

Chapter Seven

Interrogating Images

Lumumba: Death of a Prophet *as Reflexive Autobiographical Documentary*

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Lumumba: Death of a Prophet [*Lumumba: La mort du prophète*], released in 1991, was Raoul Peck's second full-length feature film, after *Haitian Corner* (1988), and his first feature-length documentary film. Difficult to define in generic terms, *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* employs a mix of documentary and fictional strategies, with autobiographical, biographical, and historical layers. Photographs, newsreels, and home movies combine with interviews and other contemporary scenes in a retelling of colonial and postcolonial African history as Peck explores the nature of historical narrative, the relationship of autobiography to biography, and of both to history. The story of Patrice Lumumba's role in the struggle for and after Congolese independence is intertwined with that of Peck's own family, Haitians who moved to the Congo to participate in the building of a postcolonial national administration. In what follows, I will discuss this powerful and innovative film as reflexive documentary, focusing on Peck's use of different narrative voices and visual evidence of the past. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* interrogates the conventions of documentary realism and demonstrates the political potential of aesthetic experimentation in film, both within a postcolonial context.

In the late 1970s, Jay Ruby distinguished between reference, reflection, and reflexivity in documentary film, concluding that "to be reflexive is to reveal that films . . . are created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records," and citing Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1932), and Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) as groundbreaking examples of

reflexive documentary (Ruby 75). And in what is by now a well-known taxonomy, Bill Nichols has identified five modes of documentary film: expository, observational, interactive, reflexive, and performative. In the reflexive mode, “the representation of the historical world becomes, itself, the topic of cinematic meditation” as the filmmaker engages in “metacommentary” and speaks about “the process of representation itself” (Nichols 56). Whereas conventional documentary realism “provides unproblematic access to the world,” reflexive documentary, according to Nichols, problematizes “realist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable argument, the unbreakable bond between an indexical image and that which it represents” (Nichols 88–96).¹ Reflexive documentary works to break what Roland Barthes, in his 1967 essay “The Discourse of History,” called the “referential illusion,” the sense that a text embodies the reality it is attempting to represent.

Barthes argued, furthermore, that the would-be objective historian avoids the use of the first-person pronoun, wishing to “‘absent himself’ from his discourse” so that “history seems to tell itself” (131–32). Raoul Peck, to the contrary, chose to insert himself into his first film about Patrice Lumumba and the Congo, bringing reflexivity to an intimate documentary that is both biographical and autobiographical. Peck wrote, directed, co-produced, and co-edited *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* and speaks in a first-person voice-over throughout. Clyde Taylor has described the result as a “poetic, improvisational film idiom” with “startlingly personal sequences” (238). Peck begins the film by addressing his mother, quoting a poem by Congolese writer Henri Lopes: “In Katanga, they say that a giant fell in the night . . . it was a giant, Mother, who fell in the night, that night, in Katanga.”² He then cuts to silent newsreel footage of this fallen giant, Patrice Lumumba, and continues:

A prophet foretells the future. But the prophet died, and the future with him. Today his sons and daughter cry without even knowing it, without even knowing him. His message has been lost, his name has remained. Should the prophet be resuscitated? Should he be given the chance to speak one last time?³

The credits to the film which answers that question follow, and in it Peck will speak both as his mother’s son and as the voice for Lumumba.

Peck cuts from a photograph of himself and his classmates at school in Haiti in 1960 to 8mm footage of a city we are told is Leopoldville, the capital of the former Belgian Congo, and then back again to more family photographs. As he weaves together these images of people and places, Peck tells the beginning of the story of how his life intersected with that of Patrice Lumumba:

In 1962, I joined my father in Congo with the rest of my family. My father was one of a first contingent of Haitian professors, doctors, and engineers recruited

for Congo. Someone had imagined that blacks who spoke French would better make up for the shortage of white-collar workers that the Belgians left behind them. We were housed in one of those neighborhoods of abandoned villas, where most of the new Congolese bourgeoisie had also moved. I was eight years old, and I was learning a new world, a new language. Today Congo has become Zaire and Leopoldville Kinshasa, and my mother, who has died, is no longer here to see these images.⁴

Via his voice-over, Peck seals a form of what Philippe Lejeune famously called the autobiographical pact, but he specifies from the start that his is a shared story (Lejeune). He has made a film dedicated to resurrecting the memory of a great man whose life was linked to his own and of the woman who provided that link. Peck will speak both of and as his mother, resurrecting her together with Lumumba.

After introducing the viewer to Lumumba through newsreel footage, Peck says that he learned about Patrice Lumumba from his mother, who had brought home a photograph of him found in the desk of her office at the Hôtel de Ville. Peck then tells the story of Lumumba and Congo as his mother told it to him. He begins his often ironic revision of history at the beginning, accompanied by a drawing of Belgian King Leopold II:

My mother says. . . . Once upon a time there was a king who dreamed of a realm eighty times larger than his own. He made such a racket at the Berlin Conference that his colleagues gave him the Congo as a gift, hoping that the cake, too heavy to digest, would choke him. Seventy five years later, his great-grandson Baudouin the 1st had to give this territory back to its proprietors.⁵

Introducing a number of the segments of his historical narrative and analysis with “*ma mère raconte*,” Peck simultaneously reminds us of the oral sources of history and displaces his narration, which becomes neither a straightforward first-person recounting of events as personally experienced nor an omniscient overview claiming to tell the whole story. Informing us of Belgian colonial strategy, for example, he states “My mother says. . . . The Belgians’ rule of domination was simple. The Negros should be treated well. They must remain fools. But the fools got tired of it and became nationalists.”⁶

So who is narrating here? Peck’s mother tells the story of Lumumba and Congo, but in Peck’s voice. Peck allows Lumumba to speak (“*lui redonne la parole*”), yet it is Peck who holds the camera, seeks out the remaining images of Lumumba, and edits them together with images from his own life. Speaking for two dead, if not mute, witnesses, Peck combines photographs from his family history and Lumumba’s public history, 8mm home movies (filmed both by his father and himself), 16mm newsreel footage, and interviews he conducted in 1991 with former Belgian colonial officials, former colleagues of Lumumba, and journalists who were in Congo in 1960–1961. Oral history

in the first person alternates and sometimes merges with third-person history as Peck brings Lumumba to life as a historical figure for Congo, Africa, and Belgium, as the connection between Peck's family and Congo (and ultimately Belgium), and as alter ego for Peck himself.

Lumumba: Death of a Prophet employs multiple narrative voices, then, in order both to personalize the historical and to historicize the personal. Peck understands all of his filmmaking to be reflexive, and he explained in an interview with Taylor that this reflexivity is evidenced both by a mixing of genres and narrative strategies and by the use of an autobiographical voice to challenge and engage his audience:

Although I make documentaries and fictional narratives, my approach is the same with both: my documentaries try to be as fictional as possible and my narratives try to be as "real" as possible. I'm trying to create an active viewer that is both submerged and standing outside of it. I try to do that, in part, by creating nonlinear narratives that draw attention to themselves. But it's difficult to do when contemporary audiences are so jaded: so what language can I use in my film to reach a viewer? (Taylor 246)

Peck's response to this dilemma, he continued, was to insert his autobiography, "this very personal story of this little boy," into the film. The spectator approaches Lumumba via Peck, then, but also Peck via Lumumba; Peck is drawn into Congolese and global history as history is told through him in his film.

Describing his filmmaking process, Peck has also explained how *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* became about much more than Patrice Lumumba:

So this film became my first confrontation. With whom? With myself. By posing questions about black mythology, black politics, and black aesthetics, I was questioning my own place in the world—and it became my own story as much as it was Lumumba's. I became the instrument with which to engage the audience. (Peck, *Stolen Images* 112)

It was difficult at first to use a first-person voice in his films, to implicate himself personally, yet he felt that this step was necessary to establish a relationship of trust with his spectators: "I must lay myself a little bit bare in order to gain their trust and open certain windows in their minds. If not, we have all learned to digest images, to close ourselves off to narratives" (McAuley, Michel, and Peck 137).⁷ Peck's use of the first-person voice, the intermingling of his story with that of Lumumba, serves not only to encourage spectatorial identification but is also useful as a reflexive strategy. Like Viktor Shklovsky with the concept of *ostranenie* (estrangement or making strange) and Bertolt Brecht with his *Verfremdungs-effekt* (alienation effect), Peck wishes to dislodge the viewer from the comfortable space from which

we know what we expect to see. Yet reflexivity for Peck does not require the distancing or alienation of the spectator; he reaches out to us, drawing us into his complex and many-layered story.

Having established his personal connection to Lumumba, Peck tells the political history of Congo from the period just prior to independence until Lumumba's death in 1962. He begins with a ceremony held on the day of Congolese independence from Belgium. We see newsreel footage of the speech given by Baudouin I, the king of Belgium, who asserted that "The independence of the Congo constitutes the culmination of the work conceived by the genius of King Leopold II, undertaken by him with a tenacious courage and continued with perseverance by Belgium."⁸ Peck then replaces the newsreel sound with his own voice-over as he cuts to a photograph of those on the podium during the ceremony. As we see a close-up of Lumumba scribbling on a piece of paper, Peck warns that "On the other side of the podium, someone is putting the finishing touches on a speech that is not on the program. He is going to say what must not be said."⁹ He then cuts back to the newsreel footage, and we hear Lumumba's speech, his response to Baudouin:

Fighters for independence, today victorious, I salute you in the name of the Congolese government. To all of you, my friends, who fought resolutely at our sides, I ask you to make today, June 30, 1960, an illustrious date that you will keep forever engraved in your hearts, a date whose significance you will proudly teach to your children, so that they in turn will teach the glorious history of our fight for freedom to their sons and grandsons.¹⁰

Addressing not the Belgians but his own people, Lumumba refused to accept Baudouin's version of history and claimed independence as a victory in the battle for liberty against the Belgian colonists. Peck similarly counters in his film not only the Belgian history of colonization and decolonization, but the story of Lumumba as told by Belgian and other Western journalists as well.

Peck, like Lumumba, says what one is not supposed to say; he offers his documentary of Lumumba's brief political career against the continuation of what Adam Hochschild has called Leopold II's policy of "officially decreed forgetting" (Hochschild 299). Leopold had his archives in the Congo burned in 1908, before he turned his private colony over to Belgium, removing what evidence he could from future histories and paving the way for Baudouin's outrageous claim that Congolese independence was the culmination of his grandfather's work. A 1959 manual for Congolese soldiers studying to be officers in the Force Publique explained, like Baudouin, that "history 'reveals how the Belgians, by acts of heroism, managed to create this immense territory'" (Hochschild 299). Peck, who knows how easily missing and misleading documents can lead to false histories, reminds us that there is no such thing as objective history by asking the former Belgian officials and journal-

ists he interviews whether the press had been objective in its portrayal of Lumumba. Jacques Brassinne, who in 1960 worked in the Belgian Embassy in Léopoldville, replies that the major reporters could not possibly have been objective, since they were all from the West. Pierre Devos, one of these former journalists, maintains that even had journalists been sympathetic to Lumumba, they could not have written positively about him for their newspapers, all of which supported a continued Belgian presence in Africa.

As we approach the crucial moment of Lumumba's independence day speech, Peck cuts to black, saying that "The images have been lost, the voice remains."¹¹ A recording of Lumumba's voice accompanies the black screen:

We have known the ironies, the insults, the blows that we were subjected to morning, noon, and night, because we were Negroes. Who will forget that to a black man, one said "tu," certainly not as to a friend, but because the honorable "vous" was reserved only for whites.¹²

Thirty years later, this radical truth of colonial racism exists only as a documentary fragment; as sound without an accompanying image. Peck, however, does not attempt to mask the fragmentary nature of his evidence. He instead emphasizes this as well as the other gaps which necessarily exist throughout his attempt at historical narration. Peck's reflexive strategy reminds the spectator to think critically about how sound and image are conjoined to create filmic narrative as well as about how all historical narratives are constructed. Peck refuses to let history seem to tell itself; he proclaims that a story is being told and that he is telling it, using the materials available to him. One of the goals of his documentary is to demonstrate, as he says, that "There are images, and those who create them."¹³ Peck has elsewhere stressed the importance of controlling one's own narration: "You must hold the key to your own image-making because if you don't, other people will. And this is the real problem of storytelling: who controls your image, who tells your story" (Peck, "*Stolen Images*" 113).

Peck presents us with a black screen at one other point in *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*. This time his voice-over refers not to the Belgian colonizers but to the dictator they left in their place, Joseph Mobutu, whose secret police have become very interested in his film: "Black holes. Images in my head. Forbidden, but inoffensive images. The Marshal of Zaire will perhaps let me film in his country, but his secret service is irritated and restless."¹⁴ Peck's film, built around the dual absence of Lumumba and of Peck's mother, exists in the shadow of another absence. His film about his past and its relationship to Congolese history contains no contemporary images of the former Congo, renamed Zaire by Mobutu. Manthia Diawara has written that the allegorical power of Peck's voice-over "makes the viewer believe that Brussels is Kinshasa" (316–17). This would suggest that Peck is trying to fill

in the blanks, the black holes, in his narrative. Yet quite to the contrary, Peck reminds us that he was not able to film in Kinshasa, emphasizing via a recurrent disjunction between sound and image the disjunction between historical reality and its narrative representation. Like Vertov in his *Man with a Movie Camera*, Peck sets out to document reality, yet refuses to hide and instead accentuates the creative power of the cinematic apparatus and editing process. This reflexivity is not a sign of fiction in its conventional sense, but a mode of understanding and analysis.

Lumumba: Death of a Prophet is reflexive, then, with respect both to the history it tells and the images it uses to tell. Peck interrogates the way in which we read images, beginning with the photograph of Lumumba that his mother brought home from work:

The scene intrigues me. What are these people doing together? Some seem bored, others are there by accident, others by force. An unusual Dutch painting—the press conference. A farewell scene, perhaps, without the participants’ knowledge. Only the man in the middle appears to know what he’s doing there. Like Christ, he is surrounded, yet alone. Perhaps they’re not even listening to him anymore. Perhaps they are actors placed there, as extras. A director has said to them, “Be objective.”¹⁵

The camera circles around the photo, giving us a closer look at the various men at the press conference and focusing on Lumumba when his name is pronounced. Peck compares the men pictured in this photographic evidence of the past to extras in a film and then cuts to his first interview with the words “The director said—Action.”¹⁶ Reminding us that we are watching a film as he compares the reality of the past to a film, Peck leaves us to wonder how best to approach historical truth. He does not seek uncritical acceptance of his new history of Lumumba, but rather encourages in his viewer the same critical attitude that he takes toward received history. He reminds us that factors beyond his control—an African dictator’s secret service on one side and a European capitalist control of history through high prices on the other—have shaped his film. When newsreel footage complete with sound is available for clips, we learn, “In the archives of British Movietone News in London, these images cost 3,000 dollars a minute. You get used to it. Everything passes. Images remain. A Congolese earns 150 dollars a year. Murdered memory costs dearly.”¹⁷

In addition to speaking of the images that are missing from his film, Peck also wonders aloud about the people pictured in the images he is able to show us. For example, in a voice-over which accompanies a colonial-era photograph of black and white workers in the Congo, he says:

Looking at these photographs, I wonder what these faces might hide. What dream, what secret, what do these men have in common. This one beats his

wife. That one too. This one is deeply Christian, but an incorrigible gambler. That one loves music, but prefers to get drunk on palm wine. . . . And then the others. . . . They also have their dreams, their illusions, their destinies. All brought together by accident in this yellowed photograph. Brought together by the ambition of a king.¹⁸

Images do not tell their own stories. It is from historians and documentary filmmakers that we usually get the background information for what we see; they tell us why certain people are pictured together and what meaning we should draw from this fact. Peck's creative whimsy forces us once again into an awareness of the role of imagination and storytelling in any historical narrative. He cuts from this photograph to a shot of a man smoking on the street in 1991 Belgium, but continues speculating, "He is perhaps named Ramon, like a friend of mine. And Marie-Claire still hasn't arrived."¹⁹ Later in the film, employing this strategy in reverse, Peck slowly zooms in on a photograph of Mobutu with his wife and three children, with the words "A family. A family like any other. No, you cannot read ambition on faces. Don't bite the hand that feeds you. He will take the hand and everything else. And then one day, he will name himself Marshal."²⁰ Even when we know the true story hidden in the photograph, we cannot see it.

Peck asks in *Lumumba* "What is there to say about a thirty-year-old story of murder?"²¹ One of his answers, and one of the important things he has to say about this story of murder is that, like all history, it is global and not merely local. Peck points out the interconnection, via colonial and capitalist networks, of national tragedies, wondering "And if there had not been the Katanga uranium to build the Hiroshima bomb?"²² Multiple images of various means of transportation in the film, including buses, trains, and cars, reinforce this theme. The most important geographical and historical relationship in the film, however, is the one between Congo and Belgium, its former colonizer. Peck is shooting *Lumumba* only in Belgium because Mobutu's secret police were too interested in his film, but he also takes care to emphasize that Lumumba's story is not just a Congolese one—it is inextricably tied to Belgium and Belgians. Peck highlights the lasting bond between colonizer and colonized created by the violence of colonial history, stressing the reciprocity of this relationship. Home movies of his family visiting Belgium as tourists are accompanied by another reflexive voice-over that employs a theatrical metaphor to describe their trip as a gesture of reverse colonization: "In 1877, the British explorer Stanley left to explore the Congo River. Almost a century later, my family and I explore Europe. . . . We can't manage to get rid of the feeling of surprising actors backstage."²³

Peck begins his film with images of the Place des Martyrs in Brussels, where he says Lumumba's ghost wanders: "The prophet roams in this city. He comes back to tickle the feet of the guilty while they sleep. Well done!

They are forever linked to his fate.”²⁴ In a later scene at the Brussels airport, Peck films against the current of people walking through the hallways and says:

I wanted to find the pieces of the puzzle. I left to look for the traces of the prophet. Why look for him in Brussels and not elsewhere? Why elsewhere? I looked for the soul of the prophet, that which travels without returning, that which can no longer rest. Stuck, lost, he is far from home. Won't the Marshal of Zaire let him come back either?²⁵

Comparing himself to Lumumba, Peck seeks the prophet's traces where he is allowed to film. The culmination of his film, the recounting of the brutal murder of Lumumba, begins with a shot of the central square in Brussels, where “the prophet roams. . . . He comes back to tickle the feet of the guilty.”²⁶ Peck then cuts to an elegant official reception in Brussels, as white men and women in formal attire pull back uncomfortably from the camera. He says that “the prophet does not want to be forgotten. He seeks a bit of warmth, and bothers everyone.”²⁷ Peck is not only giving voice to Lumumba, but also embodying him as the prophet with a movie camera. Peck's mother brought them together, and Mobutu has used his power to keep them both in exile. In striking contrast to the opulent Brussels ballroom setting, then, we hear the gory details of the obliteration of Lumumba's body:

They had to try twice to make the bodies disappear. It seems that two white men were seen in the savannah, both in police uniforms. It seems that they had driven all night. In the public works van, it seems that there was a metal saw, two butcher knives, twenty-five liters of sulfuric acid, gas, a huge empty barrel, and some whiskey. . . . The commissioner and his brother worked all night. They dug up the bodies, they sawed, they burned, they got drunk on whiskey. The acid made most of the pieces disappear.²⁸

Lumumba's ghost has since been wandering in Brussels, neither properly buried nor mourned. The well-dressed people at this reception, these guilty Belgians, all turn to look at the camera as “the prophet, polishing his image, drops by to say hello.”²⁹

Peck then reverses chronological direction to tell the story of Lumumba's death from the beginning in a scene which gestures toward, but never becomes, a historical reenactment. As he tells the story, we see drawings of a house and trees:

They say that they did not want to pray. They say they died with dignity. They say that only Okito trembled slightly, before walking in front of the firing squad. It was undoubtedly the cold weather. . . . They say that even today, the trees of the savannah are riddled with bullets.³⁰

The camera zooms in to a close-up of a tree trunk in which holes seem to be visible. All of our training in classical film spectatorship tempts us to assume that we are seeing what is being described. Yet, if we know that Peck did not go to Zaire while making his documentary and, moreover, can see quite clearly that this is not a photograph but a drawing, we also know that these cannot be the trees in front of which Lumumba, Okito, and the others were shot. Peck plays with our expectations, never allowing us to enjoy a complete conjunction of on-screen image and storytelling. He keeps us at a critical distance from the history he is retelling.

Peck reflects not only on Lumumba's life and political career in his film, but on his own life as well, weaving autobiographical and biographical stories together. After saying that "I gradually decode my memories of Congo," he cuts to 8mm home movie footage of himself as a child playing with other children and his parents in front of their house:

We were coming to help our colored brothers, they told us. But two hundred years of a different destiny separated us. We were black, but we were white. We were different. We were *Mundele*. With my friends, I exploited the ambivalences of the time. I was Congolese when it was convenient and *Mundele* when it got me out of a chore in the group.³¹

Peck, like the roaming ghost of the prophet Lumumba, has the hybrid identity of an exile. He exists not only between two continents but three, between Haiti and Congo and later France, Germany, and Belgium. As a child, a Haitian in Congo, he existed between skin colors as well—black but not African. Toward the end of *Lumumba*, Peck links three generations of his family through a reflexive moment of filmmaking, a home movie clip that functions as a film within the film. We watch 8mm footage of a toreador fighting a bull, and after a moment of silence hear Peck's voice:

One day, my father imprudently let me hold his camera. My first images. Today, my daughter, who is watching them with me, asks about my reaction at the time that the bull was being killed. I didn't dare tell her that my biggest problem was to keep it in focus.³²

Here, and only here, do we see Peck's work as that of an objective documentary filmmaker; as merely the capturing of accurate images.

In one of the very last scenes of *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, we see Peck as an adult clearly for the first time. Up until this point, we have caught merely a glimpse of the back of his head as he conducts interviews. In a medium shot and head-on, we watch Peck sleep in a bus on a Belgian highway. Peck then once again flouts a conventional conjunction of sound and image, again forcing his spectator to question the source of his film's narration, this time by matching a voice-over to his sleeping image: "I know, it's

not a pretty one, my story. But it is Patrice's story. . . . They say that the son of Tolenga is dead. But those who say it have never been able to produce the body."³³ Also for the first time, Peck now calls Lumumba by his first name in this film which he dedicates in the ending credits "For Zaire." As Lumumba refused to let the Belgian story of independence stand, Peck has refused to let either the Belgian or Mobutu's story of Lumumba stand. Soon after finishing *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, Peck announced that he would make a second documentary film about Lumumba, this time without including autobiographical material. He produced instead, eight years later, a fictional feature film that reenacted Lumumba's last months (*Lumumba*).³⁴ Moreover, even though Mobutu was no longer in power and Zaire had once again become Congo, Peck's second *Lumumba* was filmed in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. "Patrice's story" seems to resist not only being filmed on location, but conventional third-person documentary narration as well.

In *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, then, postcolonial interrogations of identity lead to complex negotiations of the possibilities for self-representation. Laura Marks has used Gilles Deleuze's film theory to create a category of intercultural cinema, composed of films "characterized by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West."³⁵ Marks includes Peck's film in her category, which is made up of both fiction films and documentaries. Yet Peck's self-representation does not focus on his position as a black minority in the white West or even on his heritage as split between "Western" and "non-Western" modes of thought. He tells together the stories of a black Haitian immigrant to black Africa and of a black African, in Africa, who was destroyed by his compatriots in collaboration with white Europeans. In doing so, Peck has created a reflexive narrative and hybrid documentary form that is biography, autobiography, and history, that incorporates elements of traditional Caribbean and African storytelling as well as of European and North American experimental filmmaking. Peck structures his history around his relationship to an individual hero, whose story is inextricably linked to the stories of the communities and nations within which he has lived and acted, and his film is narrated and edited to present overlapping and multiple autobiographical and historical voices. Peck reminds us, moreover, that, although "Lumumba" becomes "Patrice," he will always be a mystery, since so many details have been lost, since only a few iconic images remain, since no historical narrative could tell his whole story, since no film could bring him back to life.

In what Hamid Naficy calls accented cinema, "the filmmakers' own voice-over narration mediates between film types (documentary, fictional) and various levels of identity (personal, ethnic, gender, racial, national)" and "every story is both a private story of an individual and a social and public story of exile and diaspora" (21, 31).³⁶ Like Naficy's filmmakers, Peck looks

outward as well as inward in his explorations of personal identity and narrative form. The individual and the collective aspects of his project seem to be inseparable. I have argued that Peck's first-person voice and the inclusion of his own story along with that of Lumumba are reflexive strategies, and their presence also reflects a tension between the individual and the collective. Challenging a current of postcolonial criticism that glorifies the communitarianism of the Caribbean and Africa in opposition to the individualism of Europe and North America, Peck has said:

in the case of the Haitian (here I'm generalizing a bit), society doesn't really allow us an individual, intimate affirmation. That is to say that everything is lived in a collective manner. . . . There is very little space in our society for the kind of direct relationship an individual may have with his or her trauma. And this makes many things difficult. Society experiences abominable things and the individual gets lost.³⁷

Peck affirms individual experience within a collective, then, at the same time bringing African and Caribbean experience to a central position within world history.³⁸

Edward Saïd, in his analysis of orientalism, claimed that colonial stereotyping was "a form of *radical realism*" in the sense that it claims simply to designate reality (qtd. in Bhabha 72). Raoul Peck chose to create a reflexive documentary which disrupts a comparable conception of radical documentary realism. Starting as early as 1905, exploring, conquering, and colonizing outsiders attempted to claim and define Africa by creating and disseminating ostensibly documentary images of its landscape, people, and animals. The so-called descriptive and objective realism of French, Belgian, and British cameramen, anthropologists, and ethnographers originated in and served colonial propaganda. *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* is both a postcolonial and an anticolonial film, as Peck demystifies colonial history's claim to a privileged perspective on the truth of history and offers his own version. It is one of an important group of autobiographical documentary films released since the 1990s, a decade that marked a new turn to documentary in postcolonial African cinema. Other examples include David Achkar's *Allah Tantou* (1991), Jean-Marie Teno's *Africa, I Will Fleece You* and *Vacation in the Country* (1992 and 2000), Mweze Ngangura's *The King, the Cow, and the Banana Tree* (1994), Samba Félix Ndiaye's *Letter to Senghor* (1997), Abderrahmane Sissako's *Rostov-Luanda* and *Life on Earth* (1997 and 1998), Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), and Khady Sylla's *Open Window* (2005). These films diverge from early African auto-ethnographic documentaries and from better-known historical and political features, reappropriating documentary for and from Africa, for the most part from a position of exile and in French.

Speaking about *Lumumba: Death of the Prophet* almost twenty years after its release, Peck described the intertwined strands and ambitious scope of his equally personal and political, equally individual and collective project:

It isn't so much that I wanted to talk about myself, but that as a result of my family's history, I could differently and more efficiently approach the larger History of Congo and the world. Congo is the perfect example of what happened in the other countries of the Third World, and in Africa in particular. By reorienting the project toward this documentary film, the major preoccupations of my political engagement and my life in the present found their place: by means of family photographs and home videos, in Congo and in Haiti, family history became collective History.³⁹

From autobiographical narration to biography and history, Peck worked to innovate within a documentary genre whose contact with Africa has been one of oppression, exoticization, or neglect. European documentaries shot in Africa in the first few decades of the twentieth century included *Hippopotamus Hunt on the Blue Nile* (1908, Pathé), *Images of Colonial Troops Going to Chad* (1910, Gaumont), *In the Heart of Savage Africa* (1922, Oscar Olsson), and later classics of ethnographic filmmaking like Marcel Griaule's 1938 *In Dogon Country*. Even as documentary filmmakers based in Europe and North America began to experiment with form and question conventional conceptions of objectivity and realism, a development which can be traced at least as far back as the Soviet cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, representations of Africa and Africans remained untransformed. And recent critical rethinkings of reflexive documentary cinema such as Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, which examines a selection of personal documentaries within the context of a multimedia history of the essay, are almost exclusively limited to work from Europe and North America. Corrigan recognizes that "virtually every country in the world produces essay films," yet identifies Michel de Montaigne as the point of origin of the essay form in order to exclude films from Africa, East and South Asia, Central and South America, and the Caribbean from his purview (Corrigan 7).⁴⁰ Raoul Peck's reflexive, personal, and anticolonial *Lumumba: Death of the Prophet* constitutes a powerful argument against such exclusion, engaging in a global filmic conversation about documentary realism as it represents the impact of colonialism on individuals and their larger communities.

NOTES

1. Frank Ukadike has briefly examined Achkar's *Allah Tantou* and Teno's *Africa, I Will Fleece You* in relation to Nichols's category of reflexive documentary. See "African Cinematic

Reality: The Documentary Tradition as an Emerging Trend,” *Research in African Literatures* 26.3 (Fall 1995): 88–96.

2. “Du côté du Katanga, on dit qu’un géant dans la nuit est tombé . . . c’était un géant, Maman, qui dans la nuit tomba, cette nuit-là, du côté du Katanga.” *Lumumba: La mort du prophète*, dir. Raoul Peck, Velvet Film, 1992. All translations into English and transcriptions of the original French are mine.

3. “Un prophète prédit l’avenir. Mais le prophète est mort, et l’avenir avec lui. Aujourd’hui ses fils et ses filles pleurent sans même le savoir, sans même le connaître. Son message est perdu, son nom est resté. Faut-il ressusciter le prophète? Faut-il lui redonner la parole une dernière fois?”

4. “En 1962, je rejoins mon père au Congo avec le reste de ma famille. Mon père faisait partie de ce premier contingent de professeurs, de médecins, d’ingénieurs haïtiens, recrutés pour le Congo. Quelqu’un avait imaginé que des noirs parlant français seraient plus aptes à combler le déficit des cadres que laissaient les Belges derrière eux. On nous logea dans un des ces quartiers des villas abandonnées, où une grande partie de la nouvelle bourgeoisie congolaise avait elle aussi aménagé. J’avais huit ans, et j’apprenais à connaître un nouveau monde, une nouvelle langue. Aujourd’hui le Congo est devenu Zaïre, et Léopoldville Kinshasa, et ma mère, décédée, n’est plus là pour voir ces images.” Peck’s father was an agronomist and worked both for the Congolese government and for the United Nations in Congo. Peck himself lived there only for three years, between the ages of eight and eleven, after which he attended a boarding school in France and returned regularly to visit his parents.

5. “Ma mère raconte. . . . Il était une fois un roi, qui rêvait d’un royaume quatre-vingts fois plus grand que le sien. Il fit tellement de tapage à la conférence de Berlin que ses collègues lui firent cadeau du Congo, en espérant que le gâteau, trop lourd à digérer, l’étouffe. Soixante-quinze ans plus tard son arrière petit-fils Baudouin I doit rendre ce territoire à ses propriétaires.”

6. “Ma mère raconte. . . . La règle de domination de Belges est simple. Il faut bien traiter les nègres. Il faut les garder sots. Mais les sots en ont marre et voilà devenus nationalistes.”

7. “Il faut que je me mette un peu à nu pour pouvoir gagner sa confiance et ouvrir certaines fenêtres dans son esprit. Sinon nous avons tous appris à digérer des images, à nous fermer à des discours.” Christopher McAuley and Claudine Michel, “Filmer sans compromis: Interview avec le cinéaste, Raoul Peck,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 9.2 (2003): 137.

8. “L’indépendance du Congo constitue l’aboutissement de l’oeuvre conçue par le génie du roi Léopold II, entreprise par lui avec un courage tenace et continué avec persévérance par la Belgique.”

9. “De l’autre côté de la tribune, quelqu’un figole un discours non prévu au protocole. Il va dire ce qu’il ne faut pas dire.”

10. “Combattants de l’indépendance, aujourd’hui victorieux, je vous salue au nom du gouvernement congolais. A vous tous, mes amis, qui avaient lutté sans relâche à nos côtés, je vous demande de faire, de ce 30 juin 1960, une date illustre, que vous garderez, ineffaçablement gravée dans vos coeurs, une date dont vous enseignerez avec fierté la signification à vos enfants, pour que ceux-ci, à leur tour, fassent connaître à leurs fils et petit-fils l’histoire glorieuse de notre lutte pour la liberté.”

11. “Les images ont été perdues, la voix est restée.”

12. “Nous avons connu les ironies, les insultes, les coups que nous devions subir au matin, midi et soir, parce que nous étions des nègres. Qui oubliera qu’à un noir, on disait ‘tu,’ non certes comme à un ami, mais parce que le ‘vous’ honorable était réservé aux seuls blancs.”

13. “Il y a les images, et ceux qui les créent.”

14. “Des trous noirs. Des images dans ma tête. Des images interdites, mais inoffensives. Le maréchal du Zaïre me laissera peut-être filmer dans son pays, mais ses services de renseignement sont irrités et s’agitent.”

15. “La scène m’intrigue. Que font ces gens ensemble? Les uns paraissent s’ennuyer, les autres sont là par hasard, d’autres y sont contraints. Un tableau flamand insolite—la conférence de presse. Une scène d’adieu peut-être, à l’insu des participants. Seul l’homme au milieu a l’air de savoir ce qu’il fait là. Tel un Christ, il est entouré, mais il est seul. Peut-être ne l’écoute-on

même plus. Peut-être des acteurs placés là, comme figurants. Un metteur en scène leur a dit, ‘Soyez objectifs.’”

16. “Le metteur en scène a dit—Action.”

17. “Aux archives de la British Movietone News à Londres, ces images ont coûté 3.000 dollars la minute. On s’habitue. Tout passe. Les images restent. Un Congolais gagne 150 dollars par an. La mémoire meurtrie coûte cher.”

18. “En regardant ces photos, je me demande ce que peuvent bien cacher ces visages. Quel rêve, quel secret, qu’ont donc ces hommes en commun? Celui-ci bat sa femme. Celui-là aussi. Celui-ci est profondément Chrétien, mais un joueur incorrigible. Celui-là aime la musique, mais préfère se saouler au vin de palme. . . . Et puis les autres. . . . Eux aussi ont leurs rêves, leurs illusions, leurs destins. Tous réunis par hasard sur cette photo jaunie. Réunis par hasard par l’ambition d’un roi.”

19. “Lui s’appelle peut-être Ramon, comme un ami à moi. Et Marie-Claire qui n’arrive toujours pas.”

20. “Une famille. Une famille comme les autres. Non, ambition ne se lit pas sur les visages. Ne mords pas la main qui te nourrit. Il prendra la main et tout le reste. Et puis un jour, il se nommera lui-même maréchal.”

21. “Que dire d’une histoire de meurtre vieille de 30 ans?”

22. “Et s’il n’y avait pas eu l’uranium du Katanga pour construire la bombe d’Hiroshima?”

23. “En 1877, l’explorateur anglais Stanley part à la découverte du fleuve Congo. Près d’un siècle plus tard, ma famille et moi découvrons l’Europe. . . . On n’arrive pas à se débarrasser de cette impression de surprendre les acteurs derrière les rideaux.”

24. “Le prophète rode dans cette ville. Il revient chatouiller les pieds des coupables endormis. C’est bien fait. Ils sont liés à jamais à son destin.”

25. “J’ai voulu retrouver les morceaux du puzzle. Je suis parti chercher les traces du prophète. Pourquoi le chercher ici à Bruxelles et pas ailleurs? Pourquoi ailleurs? J’ai cherché l’âme du prophète, celui qui voyage sans retour, celui qui n’arrive plus à trouver son repos. Bloqué, perdu, il est loin de chez lui. Le maréchal du Zaïre ne le laisserait-il pas rentrer, lui non plus?”

26. “Le prophète rôde. . . . Il revient chatouiller les pieds des coupables.”

27. “Le prophète ne veut pas se faire oublier. Il cherche un peu de chaleur, et embête tout le monde.”

28. “On a dû s’y prendre à deux fois pour faire disparaître les corps. Il paraît qu’on a vu deux blancs dans la Savanne, deux hommes en uniforme de police. Il paraît qu’ils ont roulé toute la nuit. Dans la camionnette des travaux publics, il paraît qu’il y avait une scie à métaux, 2 couteaux de boucher, 25 litres d’acide sulfurique, de l’essence, un gros tonneau vide, et du whiskey. . . . Le commissaire et son frère travaillent toute la nuit. Ils déterrent les corps, ils scient, ils brûlent, ils se saoulent au whiskey. L’acide fait disparaître la plupart des morceaux.” A documentary entitled “Who Killed Patrice Lumumba,” shown in 2000 on Belgian television, includes an interview with former Belgian police commissioner Gerard Soete in which he describes using acid to dissolve Lumumba’s body in January of 1961.

29. “Le prophète soigne son image et vient dire bonjour en voisin.”

30. “On raconte qu’ils n’ont pas voulu prier. On raconte qu’ils sont morts dans la dignité. On raconte que seul Okito a légèrement tremblé, avant de se placer devant le peloton d’exécution. C’était sans doute le froid. . . . On raconte qu’aujourd’hui encore, les arbres dans la Savanne sont criblés de balles.”

31. “Mes souvenirs du Congo, je les déchiffre peu à peu.” “On venait aider nos frères de couleur, nous avait-on dit. Mais 200 ans de destin différent nous séparait. Nous étions noirs, mais nous étions blancs. Nous étions différents. Nous étions des *Mundele*. Avec mes camarades, j’exploitais les ambivalences du moment. J’étais Congolais quand cela m’arrangeait, et *Mundele* quand cela me dispensait d’une corvée dans le groupe.”

32. “Un jour, mon père me laisse imprudemment tenir sa caméra. Mes premières images. Aujourd’hui, ma fille, qui les regarde avec moi, me demande ma réaction à l’époque devant ce taureau que l’on tue. Je n’ai pas osé lui dire que mon plus grand problème c’était de garder la mise au point.”

33. “Je sais, elle n’est pas belle, mon histoire. Mais c’est l’histoire de Patrice. . . . On dit que le fils de Tolenga est mort. Mais ceux qui le disent n’ont jamais pu montrer son corps.”

34. *Lumumba*, dir. Raoul Peck, Velvet Film, 2000. For comparative readings of Peck’s two Lumumba films, see Christopher Pavsek, “The Black Holes of History: Raoul Peck’s Two Lumumbas,” *Framework* 50.1–2 (2009): 82–94; Étienne-Marie Lassi and Alexie Tcheuyap, “Le prophète, son récit et l’histoire: Lumumba au cinéma,” *Revue de l’Université de Moncton* 40.1 (2009): 83–105; and Burlin Barr, “Raoul Peck’s *Lumumba* and *Lumumba: La mort du prophète*: On Cultural Amnesia and Historical Erasure,” *African Studies Review* 54.1 (2011): 85–116.

35. (Marks 1).

36. Michael Renov has examined experimental autobiographical films made in the United States which also “couple a documentary impulse—an outward gaze upon the world—with an equally forceful reflex of self-interrogation.” Kathleen McHugh addresses similar questions with a wider North American range in an essay on Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory* and Ramiro Puerta and Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Crucero/Crossroads*, which she deems “transnational cinematic autobiography” (155–77).

37. “Dans le cas de l’Haïtien (là, je généralise un peu), la société ne nous permet pas vraiment une affirmation individuelle intime. C’est-à-dire que tout se vit de manière collective. . . . Il y a très peu d’espace dans notre société pour ce genre de rapports de l’individu face à son trauma. Et cela rend bien des choses difficiles. La société, le milieu, passe sur des choses abominables et l’individu se perd” (McAuley, Michel, and Peck 132–33).

38. Boulou Ebanda de B’beri argues that Peck’s use of “ma mère raconte” constitutes the first link between Lumumba’s Congolese story and the rest of the world, and that this is an affective connection; “the narrative posits an alternative articulation of belonging that moves the story of Lumumba away from its ‘natural’ locality” (813).

39. “Non pas tant que je voulais parler de moi, mais parce qu’à travers l’histoire de ma famille, je pouvais m’approcher différemment et plus efficacement de la grande Histoire du Congo et du monde. Le Congo étant l’exemple parfait de tout ce qui s’est passé dans les autres pays du Tiers-monde, et en Afrique en particulier. En réorientant le projet vers ce film documentaire, les grandes préoccupations de mon engagement et de ma vie présente prenaient leur place : à travers les photos et les films de famille, tant au Congo qu’en Haïti, l’histoire familiale devenait l’Histoire collective.” Olivier Barlet, “Leçon de cinéma de Raoul Peck,” *Africultures* (May 2012) <http://www.africultures.com/php/?nav=article&no=10741>.

40. Laura Rascaroli’s *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* is even more limited, to films from Western and Eastern Europe.

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