to transform—with his title *La Mort du Prophète*.

Directly after this montage, Peck asserts, "30 lost years. One day we will have to start again at zero." At the end of this intonation, the camera cuts once again to black: a silent space, a suspension in time. This conception of a historical event as a wound rupturing time and forestalling the possibility of progress also accounts for the film's title, its characterization of Lumumba as prophet. As Peck asserts in the opening of the film, "A prophet foretells the future. But the future has died with the prophet. Whatever is said." This introductory material, part of a sequence before the film's title credits that offers an overview of metaphors and tropes employed in the film's project, provides an early indication of the film's focus upon the unreliability of historical media accounts: "Whatever is said" (emphasis mine). Viewers hear a great deal about culpability and blame from different quarters over the course of the film, but in this rare moment of assertion, the filmmaker articulates the argument driving his text: that unless the memory of Lumumba is restored from the morass of myth and, with the passage of time, from erasure, and unless the circumstances of his death with their deep relevance to ongoing global politics and economics are revealed, the Congo will continue to stumble over the legacy of its earliest national trauma. As perhaps the only moment of such certainty in the film—the overarching strategy of which is to suggest connection, critique, and argument through the juxtaposition of images, narration, interviews, and voice-over questioning—it therefore carries some weight as an explanation of the film's ethos.

VI. Cue-ing Up

The prioritization of this perspective upon history and memory as an interpretive cue for viewers is most clearly identified in one of the film's narrative threads, offered to viewers as knowledge passed in oral form from Peck's mother, which I will examine here as a final means of analyzing the combination of oral storytelling and postmodern narrative forms that enables the film to call our attention to the particularities of individual identity and, simultaneously, to the universality of human experience in the form of our higher-order credentials of desire, hope, love, pain. Critic Prerada Reddy has argued that this particular narrative strain is

not "privileged over other accounts" in the film precisely because of the overall reliance upon postmodern representational strategies that destabilize the film's historical narrative (Reddy 2003, par. 3). However, I would argue that the information viewers receive as an indirect narration from Peck's mother is charged with a certain political value unavailable in the more traditional documentary narrative. Significantly, this narrative is radical in its unbinding of the traditional gendered split between private and public knowledge. That is, rather than being the kind of wisdom proverbially passed from mothers to children in the so-called private sphere about how to live, how to conduct one's life and make one's home, the information conveyed in this narrative is highly public, deeply politicized. The various threads of this narrative reach back to tell the story of colonialism and extend past Lumumba's assassination to expose later brutalities committed by the Mobutu regime. The narratives introduced with the line "My mother told me . . ." are spread throughout the film; however, examined in sequence, they provide a cohesive narrative of the transformation of colonial violence into the neocolonial brutality and betrayal of the postindependence era. Peck's mother, who worked for local administrators in Leopoldville, "told" him, respectively:

- about the Berlin Conference of 1888, featuring a king so greedy that "he was offered the Congo in the hope that he would choke trying to swallow such a big cake."
- about the imperial tactics of Belgian rule that led to nationalist independence movements ("the way the Belgians rule is simple: Treat the Negroes well, but keep them stupid. But they rebel at this stupidity and become nationals").
- about precolonial Africa ("In the kingdom of Nsunga, savages thought themselves happy. A few centuries later, missionaries told them they were not. Then the colonials arrived").
- about the building of the Ocean-Congo railroad by Belgium and its staggering death toll ("they say that the Matadi railroad at Leopoldville cost the lives of a whole province. A Negro for every sleeper, a white for every kilometer").
- about independence ("the conquest of the Congo will be bloodier than the Berlin Conference").
- about Lumumba's downfall ("Lumumba has been dismissed by the man whom he made President").
- about the violence of postcolonial nationalism ("the big spring clean . . . my boss in 1965 is a military governor. One day he asks me to type the following order: a rope, black cloth, and some wood. It was time to leave this office").

In contrast to the pains taken by Peck to reveal historical narrative from "official" public sources as contradictory, subjective to the point of bias, and designed to conceal more than they reveal, the narratives introduced by Peck's mother provide the opposite: a stable, chronological narrative that highlights connections among historical events and steadfastly opposes brutality from any quarter.

Employing the strategies of oral storytelling—the repetition, the ironic turns on language, the use of trope and metaphor—this thread of the film privileges a moral position delivered in an Afro-Caribbean narrative tradition representative of Peck's own heritage. Considered in tandem with the other narrative threads, the effect as a whole is of a postmodern text that decenters linear time and point-of-view in order to reveal the instability of historical narrative. However, the film's broad postmodern cast is also undone with the repeated return of this highly conscious, chronological historical narrative delivered from the authoritative figure of the mother, signifying the moral weight of the populist African position on the subjects of colonialism and neocolonial corruption.

To underscore this point, let us not forget that the film in its entirety is offered as a warning to the mother figure about the untruth of official history as recorded in popular media sources. In the film's opening montage, the story is introduced with an epigraph taken from a poem by Henri Lopes entitled "Du Core du Katanga," which is repeated again at the film's close: "In Katanga, it is said that a giant fell in the night . . ." In the opening, however, this invocation is elaborated: "In Katanga, if one tells you mother, pointing with the finger: this is the spot where the lost child lies, don't believe a word, mother, not a word . . . It was a giant, my mother, a giant who fell in the night, that night in Katanga." The narration of the entire film, then, is a corrective to the misinformation so infamously circulated in official and dominant media versions of history. It is also a corrective to the idea of Lumumba as the "lost child" posited by colonialist narratives about their colonies. As Bill Ashcroft asserts, "Long before the surge of Orientalist discourse in the late eighteenth century, the colonized other was represented in terms of tropes which invariably justified imperial rule, no matter how benign it saw itself to be. In this process, no trope has been more tenacious and more far-reaching than that of the child" (2001, 36). Peck's film reveals the mythological signification of the colonial subject as child, as well as the way the tropes of irrationality and childlike impetuosity were transmogrified into the trope of the terrorist threat, mobilized against Lumumba precisely to demobilize his brief political career in a "liquidation" that continues to reverberate today. In its poetic opening lines, the film transforms this trope into another, that of the giant—perhaps the mythical giant of the oral tale or the popular giant of mass political appeal. Stepping back from the realm of myth and other dominant narrative forms, we find that Lumumba is in fact the giant over whose fallen body history is unable to pass—that is, without an imaginative engagement grounded in an ethic of the basic rights of all humans, regardless of the particulars of identity, to life and freedom.

NOTES

1. See Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. Of relevance to my arguments here, Scarry asserts elsewhere that the ability to imagine other humans distant from oneself in time and space is, in prag-

matic terms, quite limited. See "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People." While Scarry's argument is highly compelling (and well worth addressing in another essay), I proceed here from the idea shared within the human rights community that humans are capable of imagining other humans at least in such a way that they may be moved to actively engage with the project of lessening human suffering. One indication of the centrality of this idea to human rights activism is Amnesty International's adoption of John Lennon's popular song "Imagine" as the major emblem of its 2003–2004 worldwide campaigns.

2. See Goldberg.

3. I call the reader's attention to the term *experimental* here in order to question whether in fact what once qualified as experimental, avant-garde, or esoteric might currently fall under the increasingly familiarized heading *postmodern*.

4. See Mustapha, Rosenstone, Urquhart.

5. See Edgar, DeWitte, and Wrong for historical accounts of the Congo from the colonial era to the present.

6. In keeping with this view, prompted in part by Ludo de Witte's influential and controversial book revealing the details of Lumumba's assassination, the Belgian Parliament recently undertook an investigation of Belgian complicity with Lumumba's death, resulting in an apology to the members of Lumumba's family and to the people of the Congo. See DeWitte, Weissman. The U.S. Congress also recently investigated the involvement of the CIA in the plot to assassinate Lumumba, although despite acknowledgment of the existence of said plot, no apology was forthcoming. See U.S. Congress, Senate Report.

7. See Friedlander for extensive discussion of this point.

8. It is not insignificant that the violation of bodily remains becomes the focal point of this "story" in its ethical aspect; indeed, this wrong as the ultimate outrage against humankind recalls early records of ethical imaginings about honor, dignity, and duty—and ultimately about what constitutes ethical treatment of humans even in the extremities war or "terror"—in classical Western texts such as *Antigone* and *The Iliad*, to name just two.

9. The issue of responsibility for violence in the heady days of African decolonization is too complex to address here; certainly in the case of the Congo, uprisings of its military, the Force Publique, and of civilians resulting in violence against Belgians contributed to the overall climate of violence. However, my assertion here has to do with naming as human rights violation that violence disavowed by state actors.

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Allen Feldman Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror

Such the confusion now between the real—how say the contrary? No matter. That old tandem. Such now the confusion between them once twain.

—Samuel Beckett¹

One of the few photographs I associate with my fieldwork in Northern Ireland shows a burly mustached man in a tank top, wearing aviation sunglasses. He proudly displays a photograph of a woman seated at a desk cluttered with papers, an ashtray, and a telephone. Her eyes smile at the camera lens; her friendliness is contrasted to the almost ominous dark background. He is the author of this second image. The picture within the picture is notable for its high definition; in its expert use of lit foreground and darkened background—creating perspectival depth—it is a competent example of visual realism. I use the latter term following John Tagg as pertaining to the evidentiary, typified, and mimetic dimension of photography: a core attribute that established its privileged claim on truth, facticity, and intelligibility.² This picture is a souvenir that I needed to bring home, for it communicates a visual ideology that permeates the structure and experience of political violence in Northern Ireland.

Scopes

Among my raw data from fieldwork in Belfast such firsthand photographic artifacts are rare.³ Photography in the policed zones of working-class Belfast has been a dangerous avocation throughout the conflict. The photo lens of the armed camera is considered equivalent to both the gun sight and the pointed rifle. The British Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, even the Belfast fire department react angrily and precipitously if they find a camera pointed at their bodies and activities. The police and army have been known to rip film out of cameras and arrest foreign photojournalists. The security apparatus claims that photographs of state

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