

## Ethics, universality and vulnerability in Abderrahmane Sissako's Bamako (2006) and Timbuktu (2014)

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**Ethics, universality and vulnerability in Abderrahmane  
Sissako's *Bamako* (2006) and *Timbuktu* (2014)**

**KATE INCE**

**Abstract**

This article adds philosopher Judith Butler to the list of thinkers whose work underpins the interest in ethics and/in film that began in earnest in the 2000s. Beginning with *Precarious Life: Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler has published several volumes that blend ethical thinking with moral theory and political philosophy, focusing on the concepts of precariousness and vulnerability. This article suggests that two films directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, *Bamako* (2006) and *Timbuktu* (2014), as dramas of precariousness and vulnerability respectively, can inform thinking about cinematic ethics: the staging of a trial of global institutions in *Bamako* dramatizes the possible universalization of an ethic of precarity, while in *Timbuktu*, the condemnation to death of a Tuareg shepherd by Ansar Dine, the militant Islamist group that occupied parts of Mali in 2012, allows Sissako to give full rein to his talent for filming the vulnerability of both victims and oppressors.

The so-called 'ethical turn' in the humanities that gathered pace in the 1990s began to engage productively with film studies during the decade that followed. The death of Emmanuel Levinas in 1995 doubtless contributed to new directions taken by ethical thinking at around that time, so it is appropriate that one of the first books on ethics and/in film was Sarah Cooper's study *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary*,<sup>1</sup> rapidly followed up by 'The Occluded Relation. Levinas and Cinema',<sup>2</sup> an issue of the online journal *Film-Philosophy* Cooper produced out of a conference organized at London's Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies. A number of books about film and ethics followed that have engaged the thinking of a wide range of philosophers: Jane Stadler's *Pulling Focus*,<sup>3</sup> which draws particularly on the work of Martha Nussbaum and Vivian Sobchack; Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton's *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*,<sup>4</sup> which treats the work of Lacan, Žižek, Badiou and Foucault as well as Levinas and Derrida; Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey's wide-ranging edited volume *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice and Spectatorship*,<sup>5</sup> and Robert Sinnerbrink's *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film*.<sup>6</sup> Levinas, of course, was not himself a philosopher of film, and Foucault and Lacan only qualify for this status to a limited degree, so it is perhaps not surprising that the growing literature on film and ethics – Sinnerbrink's *Cinematic Ethics* is a prime example – tends to privilege two philosophers who have actually devoted volumes to film and cinema, Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. Absent from any of these books is consideration of the work in ethics of one of the most influential philosophers of the last twenty-five years, Judith Butler, whose feminist philosophy and theory of the 1990s transformed

gender studies and played a major part in the establishment and growth of queer theory. Butler's gender-related publications up to and including *Undoing Gender* (2004) may indeed not be relevant to consideration of the ethical turn and its integration into film-philosophy and film studies, but starting with her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*,<sup>7</sup> a set of five essays written after the New York terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 'and in response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from those events',<sup>8</sup> she has published a series of books that blend ethical thinking with political theory and moral philosophy, *Giving an account of oneself* (2005), *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* (2009), *Parting ways: Jewishness and the critique of Zionism* (2012), and *Senses of the subject* (2015).<sup>9</sup> An engagement with film and visual media is promised by Butler in the preface to *Precarious Life* when she says of Levinas, 'Through a cultural transposition of his philosophy, it is possible to see how dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended'.<sup>10</sup> This article will not engage in a critique of the mainstreaming of representations of violence, or dwell on the turn to Levinasian ethics Butler made in *Precarious Life* and developed in her own terms in *Frames of War*: it will, rather, consider how the ethics Butler formulated out of Levinas's de-centred humanism in her writings of the 2000s can inform and be informed by Abderrahmane Sissako's screening of the injustices faced by the populations of developing countries in *Bamako* (2006) and *Timbuktu* (2014).

### ***Butler's ethics of precariousness and vulnerability***

The concepts Butler develops most fully in her ethical writings are precariousness and vulnerability. Precariousness is a term Levinas uses explicitly in the essay 'Peace and Proximity', in one of his commentaries on how the face – his figure for the ethical demand made on me by the other – 'is not exclusively a human face': it can be figured by other parts of the human body and is also said to consist of the sounds of suffering and agony, to constitute 'an utterance that is not, strictly speaking, linguistic'.<sup>11</sup> In Butler's description, it is 'a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense, the sonorous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of any semantic sense'.<sup>12</sup> She continues

At the end of this description, Levinas appends the following lines, which do not quite accomplish the sentence form: "The face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakesness to the precariousness of the other" (PP 167). Both statements are similes, and they both avoid the verb, especially the copula. They do not say that the face *is* that precariousness, or that peace *is* the mode of being awake to an Other's precariousness. Both phrases are substitutions that refuse any commitment to the order of being. Levinas tells us, in fact, that "humanity is a rupture of being".<sup>13</sup>

Butler draws attention here to how Levinas's remarks about the face perform the suspension and rupture of the order of being that the concept describes. She then sums up her interpretation of Levinas by writing 'To respond to the

face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life, or, rather, the precariousness of life itself'.<sup>14</sup> On the words 'or, rather' in this sentence hangs the move to universalizing precarity that Butler makes in her 2009 set of essays *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?*, whose final essay 'The Claim of Non-Violence' returns particularly to Levinas and the objective of "[thinking] through what an ethic of Jewish non-violence might be",<sup>15</sup> that she began in 'Precarious Life'. One of the issues Butler is interested in in *Frames of War*, therefore, is what might be called a post-secular ethics (an ethic of Jewish non-violence or a Jewish ethic of non-violence), but she does also discuss the generalization of an ethic of non-violence beyond the conflict in the Middle East that is her particular focus. The lives of the Africans Sissako films in *Bamako* and *Timbuktu* are every bit as questionably grievable as the victims of the wars in Iraq and the Middle East Butler has mainly been concerned with in her recent writings, and it is this shared status of questionable 'validity' – who 'counts' as human and grievable in wars and regional conflicts, and who does not? – that makes her conceptualization of precariousness and vulnerability a suitable approach to Sissako's film dramas. Sissako foregrounds this connectedness to non-fictional hardships in *Bamako* and makes no attempt to disguise it in *Timbuktu*.

It is what she sees as Butler's vacillation and contradictoriness on the possible universalization of an ethic of precarity that Mari Ruti targets for critique in her recent book *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, other, ethics* (2015). *Bamako's mise en scène* of the legal clash between global institutions and Malians' experience of the damage done to their country by these

institutions' policies can inform both how Butler wrestles with the issue of universalism and the way she is taken to task by Ruti for so doing, and this is why I am drawing on the film's unlikely juxtaposition of the global and the local in order to explore Butler's engagement with a universalized ethic alongside Ruti's critique of how Butler does this.

### ***Universality, ethics and aesthetics in Bamako***

The drama of *Bamako* – a juxtaposition of everyday life in the capital city of Mali, Sissako's country of upbringing, with a trial of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as global institutions by spokespersons for African civil society – might be said to pose questions about how film functions as what Robert Sinnerbrink terms 'a medium of ethical experience'. Its distinctive manner of doing this is to interweave the universal and the local/singular in both its dramatic form and its aesthetic, a feature that corresponds to the fourth dimension of the cinema-ethics relationship set out by Sinnerbrink in the first chapter of his *Cinematic Ethics* (the first three are 'ethical content in narrative cinema; the ethics of cinematic representation (from filmmaker and spectator perspectives); and the ethics of cinema as symptomatic of broader cultural, social and ideological concerns' (p.16)). Sinnerbrink's fourth dimension is referred to for brevity as just 'the *aesthetic dimension* of cinema', but glossed as 'the role of aesthetic form in intensifying our experience, refining and focusing our attention, and thus of conveying complexity of meaning through manifold means – [as] a way of *evoking ethical experience* and thereby inviting further ethical-critical reflection' (p.16))

The main way in which the viewer of *Bamako* experiences this interweaving of the universal and the singular is the situating of the trial already mentioned, in a courtyard that is both a domestic and a public space. (In French, *cour* means both 'courtyard' and 'court' in the judiciary sense, a double meaning of which the film takes full advantage.) Huge pieces of vividly patterned newly dyed cloth are hung out to dry all around this *cour* and makeshift court, and are regularly used by Sissako as a backdrop against which to film inhabitants of the courtyard and members of the trial's audience as they move around or watch and listen to lawyers and witnesses speak.<sup>16</sup> By means of this carefully crafted *mise en scene*, Sissako ensures that the domestic and the public (the singular and the universal) overlap with one another constantly, and become inextricable. The dramatic improbability of such a trial of global institutions taking place first, at all, and secondly, at the heart of a community and a country decimated by the policies of those institutions is not just an initial shock in *Bamako*: it is regularly re-iterated by aesthetic contrasts and clashes of various kinds. Young children unaware of what is going on wander through the space between the trial's audience, seated in serried ranks, and the judges' table, which is positioned at the same level as the audience rather than above it as in a courtroom. Each time one of them does so, improbability and incongruity are emphasized.<sup>17</sup> Sissako's camera regularly quits the trial proceedings to show the cloth dyers at work or action underway elsewhere in the courtyard, in the homes that open onto it, or outside the entry gate, where a group of local men sit listening to the proceedings relayed through a loudspeaker they often switch off in displeasure at or weariness with what they hear. As Saxton summarizes, 'Through Sissako's creative use of space



and depth of field, the boundaries between the trial and quotidian reality are literally blurred, demystifying, domesticating and democratizing the legal process'.<sup>18</sup> In this way unmotivated parallel editing or cross-cutting seems to become Sissako's preferred cinematic device, one which keeps the many elements of the film's drama disparate rather than linking them up. As Alison J. Levine observes in an article about *Bamako's* use of traditionally African modes of oral performance, the film entirely lacks narrative tension,<sup>19</sup> preferring circularity to linearity (we see singer Mélé perform twice, at the start and end of the film just before her husband Chaka's suicide). And the disparate, fragmented character of the film's action is matched at the level of the frame, which is (as already mentioned) often partly blocked out by the sheets of brightly coloured cloth hung out to dry by the cloth-dyers. The reading of *Bamako* by Akin Adesoken in 'Abderrahmane Sissako and the politics of engaged expatriation' argues that the form of the film follows from the sources of funding available to Sissako as an expatriate director based mainly in Paris,<sup>20</sup> but whether this is accurate or not, *Bamako's* visual and verbal texture seems to me to be so plural and yet so tightly woven as to merit a description as an aesthetic of disparity or of interruption, one by which the viewer's attention and engagement are continually displaced and re-referred between the global issues in which the trial deals and the pressing local difficulties of everyday life in Mali's capital city.

Three of the principal characters to feature in *Bamako* are Chaka, his beautiful singer wife Mélé, and their daughter, toddler Ina, a family whose home opens onto the courtyard where the trial is taking place. Chaka and Mélé 's marriage has deteriorated to the point where they hardly speak: we

see Chaka requesting information about his wife from one of her friends rather than asking her directly, and Mélé telling her mother on the phone that she is planning to return to live with her in Dakar, leaving Ina to be cared for by her husband. The judges, lawyers, witnesses at and audience to the trial constitute the rest of the film's large cast of characters, only some of whom are named, such as Samba Diakité, whose witness statement consists of almost a minute's complete silence, and Zegué Bamba, the one witness filmed arriving at court at the start of the film, who is refused permission to deliver his statement when he first comes up to the stand, and told instead to wait his turn. When he is finally allowed to take the stand, he sings his statement in the Senoufo language rather than speaking it in French, unsubtitled by Sissako, who explains in interview that he chose to do this because the statement's effect on the trial's audience and film's viewers resides in its musical delivery – a lament – rather than in its verbal content. (This seems to dramatize exactly what Butler says in *Prekarious Life* about the Levinassian face consisting of the sounds of suffering and agony, constituting 'an utterance that is not, strictly speaking, linguistic', and being audible in 'the sound of language evacuating its sense, the sonorous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of any semantic sense'.) *Bamako*'s main judges and lawyers are played by real-life magistrates, and there is a cameraman filming the trial, although we do not see any proceedings from his point of view until they are over except for the verdict, which is never heard because the film ends instead with the suicide of Chaka. The washed-out video footage of a procession of mourners we see in the final minutes of the film contrasts strikingly with the rich colours of the rest

of it, which is as colourful as it is because of the ochre shade of the courtyard's walls, the fabrics of the locals' clothing, and the cloth-dyeing that is going on all around the court's proceedings.

The argument running through Ruti's *Between Levinas and Lacan* attempts to rethink the post-enlightenment ethical subject by pitting Levinas and Butler on the one hand against Lacan, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou on the other. In seemingly Habermasian mode, Ruti wishes to re-balance what she considers the excessive swing to non- and anti-normative paradigms brought about by posthumanist theory, and argues accordingly for 'the possibility of *a priori* norms that are binding *without being metaphysically grounded*,<sup>21</sup> a possibility generally refuted by the posthumanist thinkers on which her book concentrates. Her critique of Butler, accordingly, picks out a number of moments in *Frames of War* and *Parting Ways* when Butler suddenly seems to re-invoke the normative ethical models of the Enlightenment without explaining how these may be accommodated by her non-normative and anti-Enlightenment thinking. Butler's claim 'that Palestinians have the right to have basic rights, such as the right not to be dispossessed of land, due to their membership in a global human community'<sup>22</sup> is probably the best example of one of these ethically normative moments. The subtitle of Ruti's chapter critiquing Butler is 'Judith Butler's reluctant universalism', and takes as its epigraph the 'new bodily ontology' Butler declares at the start of *Frames of War* will be necessary if future ethical theorizing is to be approached on more than a case-by-case basis: this new bodily ontology, she specifies, 'implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and

social belonging'.<sup>23</sup> Whether a sufficiently flexible such new bodily ontology is possible and whether Butler succeeds in formulating it are two questions this exploration of two films may not be able to advance very far, but what Ruti seems to me to succeed in demonstrating about Butler is that she is not so much a 'reluctant' as an *ambivalent* universalist. This might, in my view, be exactly the kind required by posthumanist ethical theorizing: surely the so-called 'ethical turn' widely observed in the humanities since the 1990s benefits rather than loses if it adopts a qualified kind of universalism in which universals are inclusive of singularities rather than subsuming them into undifferentiated sameness? (This approach to the relationship between universality and ethics implies Derrida and Levinas as philosophical reference points rather than Hegel, to whom Butler often pledges adherence in her earlier work, and Nietzsche: it suggests that she has moved progressively away from an ethics of the (self)same towards an ethics of alterity.) *Bamako* resembles films such as Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) in its concentration of universal (global) ethical dilemmas into singular situations: *Bamako* moves constantly between a local family's tragedy and the international issues of the trial,<sup>24</sup> while in *Caché*, all the tensions of post-colonial France are concentrated into the drama of Georges and Anne Laurent receiving threatening video tapes and drawings from an anonymous sender at their comfortable Parisian home. *Bamako* presents its viewers with a much starker vision of the effects of injustice and poverty than *Caché*, of course, and by concluding with the suicide of a local man rather than the trial's verdict, implies that singular tragedies of this kind cannot be subsumed into the

generalized financial mismanagement or political ineptitude demonstrated by the 'developed' world towards so-called 'developing' countries.

A further manner in which *Bamako* suggestively complicates the relationship between universality and singularity is in its photography of native Malians who observe rather than participating in its trial of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. As already mentioned, the cloth-dyers working in the courtyard are one source of ambient local activity to which Sissako's camera moves when the witness stand is unoccupied. Cloth-dyeing is a craft widely practised in Mali, and associated particularly with its capital city: the brocades produced by the dyeing process may not always have been woven locally (although the cotton is likely to have been grown in Africa), but the expertise of the largely female workforce, who mix and apply their dyes by hand, is internationally known and appreciated, and the patterns they produce often have symbolic significance only comprehensible to Malians or even just inhabitants of Bamako and its environs. So when Sissako films individual dyers standing next to their sheets of newly-dyed cloth as they watch the trial, these portrait-style shots of a few seconds' duration are not simply the universalizing 'portrait of a native' they may appear to be to *Bamako's* Western viewers: rather, the colour and pattern of the cloth itself particularize its producer (for those who know how to 'read' the cloth), de-universalizing by means of *mise en scène*.

### ***Violence and vulnerability in Timbuktu***

The political turn of events that gave Sissako the opportunity to title the

feature film with which he followed *Bamako* after another of Mali's major cities (Timbuktu) was the control over the northeastern regions of Mali claimed by the militant Islamist group Ansar Dine in late March of 2012. Ansar Dine's links to the Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have been both surmised and disputed, but what is certain is that the joint forces of Ansar Dine and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) had occupied Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal in addition to Aguelhok, Tessalit and Tinzaouaten (three towns close to Mali's border with Algeria) by the first few days of April 2012, and that Sharia law held sway in Timbuktu until the city was liberated by the French-led military action Operation Serval in January 2013. Sissako's main subject in *Timbuktu* is everyday life under Sharia law, and the film does not therefore dwell on the economic mistreatment of Mali by Western and global institutions in the same way as *Bamako*, but it thematizes injustice every bit as powerfully and perhaps more so, by showing the suffering and death brought to ordinary people by the inflexible cruelty of Sharia law. In *Timbuktu*, precariousness and vulnerability are experienced in the face of political violence, the violence of terror, a theme Sissako may have chosen in order once more to expose a modern-day global issue, vulnerability to a quasi-universal violence.

It is an indication of Sissako's slowly growing international reputation that *Timbuktu*, his fifth feature film, has far outstripped the commercial performance of his previous films while also achieving enormous critical success: by April 2016 it was 'the topgrossing African film – by a black African director – in US box office history, making over \$1m'.<sup>25</sup> Released at the end of 2014 in continental Europe and more widely in Europe and worldwide (Brazil,

Turkey, Mexico, Taiwan and Japan) in 2015, *Timbuktu* won no fewer than seven Césars at France's annual award ceremony in February 2015, for Best Film, Best Director, Best Original Writing, Best Editing, Best Sound, Best Original Score and Best Cinematography. It was also nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, the 2015 winner of which was Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013). Making use of the beauty of African landscape in a way that the spatially concentrated drama of *Bamako* rarely allowed, *Timbuktu* is filmed largely in desert locations that resemble those around its eponymous city, although continuing political unrest in Mali meant that Sissako had to film almost exclusively in his native Mauritania.<sup>26</sup> Particularly memorable sequences of the film's landscape photography include those of the Tuareg Berbers' encampment in the sand dunes outside the city, where these nomadic shepherds and farmers graze their cattle, feed and milk their goats, and live what is on the surface of things an idyllically civilised life in their spacious and richly decorated tents. Two striking posters for the film featured, respectively, a single green tree amid the seemingly unending expanse of golden dunes, and leisured after-hours music-making in the tent of the Tuareg family who are its main narrative agents, an unforgettable image of the contented and cultured family life that the presence of Ansar Dine is about to destroy forever.

In the first scene of *Timbuktu*, we watch a Western prisoner being transferred from one desert location to another by his Jihadist captors, one of numerous possible narrative threads to which the film never returns, allowing them instead to serve as vignettes of the casual and even amateurish brutality of Jihadist rule. As Elisabeth Lequeret observes,

The city – its stalls, its mosques, its inhabitants quietly attending to their business, is still calm, like a semi-healthy organism threatened by an incurable virus. The jihadists are everywhere and nowhere.

Emerging from behind a dune to blindfold a Tuareg shepherd girl.

Nabbing a small-time fish-seller to make him (*sic*) put on socks and gloves – at 113 degrees in the shade.<sup>27</sup>

The film's story becomes riddled with questions, drawing the viewer into the same kind of shuttling between sites that characterized Sissako's cinematography in *Bamako*: 'What happened to the Western hostage? To the young fishmonger? To the children who, in one of the movie's most beautiful scenes, take turns dribbling an imaginary soccer ball? In *Timbuktu*, ellipses and off-camera events constantly destabilize the frame'.<sup>28</sup>

However, the regular shifts of location in *Timbuktu* limit a progressive narrative rather than undermining it altogether as in *Bamako*: as already indicated, the central narrative thread of *Timbuktu* concerns a Tuareg family living in the dunes outside the city, sustained by their livestock and almost accidentally drawn into the web of authoritarian actions administered by Sissako's fictional version of Ansar Dine. Shepherd Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed), his wife Satima (Toulou Kiki), their daughter Toya (Layla Mohamed) and their twelve year-old shepherd Issan (Mehdi Mohamed) are a tight-knit group of Tuareg Berbers scarcely concerned by the regular visits to their compound made by the deputy to Timbuktu's chief Jihadist, Abdelkrim (Abdel Jafri), who attempts to woo Satima despite being unable to speak the Tamasheq



language and clear indifference on her part. Abdelkrim, who is seen failing to master the controls of a 4 x 4 vehicle he is being taught to drive by a much younger Jihadist, initially plays no part in the events that embroil Kidane in the harsh regime of punishments the Jihadists are meting out, which are triggered when one of the family's small herd of cows amusingly nicknamed 'GPS' by Kidane and Toya escapes Issan's control and wanders destructively into the carefully erected nets of local fisherman Amadou. Amadou launches a sharpened spear into GPS's neck, and she sinks, groaning, into the shallows of the river. When Kidane hears this news from Issan, confrontation is inevitable, and he immediately seeks Amadou out by the river: Amadou is accidentally shot in the tussle that ensues, and Kidane is almost immediately arrested by the Jihadist police – though not before he is seen stumbling back across the river towards his home in an unforgettably beautiful extreme long shot of the Niger river at sunset in which he is reduced to a tiny matchstick-sized figure in the landscape. It is significant to how the drama of *Timbuktu* plays out that Sissako films the incident that leads to Kidane's execution in such an achingly glorious setting: the image of the Niger (the main river of western Africa, which after leaving Mali runs south through Niger then Nigeria to its delta in the Gulf of Guinea) both displays the director's rootedness in his homeland and reminds us of the coincidence of beauty and tragedy in the condition of one African nation in the twenty-first century.

It is my contention that *Timbuktu*, like *Bamako*, dramatizes issues central to Butler's ethics, in this case (as already suggested) the vulnerability also emphasized in Levinas's writings on the face. Butler comments on the

vulnerability of the Levinasian subject in her early essay 'Ethical Ambivalence',<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, this self is "accused by the Other to the point of persecution"...the position of the subject . . . is . . . a substitution by a hostage expiating for the violence of the persecution itself. Importantly, there is no self prior to the persecution by the Other. It is that persecution that establishes the Other at the heart of the self, and establishes that "heart" as an ethical relation of responsibility. To claim the self-identity of the subject is thus an act of irresponsibility, an effort to close off one's fundamental *vulnerability* [my emphasis] to the Other, the primary accusation that the Other bears.<sup>30</sup>

This passage is an excellent illustration of how different the Levinasian subject Butler brings into her thinking from 2000 onwards is from the autonomous and sovereign subject of ontologically grounded philosophies: by defining ethics as 'first philosophy', Levinas reverses the priority of ontology over ethics and reconfigures ethics as a 'persecution', an originary vulnerability that precedes being. As Moya Lloyd (who declares herself particularly interested in the ontological assumptions grounding Butler's ethics) summarizes, 'In short, this is an ethics, indeed a potentially global ethics, which issues out of a common human experience of vulnerability, and particularly vulnerability to violence'.<sup>31</sup> Exposed internationally as vulnerable in this way by the events of 11/9/2001, the US 'heightened nationalist discourse, extended constitutional rights and developed forms of explicit and

implicit censorship',<sup>32</sup> when it could and should, in Butler's view, have taken the political opportunity to 'redefine itself as part of the global community' (ibid.) by acknowledging the human interdependency that is as structuring a force in politics as it is in social and personal life. This was an opportunity 'to reflect on the relation between human vulnerability and violence; and to consider "what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war" '<sup>33</sup> – the post-secular ethic of non-violence Butler adumbrates in 'Precarious Life' and returns to in *Frames of War*. Commenting on this condition of vulnerability in one of few pieces of writing to relate Butler's recent work to film (Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* (2003), dubbed Eastwood's 'cinematic critique of revenge'<sup>34</sup>), Robert Watkins argues that the precariousness of life as conceived by Butler constitutes 'the ontological condition of possibility for subjectivity' through its very ambivalence. This ambivalence is that we as human subjects are fundamentally dependent on others for our survival, but risk generating cycles of violence through our 'exposure to violence' and 'vulnerability to loss'<sup>35</sup> by engaging in acts of vengeance precisely when we should forbear from so doing. 'In the eyes of Butler and Eastwood, loss reveals the condition of common vulnerability and challenges us to keep our rage from overwhelming our common humanity'.<sup>36</sup>

Precarious interdependence and the question of how to respond to violence is dramatized pointedly in *Timbuktu* by the stand-off between Kidane and Amadou that follows the killing of the family's favourite cow. Disregarding Satima's advice not to do so, Kidane takes his revolver along, which leads to an ambivalent act of vengeance made possible by being armed, despite uncertainty over Kidane's intentions. Kidane is not a violent man, but by semi-

unwittingly committing a vengeful act when the loss of one of his small herd of eight cows (GPS, tellingly, was with calf, an indicator of future prosperity) has exposed his condition of common vulnerability with Amadou, he moves beyond a re-affirmation of this common humanity into a new cycle of violence which, although it will in fact go no further, instantly seals his fate. The confrontation and tussle between Kidane and Amadou perfectly dramatizes Levinas's and Butler's arguments that ethics is sited in this vulnerability to violence. Similarly, in the opening sequence of *Timbuktu*, we see a beautiful gazelle racing desperately across sand dunes, pursued by a jeep full of armed Jihadists whose aim is not to kill it but to run it to ground: 'Wear it out' one of them calls to the others, 'don't kill it, wear it out'. The final shot of the film shows Toya toiling across an identical stretch of desert, just after her parents have both been killed by Ansar Dine when they mistake Satima's arrival on the back of a motorbike at Kidane's execution for a rescue attempt, and shoot her as well as her husband. Toya must suspect her father's fate, but presumably does not yet know she is now an orphan. The parallel between the delicate, graceful gazelle and Toya is evidently intended by Sissako as an image of vulnerability: if Toya is not yet being hunted down and taunted by Jihadist violence, she is now exposed to it in just the same way that her father has been, a vulnerable ethical subject *par excellence*.

Kidane's peacableness is nowhere more obvious than in the readiness with which he submits to arrest and in the scenes where he meets with the chief Jihadist (Salem Dendou) to learn how he will be judged for the death of Amadou. Here, of course, he is faced not just with the vulnerability of human interdependence, but with the political dominance of Jihadist rule and the

harshness of Sharia law. (Other instances of political – rather than ethical – persecution in *Timbuktu* also stem from Sharia law – the ban on music, football and any instance of extra-marital sex.) Kidane is told that if Amadou's family agree to pardon him at his trial (in Butlerian terms, an acknowledgement by the Other of shared vulnerability), the judge may decide in his favour (in the event, no such pardon is forthcoming). He repeats at the trial what he has said at the initial meeting with the chief Jihadist about not fearing the death that awaits him, and speaks instead about his love for his family and particularly for Toya, the only child God has blessed him with. She is everything to him, Kidane explains, and what pains him about the judgement he is undergoing is not the destiny of an early death but first, that he cannot see her face again before he is tried, and second, that his death will leave Toya unprotected in the world. Kidane sits motionless during these exchanges with the chief Jihadist as a single tear rolls down his right cheek, the very image of vulnerability in a more everyday sense. Despite the unbending Sharia law being applied to his actions, his interview with the chief Jihadist is depicted by Sissako as a human exchange. Kidane dares to appeal to his judge as a man and a parent who worships the same God as he does, upon which he learns that the chief Jihadist has been blessed with two children including an eight year-old boy. The chief Jihadist even expresses sympathy for Kidane's fate, but orders that this should not be recorded in the notes of their meeting.

In an interview with *Positif* about *Timbuktu*, Sissako makes a comment about fragility (*fragilité*) that seems to pick up directly on the concepts of precariousness and vulnerability around which Butler's ethics is formulated.

Fragility, he suggests, is not a problem or something to be eliminated, but a 'source de création'. This seems to be elaborated on in another interview conducted at the 2014 Cannes film festival with the film's main performers (Ibrahim Ahmed, Toulou Kiki, Abdel Jafri) as well as with Sissako, where it is obvious that the latter's working relationship with his actors is highly collaborative – he sets out what he wants from each scene, but trusts his performers to produce it in their own way, rather than imposing his own. (The word 'improvisation' is not used in this discussion, but something very like it is described.) Some of the most powerful scenes in *Timbuktu* – Kidane exposed before the chief Jihadist, Abdelkrim's performances of inadequacy with his driver and when wooing Satima – have been arrived at not by means of precise planning and construction, but have been 'found', collaboratively, through an awareness of mutual dependency and its attendant vulnerability. In this way, elements of Sissako's films *and* his film-making method can be seen to issue out of a common human experience of vulnerability to violence to which he is particularly sensitive, and on which he sometimes draws consciously.

In this discussion of how film studies has engaged with the so-called 'ethical turn' in the critical humanities since the 1990s, I have focused on the ethically-inclined political theory written by Judith Butler in the 2000s and 2010s, and considered how the precariousness and vulnerability suggested by Butler as the foundation of a new ontology of subjectivity can be seen in two of Abderrahmane Sissako's films from the same period. A density of aesthetic engagement that is at the same time an evocation of ethical experience is evident in *Bamako's* aesthetic of interruption, one that

corresponds closely to the fourth dimension of the cinema-ethics relationship set out by Robert Sinnerbrink in his *Cinematic Ethics*. The finely crafted and complex texture Sissako achieves in *Bamako*, also approachable in terms of its blending of documentary and fictional elements but already evident in the film's visual and verbal composition at the levels of action, editing and framing, is ultimately just as important as the improbability of a trial of global institutions taking place in a semi-domestic setting in contemporary Mali. The texture of *Timbuktu* is also complex and densely woven, but in Sissako's later film, his emphasis on universality gives way to more keenly felt dramatizations of vulnerability that also merit consideration in the terms of Judith Butler's ethics, embedded as they are in a subtle narrative constructed by Sissako and performed by a particularly mutually attuned ensemble of actors.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (Leeds and London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Cooper (ed), 'The Occluded Relation: Levinas and Cinema', *Film-Philosophy* Vol 11 No 2 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Choi, Jinhee and Matthias Frey (eds), *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> Sinnerbrink, Robert, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, Butler first disclosed an interest in ethics in a much-cited interview called 'Politics, Power and Ethics: A Discussion between Judith Butler and William Connolly' published in *Theory & Event* 4: 2 (2000) and an essay from the same year, 'Ethical Ambivalence', in Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds), *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge 2000), pp.15-28. In the essay, Butler distances herself from the 1990s 'return to ethics' by remarking that she has resisted it thus far and has little to say about it, but goes on to demonstrate otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), xi.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2010); *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, xviii. To date, only a few philosophically-inclined film critics have pursued connections between Butler's later work on ethics and visual culture, such as Nikolaj Lübecker in section 2.2 of *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 75-83), where he draws on *Giving an Account of Oneself* and *Frames of War* (79-83). Emma Wilson brings *Giving an Account of Oneself* into dialogue with the first two feature films of Mia Hansen-Løve in 'Precarious lives: On girls in Mia Hansen-Løve and others', *Studies in French Cinema* 12: 3 (2012), 273-284, and Casey Ryan Kelly considers precarity in relation to the horror genre in '*It Follows*:



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precarity, thanatopolitics, and the ambient horror film', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34: 3 (2017), 234-249, where he defines precarity as 'the uneven yet organised redistribution of bodily vulnerability throughout postindustrial society' (235), and suggests that 'cinematically, precarity registers as an existential horror in which victims are made acutely aware of mortality' (236). The forthcoming, Spring 2018 issue of *Canada & Beyond: A Journal of Canadian Literature and Cultural Studies* is entitled 'The Life of Others: Narratives of Vulnerability'.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life* 133

<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134

<sup>14</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134

<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134

<sup>16</sup> 'The full-screen central image of the ochre-orange cloth hanging up in the courtyard to dry metaphorically represents Africa's fragility. Orange is repeated thematically and aesthetically in other smaller elements of the film's colouration as a repeated reminder of the connectivity between individuals and broader common humanity, as well as the ongoing erosion of Africa's resources' in Jacqueline Maingard, 'Screening Africa in colour: Aberrahmane Sissako's *Bamako*', *Screen* 51:4 (Winter 2010), 397-403 (398).

<sup>17</sup> 'Here everyday life and work continue uninterrupted around the hearing: a toddler ambles around in squeaky shoes; women dye fabric and men converse with half an ear to the proceedings; an audience-member breast-feeds her child', in Libby Saxton, 'The South Looks Back. Ethics, race,

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postcolonialism' in Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, 50-61 (p.58).

<sup>18</sup> Libby Saxton, 'The South Looks Back', pp.58-9.

<sup>19</sup> Alison J. Murray Levine, 'Words on trial: oral performance in Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako*', *Studies in French Cinema* 12: 2 (Summer 2012), 151-67.

<sup>20</sup> Akin Adesoken, 'Abderrahmane Sissako and the politics of engaged expatriation' *Screen* 51: 2 (Summer 2010), 143-160.

<sup>21</sup> Mari Ruti, *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, other, ethics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 168-9

<sup>22</sup> Ruti, *Between Levinas and Lacan*, 64

<sup>23</sup> Ruti, *Between Levinas and Lacan*, 39

<sup>24</sup> As Saxton observes, *Bamako* is 'concerned not only with the ethics of globalization, but also with the globalization of ethics, that is, with how analysis of the power relations between communities and cultures might alter our understanding of what ethics is or ought to be', Saxton, 'The South Looks Back', p.61.

<sup>25</sup> Nadia Denton, 'A masterclass in African film', in *African Business* 85 (April 2016), 85-88 (p. 88). *Timbuktu*'s commercial and critical success may well indicate that its critique of Islamic fundamentalism is more palatable to Western audiences than *Bamako*'s raw political questioning of the IMF and the World Bank.

<sup>26</sup> Phyllis Taoua, 'Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* and its controversial reception', *African Studies Review* 58: 2 (September 2015), 270-8 (270-1).

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Lequeret, 'Timbuktu', *Film Comment* 51: 1 (Jan-Feb 2015), 67-8 (p.67).

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<sup>28</sup> Lequeret, 'Timbuktu', p. 68

<sup>29</sup> See Butler in Garber, Hanssen and Walkowitz (eds), *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge 2000), pp.15-28 (p.25).

<sup>30</sup> Butler, 'Ethical Ambivalence' p.25.

<sup>31</sup> Moya Lloyd, 'Towards a cultural politics of vulnerability: precarious lives and ungrievable deaths', in Terrell Carver and Samuel A. Chambers (eds), *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 92-105 (p.92). Lloyd is also the editor of the recent collection of essays on Butler *Butler and Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, xi, quoted in Lloyd, 'Towards a cultural politics of vulnerability' p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Lloyd, 'Towards a cultural politics of vulnerability' p.93

<sup>34</sup> Robert E. Watkins, 'Vulnerability, vengeance, and community: Butler's political thought and Eastwood's *Mystic River*', in Carver and Chambers (eds), *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, 188-203 (p.188).

<sup>35</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life* 19, 29

<sup>36</sup> Watkins, 'Vulnerability, vengeance, and community', p.189