

**BEYOND THE MORALITY TALE OF HUMANITARIANISM:
EPISTOLARY NARRATION AND MONTAGE IN
RAOUL PECK'S ASSISTANCE MORTELLE**

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Time passes, and the earthquake is turning into a narrative. It is already shifting from a lived event to a written-about one, leaving the realm of experience and entering the realm of reconstituted imagination. . . . With each telling it becomes scripted, and the earthquake begins to seem like an inevitability. The memory is becoming glossy and smooth from overuse.

—*Laura Wagner, "Salvaging"*

Each Haitian disaster benefits someone, benefits many.

—*Nadève Ménard, "Helping Haiti—Helping Ourselves"*

INTRODUCTION: CINEMA, LETTERS, AND THE 2010 EARTHQUAKE

In the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on January 12, 2010, news outlets rushed to film the humanitarian mania that invaded the tiny Caribbean nation. The filmed representations of the post-earthquake recovery effort embraced cliché and sensationalism in order to applaud Western benevolence and humanitarianism. News networks and telethons constantly showed footage of rubble, tent cities, and people trying to cope with disaster. For example, while conducting interviews with Wyclef Jean and Edwidge Danticat, Anderson Cooper referred to the earthquake as the latest in a series of “one thing after another” for Haiti.¹ During Cooper’s visit to Haiti a month after the earthquake, he pointed out the cliché in talking about Haitian resilience but then reasserted it, saying, “But some clichés are true . . . Haitian people have suffered for generations.” Cooper concluded his *Anderson Cooper 360°* feature by alluding to years of Haitian corruption and violent regimes, failing to address the flawed approach to humanitarianism in the post-earthquake moment.² Ultimately, film and social media quickly became the way in which many people outside Haiti gained access to news surfacing

from aid efforts and international cooperation. As the two epigraphs above indicate, narratives of white, Western humanitarianism are the scripts that the twenty-four-hour news cycle fed piecemeal to its viewers for months following *Goudougoudou*.³

Such narratives, clips, and sound bites are the initial source material that Raoul Peck deploys in his 2012 documentary *Assistance mortelle* to debunk humanitarian claims to a moral high ground in the aftermath of the earthquake, repurposing them as evidence of neoliberal incompetence and exploitation. The film situates the viewer in the context of the post-earthquake relief effort by making use of interviews, infographics, and footage from inside the meetings of various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as email correspondence from on-the-ground perspectives.⁴ Peck combines these elements in two separate cinematic forms, montage and epistolary narration, through which he reframes the relief effort in Haiti. This article explores how Peck manipulates these two formal aspects in order to critique the neoliberal nature of NGOs during the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Montages of committee meetings, interviews, and B-roll footage allow Peck to reconstruct his own anticolonial narrative of the earthquake recovery while the epistolary narration provides viewers with an affective experience of the months following January 12, 2010; the film both instructs viewers and attends to the subjective, affective reactions to the event that sparked a problematically well-intentioned humanitarian frenzy.

Raoul Peck is a Haitian filmmaker who was born in Port-au-Prince to an upper-middle-class family in 1953. He went into exile in 1962, at the age of nine, when he and his parents fled to Congo to escape François Duvalier's dictatorial regime. His first forays into cinema began with experimental short films, which, as Sophie Saint-Just and Toni Pressley-Sanon note in the introduction to their recent edited volume *Raoul Peck: Power, Politics, and the Cinematic Imagination*, "solicit the active participation of the viewer as part of the meaning-making process."⁵ This is a technique that Peck employs in a number of his documentaries, such as *Lumumba: La Mort du prophète* (1992) and the Oscar-nominated *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), which explores the life and writing of James Baldwin via an incomplete manuscript about the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that Baldwin was working on prior to his death.⁶ Peck also has an extensive repertoire of fiction films that, along with his documentaries, "explore the importance of keeping memory alive in the face of trauma, displacement, dislocation, relocation, longing, and belonging."⁷ His fictional films treat historical moments such as the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti (1957–1986) in *L'Homme sur les quais*

(The man by the shore, 1993), the Rwandan genocide in *Sometimes in April* (2005), and the life of Patrice Lumumba in *Lumumba* (2000), among other subjects. Peck's cinema is as rich in form as it is in content; he frequently refers the influence of documentarians like Chris Marker on his use of film techniques and cinematography.⁸

One of the techniques Peck employs in *Assistance mortelle* is the use of voice-over narrators, played by Céline Sallette and himself, as the two correspond with each other throughout the movie via letters.⁹ This choice evokes epistolary writing, a literary convention that dominated eighteenth-century European fiction, where it belonged to the popular domain and was often pushed to the margins of literary production as a feminine genre, too rife with subjectivity to be considered discursively rigorous.¹⁰ In *Assistance mortelle*, the two narrators exchange letters addressed to each other as “cher ami”/“chère amie” (dear friend) as each of them tries to process the aftermath of the earthquake and the humanitarian disaster left in its wake. Peck's use of the epistolary form provides a means for individual, subjective voices to surface from the earthquake recovery efforts before the dust fully settles.¹¹ This allows Peck to formally separate the aid worker, the government official, and Haitian citizens from the organizational bodies that they represent on a larger scale. By individuating aid workers and government officials from their organizations and agencies, Peck surpasses what Mark Schuller calls the clichéd “morality tale” of humanitarianism. Through this cinematic method, the Haitian filmmaker is able to perform, as Schuller writes, “a structural analysis of the system, not assessing individuals (or individual agencies’) morals.”¹²

In addition to the epistolary mode, Peck employs Sergei Eisenstein's conception of montage-as-conflict, a technique in which two pieces of film collide in order to produce a separate meaning. Eisenstein writes, “The juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot—as it does a certain creation.” The creation of new meanings is crucial because it also, as Paul Begin notes, “creates ambiguity and, therefore, requires the participation of the observer [in the film].”¹³ In deploying montage-as-conflict, Peck requires the active participation of his viewers, not just to engage with the content of the film but also to attempt to decipher the layers of meaning hidden behind the documentary's various forms.

While the content drives *Assistance mortelle*, its formal aspects orient the viewer to the numerous facets of the post-earthquake recovery, including the variety of people involved. First, the epistolary narration allows the viewer to gain access to the intimate thoughts of individual aid workers and

others in Haiti. The use of montage—the piecing together of interviews, infographics, and footage of the earthquake’s aftermath—provides a window into the Republic of NGOs in Haiti as well as the organizations’ interaction with Haitians and their government. These two formal elements of the film allow the viewer to shift between the individual perspectives of the aid workers, the larger structure of NGOs, and Haitian perspectives on the efforts to reconstruct the country. By not simply using one filmic technique to drive the documentary, one language (the film is in Kreyòl, English, and French), or one unique perspective, Peck is able to expose the dysfunctional, neocolonial nature of the international relief efforts while allowing the viewer to differentiate individual subjects—such as aid workers or politicians—from the neoliberal organizations and governments of which they are a part.

**PROVE TO US THAT YOU ARE NOT CORRUPT:
THE COST(S) OF HUMANITARIAN AID**

In the film, the relief effort begins with the creation of the Commission Intérimaire pour la Reconstruction d’Haïti (CIRH [Interim Haiti Recovery Commission]). Initially designed as an oversight committee for the reconstruction of Haiti, the CIRH includes both Haitian and international representatives and was officially chaired by Haitian prime minister Jean-Max Bellerive and former US president Bill Clinton. One of its main tasks was to allocate the funds pledged to Haiti from public and private sources. The CIRH is one of the first targets of the documentary: as Peck reveals, the dysfunctional nature of the CIRH more closely resembles a neocolonial form of governance than a benevolent intermediary.

In order to explain the genesis of the CIRH, the male epistolary narrator introduces a montage of interviews with world leaders like Nicolas Sarkozy and Bill and Hillary Clinton as well as cameos by celebrities like George Clooney, Angelina Jolie—recently appointed as a visiting scholar on women, peace, and security at the London School of Economics—and Brad Pitt as they host phone bank events and donate large sums of money for the relief effort.¹⁴ Next, Peck inserts an infographic to explain the membership requirements for the CIRH (\$100 million buy-in) and introduces the member nations and organizations seated around the table. The overall mission of the institution is to manage the money promised to Haiti: \$5 billion over the initial eighteen months and \$11 billion total over the course of five years. The infographic itself provides an objective vision of the CIRH, while the epistolary narration provides a subjective critique of the institution. Peck’s voice-over letter explains that this is how the whole relief story started and that the geopolitical makeup of the CIRH looms

like an ominous cloud over the entire process. Assembled like players in a neoliberal poker game in which post-earthquake Haiti represents the coveted sum of money in the middle of the table, each country lines up to partake in what Naomi Klein refers to as “disaster capitalism.”¹⁵ The infographic becomes animated as the epistolary narrator specifies the problematic nature of the members in relation to Haiti:

Malgré quelques contradictions géopolitiques évidentes (la France et les EEUU), ou plus cachées (les EEUU et le Canada), des intérêts économiques divergents, des rivalités institutionnelles établies (BIRD, la Banque Mondiale et CARICOM), et quelques oppositions idéologiques fortes (Hémisphère Nord, le Brésil, le Venezuela), tous autour de la table veulent sauver Haïti.

(In spite of a few evident geopolitical contradictions [France and the USA], or less obvious [USA and Canada], divergent economic interests, well-established institutional rivalries [International Development Bank, The World Bank and CARICOM], and a few strong ideological oppositions [Northern Hemisphere, Brazil and Venezuela], everyone around the table wants to save Haiti.)¹⁶

While the infographic itself orients the viewer toward a factual, on-paper description of the CIRH, the narration provides an interpretation mirroring an interview with Bellerive, who states that the CIRH appeared to be similar to NGO structures with interests in particular regions or sectors. The voice-over sets the viewer up to witness the dysfunction of the CIRH and its capitalist habitus, especially the ways in which Haitian interests are ignored or forgotten.

As Peck’s epistolary narration establishes the context of post-earthquake reconstruction, a second narrator is introduced to separate aid workers from the NGOs for which they work. Céline Sallette enacts the female epistolary voice, which, over the course of the film, loses optimism regarding the relief effort as well as the good faith of the NGOs. This letter is the beginning of the female narrator’s descent into pessimism. The sequence begins with melancholic extradiegetic music that slowly overtakes the quotidian sounds of Haitian children playing soccer in a courtyard. The female narrator interrupts by despondently intimating how troubling the fiscal situation is after the earthquake. Although we cannot see her, her testimony serves as a means of witnessing the breakdown of the aid system—wherein volunteers or other participants receive affirmation of having done a good deed for a benevolent cause. Given that thousands of

people donated money to Haiti following the earthquake, Sallette's singular epistolary voice provides armchair humanitarians a character with whom they can identify, one who might not have the means to participate in more direct forms of aid but sees herself as implicated in the drama nonetheless.

Although Peck has stated that the letters were inspired by email correspondance between a close friend working for an NGO, it is hard to say how much was taken verbatim from these emails. In a way, the vehicle (epistolary communication) is as important for the film as the content of the messages.¹⁷ Manthia Diawara points out in his essay "The 'I' Narrator in Black Diaspora Documentary" that "it is possible to define the first-person narrative in [black] diasporic cinema as the filmmaker's revisionist construction in which the narrator is as central to the film as the film's object."¹⁸ While Peck is undeniably part of *Assistance mortelle* as one of its epistolary correspondents writing in the first person and one of the voice-over actors, the film departs from Peck's previous films like *Lumumba: La Mort du prophète*, where the exploration of Patrice Lumumba's death was, in some ways, an exploration of Peck's personal experience of living in Congo. As John P. Walsh argues in "Haiti mon amour," the voice-over letters allow Peck to intentionally elicit shame in the viewers through an exploration of the emotions between aid workers and the Haitians they intend to help.¹⁹ By mainly profiling Western—non-Haitian—aid workers, Peck creates a sense of identification between the film's subjects and Western viewers, prompting the viewer to empathize with the aid workers and their frustrations. It is, then, possible to imagine the viewer as the "dear friend" to whom these letters are addressed. In this case, the audience now shares in the anguish of the letter writers, providing them with the semblance of a lived experience in post-earthquake Haiti among the NGO community.

This effect is crucial for Peck as a documentarian because it allows the viewer to question the situation from within. Sallette's voice-over begins, "Les organismes internationaux ont tenté d'être des intermédiaires impartiaux. Ils se battent tout aussi féroce­ment que les autres pour l'argent des donateurs. Malgré le conflit d'intérêt évident, ils interviennent en tant qu'entrepreneurs, à leur profit et vendent sur les acteurs locaux. C'est révoltant" (The international organizations have attempted to be impartial intermediaries. They fight with each other just as ferociously as the others for monetary donations. Despite the obvious conflict of interest, they intervene as entrepreneurs and to their profit they betray the local actors. It's revolting).²⁰ Juxtaposed with B-roll footage of Haitians dismantling collapsed structures, rebuilding, and working to improve their lives, this epistolary fragment establishes an emotional response to the exploitation of

local actors by the international community. Employing evocative diction, the letter seeks to imbue the viewer with a sense of disgust for the NGO community, provoking skepticism toward aid groups. The scene ends with an establishing shot of downtown Port-au-Prince that slowly pans from right to left, emphasizing the fleeting nature of the letter by cutting off the white female narrator in order to home in on concerned Haitians, and setting up the next sequence before the CIRH.

The epistolary narration binds scenes together and creates the driving force for the film, but other montages often fill in the gaps, presenting content for the narrator to develop. The sequence begins with footage of Suze Percy Filippini, the representative responsible for Haitian executive actions in the CIRH, arguing that the committee is intentionally ignoring Haitian leaders and officials; this allows the viewer to witness the procedural violence of relief meetings supposedly in favor of Haitian interests. The camera footage cuts to Filippini and other delegates, including Bill Clinton, ultimately revealing their indifference to her speech.²¹ Next, Peck inserts an interview with Joël Boutroue, a former humanitarian coordinator for the United Nations, who articulates the prejudices the international community holds against Haiti. Boutroue's comments offer one way of interpreting Filippini's remarks at the CIRH meeting. He argues that the reason the Haitian delegation is being ignored is that the international community does not trust Haitians to govern themselves. The next piece of footage is an interview with Bill Vastine, a member of the CIRH who is in charge of debris removal. Vastine's comments confirm that the international perception is that Haitians are incapable of managing funds, as he frankly states:

The international community said that they were going to grant so many billions of dollars to Haiti. That didn't mean we were going to send so many billions of dollars to a bank account and let the Haitians do with it what they will. Unfortunately, and it's not just Haiti, as you [the interviewer, Raoul Peck] mentioned before, there's corruption all over. There's corruption the world over. There's corruption in the United States of America. We see it on the news.²²

Unlike the critical statements of Filippini and Boutroue, Vastine's flippant tone implies that he believes these prejudices to be universal truths, while the montage, particularly the order of the speakers (Filippini, Boutroue, and finally Vastine), suggests that he may subscribe to them as well. Vastine's interview is crucial to Peck's argument because he demonstrates the manner in which Haiti is forced onto what Robert Fatton calls the "outer

periphery,” or a group of states labeled as weak or failed by NGOs and the West. Fatton refers to the relationship between such nations and global powers as the latest version of the “white man’s burden,” through which the occupying state creates a trusteeship with a territory on the outer periphery that is “infused with militaristic impulses hidden by humanitarian and cosmopolitan gestures.”²³ In order for these states to liberate themselves from political dependency, they must subject themselves to indignities such as the extreme financial paternalism to which Vastine alludes. However, in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake it is impossible for Haiti to move away from the periphery for a number of reasons. In this case, Haiti cannot rebuild itself according to its own needs: instead, it is forced to obey the NGO occupying force.

As the montage progresses, Peck diagnoses and identifies the source of Vastine’s and the international community’s prejudice by alternating between Boutroue, Vastine, and a Haitian engineer named Joséus Nader. Peck’s interview with Nader provides a Haitian perspective on the issue of corruption, injecting the sequence with irony. The engineer states, “Comme on est ‘un ramassis de corrompus’, ils envoient des gens pour gérer l’argent. Et les gens venus pour le gérer repartent souvent avec 40% de l’argent donné” (Because we’re just a bunch of corrupt people, they send people to manage the finances. And the people who came to manage it often leave with 40 percent of the donated money).²⁴ The juxtaposition of these three voices produces several effects: the persuasive, the discursive, and the comic. Boutroue presents a historically rigorous claim about the perception of Haiti since its independence in 1804, Vastine attempts to sanitize Haitian claims to aid by flippantly insinuating that Haitian officials are pocketing aid money, and Nader laughs at the suggestion that Haitians are corrupt when aid groups and NGOs routinely profit from their so-called humanitarian concern. Through montage, Peck reveals the extent to which the Haitian members of the CIRH and the recovery effort are ignored and rebuffed. Furthermore, the combination of epistolary narration and montage draws viewers into the heart of the matter, allowing them to judge the situation for themselves.

DOING THE MANGO TANGO: NEW FORMS OF GLOBALIZATION

The humanitarian aid community is not the only enterprise with an economic interest in Haiti, especially after the earthquake. Haiti has long held commercial relationships, whether voluntary or coercive, with the United States, providing textiles and other exportable materials, but these relationships offer little benefit to the average Haitian citizen. Instead, the import/export industry has historically allowed the global economy

to thrive at the expense of the Haitian people, the environment, and the overall economic health of the country.²⁵ After the earthquake, there was a gold rush of international economic opportunities in Haiti. Foreign interest groups—both humanitarian and profit-seeking—began to propose myriad modern disaster remedies, from plastic modular homes to chlorine tablets, and new ideas for urban development and agricultural growth. Throughout *Assistance mortelle*, Peck presents numerous examples of the humanitarian aid community failing to assist in Haiti's reconstruction and choosing instead to profit from the disaster-as-niche market defined by desperation. Peck is concerned with not only how the international community thrusts itself onto Haiti but also how the Haitian government, particularly President René Prével and Prime Minister Bellerive, provides limited assistance to the larger Haitian public.

While the film is full of relevant and poignant illustrations of how the Haitian government lacks influence in the face of international capitalist interests, the best example arises during the United Nations sequence, which depicts Prével's last visit to the United States. Two epistolary fragments read by Peck bind the UN montage together. In these letters, Peck extrapolates the emotional states of the narrator, Prével, and Bellerive as they are pulled through the arduous diplomatic process and the pageantry of the UN visit. The epistolary narration frames the sequence in order to clarify the hidden codes and cues of international diplomacy, revealing how little power the Haitian government actually holds in the United Nations. Additionally, more traditional documentary footage provides evidentiary accounts of the UN trip that substantiate and reinforce the sentimental elements of the epistle. Peck's montages are crucial for this sequence because they question and redefine representations of the actors—aid workers, politicians (Haitian and international), and Haitian citizens—in post-earthquake Haiti. In this four-minute sequence, Peck reveals how Haitian officials have been rendered powerless, trapped by the very network of organizations that pledged to assist them in addressing the natural disaster.

The sequence begins with an establishing shot of the UN headquarters in New York. The camera slowly pans down to create a medium shot of the base of the building as upbeat music provides a background; it then zooms in to a close-up of the flag court, followed by an extreme close-up of the Haitian flag undulating in the wind. The music stops and Peck's narration begins:

La reconstruction n'a toujours pas commencé. . . . [L]e
Président René Prével arrive à New York pour faire accélérer

les efforts. . . . [C]'est son dernier mandat. Dans trois mois, il doit réorganiser les élections et céder sa place. Le piège est posé, mais il ne le sait pas encore.

(The reconstruction still has not begun. . . . René Préval, the president, arrived in New York to accelerate the [relief] efforts. . . . [I]t's his last term as president. In three months, he will have to organize elections and cede his position. The trap is set, but he does not know it quite yet.)²⁶

This opening epistolary fragment has two primary functions: to familiarize the viewer with the current situation in the larger historical context of the earthquake and Haitian politics and to provide an interpretive model through which the viewer can read the following sequence. Through the letter, the viewer understands who the actors are (Préval and the United Nations), what the current status of the reconstruction is, and why Préval is visiting New York. The epistle signals to the viewer that something is awry. Upon hearing of the “trap” set for Préval, the viewer realizes that the Haitian president is powerless to help his beleaguered country.²⁷

The first clip is of Préval's speech before a half-empty General Assembly. The footage lasts only a few seconds, implying that the Haitian president's address is futile. After greeting the chamber, Préval begins, “Le moment est venu, en effet, de penser une nouvelle forme de globalisation” (The moment has come to theorize a new form of globalization).²⁸ Using an abrupt cut from Préval's speech to the next clip, Peck formally conveys the president's lack of power. The following segment presents an informal aside in which Préval is joking and laughing with the presidents of Cameroon, Gabon, and Senegal. This is the only scene in which Préval and the Haitian delegation are not under duress. It is far from being merely a piece of B-roll in the UN scene: Peck signals its importance by focusing the camera on the handshake between Préval and the president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, making it one of the few scenes in the documentary where Haitian officials meet with nonwhite government or NGO representatives. However, the rest of the UN scenes feature stark divisions along color lines, showing white officials giving orders or dictating the terms of their dealings in Haiti. On a visual plane of representation, Peck provides a critical window into the neocolonial rhetoric of humanitarianism, in which whiteness is read as benevolent and civilized and Blackness is coded as backward and corrupt. The aside with the West African presidents is the only UN scene that does not depict arbitrary power being wielded over Haiti.

The next shot in the UN sequence portrays the movement from Préval's meeting with the African presidents to an investment meeting

with high-ranking Coca-Cola officials and members of the Inter-American Development Bank. Talking with an aide on the way to their next meeting, Préval says, as he drinks a bottle of “Mango Tango” juice, “C’est complètement insipide” (It’s completely insipid).²⁹ While the president is clearly referring to the drink, Peck’s choice to place this transitional scene in the sequence invites the viewer to question whether the juice is the sole tasteless moment of their visit to the United Nations. While the scene is comedic on its own, it appeals to a morbid sense of humor in relation to the other two scenes, which adopt a more serious tone as they explore Préval’s function as a political representative and head of state.³⁰

After sitting through two separate meetings, one with representatives from Coca-Cola—the pioneers of the aforementioned juice—and one with UN officials, Préval leaves New York with no further reassurance that the relief efforts will fully commence. The footage alternates between meetings with capitalist and humanitarian leaders; in both, Préval and Bellerive appear hopeless and despondent as they listen to the UN’s marching orders. The Haitian leaders are for the most part speechless, defeated by parties that want to circumvent the local Haitian government and remotely control the economy as well as the aid process. To close the scene, another letter further emphasizes the Western incursion on Haitian sovereignty:

L’aide est bien trop importante, bien trop politique, bien trop convoitée pour qu’on puisse envisager de la laisser aux dirigeants haïtiens. Si on n’avait déjà compris, aide et politique sont hâtivement liées, et le cas de Préval va démontrer à nouveau. On avait fait jongler les milliards. Pour quel résultat ? Après cet ultime blocage le président ne sait pas ce qu’il a obtenu.

(Aid is far too important, far too political, far too coveted for one to imagine leaving it to the Haitian leaders to manage. If you have not already understood, aid and politics are prematurely linked, and the case of Préval will demonstrate it once again. We have juggled billions. To what result? After this final roadblock, the president does not know what he has obtained.)³¹

In the UN sequence, the epistolary fragments and Peck’s montage of assembly meetings work in concert to reveal that the humanitarian crisis is out of the hands of the Haitian government, largely, if not solely—as Peck states—because the NGO system coopted it for its own financial gain.

TALKING ABOUT BILL; OR, THE RECONSTRUCTION, THE MOVIE

In an extensive sequence later in the film, the female epistolary narrator explores her personal role in the nexus of international aid; she quickly realizes that she has little to no power because the institutional hierarchy is so deeply centralized. According to her narration, Bill Clinton is the linchpin of the entire aid system and the executive in chief of the Republic of NGOs. Peck presents the numerous titles held by Clinton in post-earthquake Haiti with an elaborate montage of sound bites and clips framing the former US president as a figurehead who hinders progress and dominates the floor of committee meetings.

After focusing on Clinton, the epistolary narrator turns to the real targets of the sequence: Clinton's disciples. They are the droves of well-intentioned young people who are eager to help rebuild Haiti. This is the most troubling demographic for the epistolary narrator because she is forced to recognize her own complicity as a member of this group. The epistolary narration, therefore, provides for the viewer a snapshot of the everyday aid worker—who “they” are and what their jobs look like—so that the montage of this episode can focus on specific people. The montage does not offer redemption. It excludes the workers' good intentions from the equation, revealing instead the problems international intervention has caused for Haitian citizens. In this sequence it is clear that Peck uses his cuts and footage to depict the inefficacies of the NGO community; for this reason, particular aid workers are cut off and never get the chance to explain themselves fully. The interplay between the epistolary narration and montage seeks to unravel the humanitarian aid system on a human level by not only revealing the follies of individuals guilty of subterfuge but also giving certain aid workers a chance for remorse. However, such remorse is not possible for the NGO system as a whole.

Peck's critique of the humanitarian system and the individual aid workers reveals the classic assertion of postcolonial studies that there is no intermediate position: one either supports colonialism—wittingly or not—or fights against it. In his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Aimé Césaire places the blame on individuals because they have the power to choose whether or not to support exploitative practices:

Et n'essaie pas de savoir si ces messieurs sont personnellement de bonne ou de mauvaise foi, s'ils sont personnellement bien ou mal intentionnés, s'ils sont personnellement, c'est-à-dire dans leur conscience intime de Pierre ou Paul, colonialistes ou non, l'essentiel étant que leur très aléatoire bonne foi

subjective est sans rapport aucun avec la portée objective et sociale de la mauvaise besogne qu'ils font de chiens du colonialisme.

(And do not try to figure out whether these gentlemen are personally of good or bad faith, if they are personally well or poorly intentioned, if they are personally, which is to say in their subconscious frame of mind, colonialists or not, the essential being that their extremely random and subjective good intentions have no connection with the objective social implications of the evil work they carry out as the watchdogs of colonialism.)³²

In *Assistance mortelle*, Peck reproduces a nuanced version of Césaire's "watchdogs" of colonialism, wherein both naïve and self-aware humanitarian workers exist.

Montage allows Peck to jump from one aid worker to the next, enabling the viewer to pass judgement on each individual. However, the epistolary narration allows the viewers to engage with the subjectivities of certain aid workers, making them more sympathetic characters. On one hand, there is Bryan Castro, who is stationed in the Corail camp for around ten months. He is portrayed as naïve, incapable of understanding the detrimental effect humanitarianism has had on Haiti since the earthquake relief effort began.³³ Castro's insistence on communicating in French, rather than Kreyòl, further reveals his overall disconnect with the community he purports to serve. On the other hand, the epistolary narrator is self-aware and extremely remorseful for her blind participation in the post-earthquake relief efforts. Her critique of Bill Clinton's followers is that they are "une majorité de jeunes gens vraiment intelligents mais peu expérimentés" (a majority of young, rather intelligent people with little practical experience). Simply being intelligent or a kind person is not the issue; the real question is whether aid workers are professionally, culturally, or linguistically qualified.³⁴ The sequence featuring Castro and the portion with the epistolary narrator represent opposite poles of the NGO system during the reconstruction; by analyzing the effects of epistolary narration versus montage, the distinction between the two becomes quite clear. On one hand, epistolary narration grants a chance for repentance, while on the other hand montage passes final judgement on individual aid workers.

After introducing the problem of Clinton and his ambitious followers, the film transports viewers to Corail, where Castro is giving an address to a room of Haitian community members. In audibly imperfect French, Castro applauds the community for their patience in the process, urging them to keep their morale high as he passes a binder full of rules, schematics,

and blueprints on to the new mayor of Corail. Castro is in the center of the room as he slowly, almost patronizingly, addresses the Haitians in attendance. Before he can finish speaking, Haitians start to lose their patience, calling him a liar and corrupt. Peck's choice to cut to this scene of Castro substantiates the epistolary narrator's claim about the workers' lack of experience. Peck allows the scene to unravel uninterrupted for about two minutes as the two aid workers struggle to regain the confidence of the Haitian crowd. Only after the mayor addresses them in Kreyòl do the residents of Corail suspend their distaste for Castro and his female, French counterpart—a woman who remains unIntroduced by Peck, which may be a reflection of the director's disdain for her condescending tone towards the Haitian onlookers. As the French aid worker begins speaking, recognizing that she does not understand Kreyòl but expecting the residents of Corail to understand her French, Peck reveals once again how the neocolonial hubris of the NGO system is completely out of touch with the demographic it purports to serve. He fades and then cuts the audio while Castro and his colleague are speaking, leaving them just as powerless as the assembled Haitian community.

Unlike Castro and his colleague, the female epistolary narrator is given the chance not only to confess her proverbial sins to the viewer but also to give a personal perspective on the entire situation in Haiti after the earthquake. In the monologue that terminates the Castro scene, she proclaims:

Nous avons collectivement échoué. J'ai été à la fois victime et exécutante, j'ai été dupée, j'ai été utilisée par les agences internationales et en particulier par celle qui m'a employée. Par les Haïtiens, et par un Haïtien en particulier, un homme que je suis venue à aimer . . . qui va jamais changer sa vie pour vivre avec moi. Il n'y a pas un "juste au milieu" en effet, pas d'équilibre possible. Tout ceci est cohérent en un sens, poétique presque.

(We have collectively failed. I was at the same time victim and executioner. I was duped by the international agencies, and in particular by the one that employed me. By the Haitians, and by one Haitian in particular, a man whom I have come to love . . . who is never going to change his life in order to live with me. There is no "just in the middle," no possible equilibrium. All of this is coherent in a way; it's almost poetic.)

The sentimentality of this final letter allows Peck to redeem the female epistolary voice, who, despite being aligned with the international aid

organizations, is also a victim of the humanitarian aid system in Haiti. The epistolary form allows for this type of confession in a way that montage does not. The narrator is given the opportunity to speak for herself rather than relying on the manipulation of scenes and cuts orchestrated by the director— although the viewer is left to constantly question whether the narrator has the right to speak because, presumably, Peck has also written the script or at least has left an editorial mark on her pronouncements. By individuating the female epistolary aid worker, Peck rejects the notion of “good” and “bad” aid workers or organizations. Instead, he sidesteps the “morality tale” of post-earthquake aid entirely in favor of a more nuanced analysis of the neoliberal aid system’s structure.³⁵ Ultimately, humanitarian justifications for the NGO occupation completely unravel by the end of the documentary, as the last standing line of defense, the aid workers in general, recognize the failures of the system they (un)wittingly supported. By revealing the powerlessness of even the individual aid workers, Peck effectively characterizes the humanitarian system as a nebulous, inhumane apparatus in which “les vrais responsables sont absents” (the real people in charge are absent).³⁶

CONCLUSION:

POSTCOLONIAL AND POST-EARTHQUAKE NARRATIVES IN HAITI

In her introduction to *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*, Linda Kaufmann invites readers to think about the post in terms of letters and the mail, but also as a prefix in relation to postmodern, postfeminist literature, and the creation of new genres through fragmented modes of storytelling. Similarly, in the case of *Assistance mortelle*, Peck helps viewers rethink the role of email, digital correspondence, and the twenty-four-hour news cycle in post-earthquake Haiti. These technologies not only allow information to escape the crucible of disasters like the 2010 earthquake but also enable people on the outside to (inter)act with the affected population. *Assistance mortelle* calls for a heightened awareness when it comes to humanitarian action in post-earthquake Haiti. Peck’s analysis of the NGO system and its workers calls into question the difference between aid and intervention, collaboration and cooptation, and humanitarianism and neocolonialism.

As Boutroue notes in his interviews with Peck during the film, Haiti is still greatly affected by the prejudices the world holds against it. *Assistance mortelle* demonstrates that this relationship has changed very little in the post-earthquake era; indeed, the patterns repeated after the passage of Hurricane Matthew in early October 2016.³⁷ Haiti remains caught in a cycle of ahistorical narratives that ignores the many waves of colonial and neocolonial violence brought on by France, the United States, the United

Nations, and other states, multinational organizations, and corporations. In order to wrest the power of narrative from (neo)colonial hands, post-earthquake Haitian artistic production like *Assistance mortelle* has provided nuanced accounts of the relief effort in Haiti rather than allowing it to be heralded an example of Western benevolence.

As part of the reframing of the relief narrative on Haitian terms, Peck begins and ends his film with Nader, who witnesses not only the earthquake but also the catastrophic failure of subsequent humanitarian aid efforts. The last person to be interviewed in the film, Nader refers to the earthquake as a part of Haitian folklore while pointing out that there are two versions of the story: the international and the local. Invariably, the international version overpowers the local, Haitian rendering of history. The Haitian engineer argues that continuous tales of Western hegemony can be summed up in the words of Haitian poet Frankétienne: “Tu meurs et puis, il t’insulte” (You die, and then he insults you). In the final sequence of the film, Peck attempts to reconcile the narrative inequities Nader mentions by narrating the film’s final letter as the image fades to closed-circuit footage of the earthquake:

Et puis, il y aura la voix grave, tremblante, et érotique d’un violoncelle.

Tu me demanderas à danser

Je suivrai une dernière fois le mouvement de ton corps.

Puis je te laisserai seule avec le cadavre de cet amour.

(And then, there will be the deep, trembling, and erotic voice of a cello.

You will ask me to dance

I’ll follow, one last time, the movement of your body.

Then I’ll leave you alone with the cadaver of our love.)³⁸

By giving himself the final say, Peck implicitly argues for a Haitian rendering of the history of the earthquake and the humanitarian fracas it left in its wake. The final epistle leaves the viewer to wonder whether Haiti itself is the cadaver, the object uniting Peck and his *chère amie*. And if the cadaver is Haiti, viewers are left to question whether it will receive a proper burial—allowing Haitians to bury their dead—so it can be reborn in the wake of the NGO occupation. Such an ambiguous, and perhaps ambivalent, ending is meant to resonate with viewers, prompting them to reflect on their own potential complicity and complacency in the face of neoliberal humanitarianism.

Notes

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¹ CNN, “Wyclef Jean Live on Anderson Cooper.”

² CNN, “Living in Haitian Tent Cities.”

³ *Goudougoudou* is one of the terms Haitians used to refer to the earthquake. It refers to the sound the earth made as it began to shake.

⁴ There are a number of scholarly texts and fictional works that directly address the NGO (including the UN) and US occupation of Haiti as well as a number of ways of referring to these occupations. For example, Jonathan M. Katz uses the term “The Republic of NGOs” in his 2013 book *The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster* (51). Fictional works addressing recent US and NGO occupations of Haiti include *Brother, I’m Dying*, by Edwidge Danticat, and Kettly Mars’s novel *Aux frontières de la soif*.

⁵ Pressley-Sanon and Saint-Just, “Introduction,” 3.

⁶ Sepinwall, “Who Is Raoul Peck?”

⁷ Pressley-Sanon and Saint-Just, “Introduction,” 3.

⁸ For more on the style and cinematic genealogy of Peck’s films, see: Barlet and Peck, “Lessons from the Cinema of Raoul Peck,” 243–263.

⁹ Céline Sallette is a French actress who is best known for her César-nominated work as Clotilde in *L’Apollonide : Souvenirs de la maison close* (2011).

¹⁰ Rousseau, *Julie*, 72.

¹¹ All the transcriptions and translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹² Schuller, *Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti*, 10.

¹³ Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, 7; Begin, “Buñuel, Eisenstein, and the ‘Montage of Attractions,’” 1120.

¹⁴ Addley, “Angelina Jolie Gets New Role.”

¹⁵ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 6.

¹⁶ Peck, *Assistance mortelle*.

¹⁷ Pont-du-Jour and Peck, “Filmmaker Question and Answer Session.”

¹⁸ Diawara, “The ‘I’ Narrator in Black Diasporic Documentary,” 316.

¹⁹ Walsh, “Haiti mon amour,” 196.

²⁰ Peck, *Assistance mortelle*.

²¹ The figure of Bill Clinton appears many times in this article, as he does in the film, because of his position as the president of the CIRH among many other honorary titles in the Haiti relief effort. His efforts to manage the relief process have been duly noted in articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Le Nouvelliste* and quite extensively in *The Big Truck That Went By*. Clinton was responsible for many US incursions into Haiti in the 1990s and early 2000s surrounding Jean-Bertrand Aristide's presidency. The Aristide affair has also been studied extensively; for further reading, consult: Dupuy, *The Prophet and Power*; Fatton, *Haiti*.

²² Peck, *Assistance mortelle*.

²³ Fatton, *Haiti*, 2.

²⁴ These are the French subtitles of the Kreyòl provided in the film, which I have transcribed and translated into English in the main body of the text.

²⁵ This process has not been exclusive to Haiti: for the history of US industrial imperialism in Latin America, see Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*; for the case of Brazil, see Grandin, *Fordlandia*.

²⁶ Peck, *Assistance mortelle*.

²⁷ René Préal (1943–2017) became the fifty-second president of Haiti in 1996 after serving under Jean-Bertrand Aristide as prime minister. According to Katz, Préal was a remarkably non-confrontational leader, while at the same time insisting that the only way for Haiti to change its fortunes is through political stability: “Préal’s default response to crises had long been to shrink from the public eye. Some of it was his strategy for political survival: knowing that any declaration had the power to alienate or disappoint. . . . In a nation whose political discourse had been defined by the high squeal dementias of Papa Doc Duvalier and the winding electric fantasias of Father Aristide, the prototypical Préal speech was an awkward, measured silence” (Katz, *The Big Truck That Went By*, 59).

²⁸ Peck, *Assistance mortelle*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Peck’s cynicism toward politics and the NGO system is evident not only in his film but also in a piece included in the edited volume *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture and the Earthquake of 2010*. Peck ponders the frightening state of affairs—refugee camps, ineffective humanitarian efforts, and governmental incompetence—when he writes: “Knowing the shortcomings of my country and expecting no consistency in the thinking of the international community (Haiti will not be the first place to be abandoned by the media and the humanitarian agencies), this provisional state of affairs is transforming itself already before our very eyes (in spite of the denials of Haitian and foreign leaders) into something definitive” (Peck, “Dead-End in Port-au-Prince,” 43).

- ³¹ Peck, *Assistance mortelle*.
- ³² Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, 39.
- ³³ Corail has been exposed in works subsequent to *Assistance mortelle* like those by Jonathan M. Katz and Kettly Mars. In Mars's novel *Aux frontières de la soif*, a Japanese professor of French comes to Haiti to write an article on the aftermath of the earthquake, making visits to settlements or camps such as Corail. Corail-Cesseless, or simply Corail, was the product of an effort to relocate a tent city from a golf course in Pétiön-Ville—as part of actor Sean Penn's humanitarian contribution to Haiti earthquake relief—to a stretch of land outside the city limits. The new settlement of Corail was also supposed to have the luxury of on-site work at a Korean textile factory until the Korean business partners backed out. While not all of these details are shown in *Assistance mortelle*, they are presented in their entirety in Katz's and Mars's works.
- ³⁴ Peck, *Assistance mortelle*. For a deeper exploration of the problematic “good guy” positioning of humanitarianism, see Glover, “Flesh like One's Own,” 245–250.
- ³⁵ Schuller, *Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti*, 9.
- ³⁶ Peck, *Assistance mortelle*.
- ³⁷ For a poignant and trenchant analysis of the parallels between the 2010 earthquake and Hurricane Matthew see, Wagner, “Chronicle of a Disaster Foretold.”
- ³⁸ Prophète, “Partager la poésie.”

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