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## Pumzi and the Politics of Trash

In Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi*, a futurist dystopia set in Africa 35 years after the so-called water war, the heroine Asha escapes her enclosed pod community, where water is scarce and electric power is generated by rowing machines and treadmills. She opens the escape hatch of her enclosed pod-world to begin her exodus into the surrounding desert, having been entrusted with a mysterious seed she's been given that is an organic living thing, unlike the "dead world" outside the pod. As she walks away from the structure, she steps out onto an "ancient" mound of rubbish. As Asha contemplates her next move, she plucks from the mound of trash a kanga, an Eastern African machine-stamped cloth wrap now faded from an eternity in the harsh sun. Asha wraps it around her head to protect her as she trudges into the barren east African landscape to plant the seed which will restore Africa and indeed the world to a fertile, virgin rainforest. The kanga might have been waiting for Asha, an object with latent potential to shield the woman and her fertile seed, a faded and functional object serendipitously "found" at the top of the mound. Standing at a threshold of use and non-use, the kanga negotiates time and human/organic ecology. Asha mediates a transition from the past when Africa was on the brink of ecological destruction (now), to the filmic time of Asha's post-apocalyptic world; her actions ultimately set off a chain of events that lead to a utopian future.



As do so many futuristic films, *Pumzi* allows us to glimpse our time as an image of history. As Asha steps outside of the hermetic world, she steps into a mound of the past: we recognize mason jars and gatorade bottles, papers and plastic bags. The blank slate of futuristic Africa is in reality built on the wreckage upon wreckage, Walter Benjamin's apocalyptic image of history. South African artist Penny Siopis famously depicted this wreckage as a trash heap. The heap is also, however, the image of collectivity that, much like early accounts of Africans by explorers and ethnographers, describes a global condition of Africa, one that relies on the image of oversignification and, more importantly, its existence as the dumping ground of time and material.

As a whole, *Pumzi* dramatizes the post-apocalypse that is at the base of our fascination with rubbish. It shows the aftereffects of all of the fears that masses of discarded waste bring forth: filth, excess, and even poison, and mass extinction of the earth's resources. But what *Pumzi* does differently than most of the other images of waste, especially as it appears in the so-called developing world, is to enact a futurism by singling out an item from a mound not for redemption, but to develop new techniques. That is, the visual trope of the mound is the psychological condition of paralysis from techniques of ecology. The kanga, then, is not only the tool best suited to Asha's task, but also a standing reserve waiting to be used with the correct method.

Similarly, Asha's lab in the virtual museum of natural history is filled with obsolescent items that have been "repurposed," ostensibly because of the scarcity of resources to the pod-world. An old film projector is now a holographic projector, a flatbed scanner has an increased penetrative ability to examine Asha's thoughts and biological makeup. Though the technological powers have changed, increased even, the materials for it have not much. It is what Bruno Latour speaks of in technology as new technique—leaving the matter of the appearance of the apparatus behind in the face of advanced optics. The capacity of the projector and scanner are made efficient through techne, the knowledge of doing or making. This is the distinction I want to make with "making due."

Many theorists of the trash in trash art address the issue of time, the cycles of products indicating both the flows of global capitalism and the primitivism of those areas that receive trash. Countless essays and exhibition texts on Nigerian artist El Anatsui describe his work variously as trash, recycled, transformation, and the Yoruba word *sankofa*, meaning "go back and pick." Anatsui himself has described this as a process of going back both in time and in memory and reformulating objects to be aesthetic and in that sense redemptive. The danger in remaining fixed on the status of his material as "trash" carries with it a danger in reinforcing the stereotype of artists in developing (and I use that word in quotes) nations who "make due" in the tradition of Claude Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur. It was Duchamp, after all, while speaking of the dangers of excessively repeating his production of readymades that "art is a habit-forming drug"—repeating the reading of image of trash as a geopolitical situation is likewise habit-forming.

In just one example of this, South African artist Zwelethu Mthethwa was commissioned by the Prospect.1 biennial in New Orleans in 2008 to produce a body of work in New Orleans. He photographed parts of post-Katrina New Orleans, particularly the peri-urban housing of corrugated iron and cardboard structures similar to those he shoots in South Africa. In fact many critics mistook his work for the photos he takes in South Africa—it was unclear where the photos came from at all but rather had the patches of color and texture with sections such as this draped cooked in mud, the collision of natural and unnatural accumulation. Like much of the art in

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world”, the pseudomorphism of blight became the theme of many works in Prospect 1. But this pseudomorphism is one of the foundational aspect of international biennials themselves. Tracing back to Documenta 1955, which was built out of the ruins of WWII, global art exhibitions have had social ills as a unifying aesthetic, with the idea that participating in the show is a form of direct democracy. The oversignification within pieces like Mthethwa’s is matched by the overwhelming number of pieces in the exhibition as a whole, a borage of information, a sublime inability to absorb it all.

Mthethwa’s work was described in a 2009 exhibition at the Shainman Gallery as “stunning portraits [that] show black Africans as dignified and defiant, even under the duress of social and economic hardship.” In an often repeated sentiment, the gallery makes this crucial connection between the piles of trash and the character of the generic African. These statements communicate the shared anxiety about lumping the black body in with the mounds of trash, to search for some kind of distinction that can be made by referencing the basic humanism of the figure. Here, the image is not a photograph at all, but an index of the unconscious and old trope of guilt and paternalism running parallel to the flow of goods globally. This has been in large part the parallel of the contemporary terms developing and developed nations, the figuring of the first and third worlds now in terms of time. In that sense, the image of the mound of trash is stasis.



The black African as “dignified and defiant” could be one way of reading the work of Nigerian photographic collective “Depth of Field.” Emeka Okerere’s *Suffering and Smiling 2*, is a black and white image of a man sitting atop, or rather at the foot of, an enormous mound of rubbish that rises above him and out of the frame on all sides. The man sitting at the foot of the mound is well dressed in a clean white shirt and tie, holding a cell phone and grinning. In his other hand is a second cellphone. The smile, the white shirt, the shiny shoes all jump out of the mound of detritus on which he sits. The image is ambivalent to a reading of dignity and defiance, however. Is this an image that seeks to normalize the crisis which is waste management? Is it ironic? Social realism? The image is uncanny in its juxtaposition, as we view the beginning and the end together: the splitting off of good from bad is here collapsed into a closed circuit, a feedback loop.

Let’s compare this photo to Fred McDarrah’s of Robert Rauschenberg in an empty lot, Rauschenberg being the most famous postwar artists to use trash in his work, drawing out distinctions from Duchamp’s readymade. the characters in each photo are at home in the midst of rubbish, happy to be resting in a graveyard of material commodities. significantly, They both use objects of media that are most aggressively assigned a short life cycle, the newspaper and cellphone. Both are consumers of products and also find themselves among their waste. It is worth determining in what sense they are integrated within the image, as the difference between the readymade, found object, collage, and recyclia—all of the baggage of this terminology—has been embedded in the way we estimate art production from the developing world to the developed world. For Rauschenberg, as for Duchamp, the decision to include objects not made by the artist’s hand was part of the gesture of the artist. It was never assumed that he or his body would be collapsed within the condition of detritus, but only the act of selection.



By introducing my essay with Pumzi, however, I suggest that the regime of representation of “Africa” and even the “developing world” is currently undergoing change. Kahiui calls Pumzi an exploration of Afrofuturism, which has, since the 1960s, been concerned with a renewal of the obsolescent as a technique of consciousness and agency. Its theorists have proposed a different relationship to objects and technology especially, working the material as a standing reserve always ready to be engaged against the grain of planned obsolescence.

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