

# FILM REVIEW

**Joël Akafou, director. *Traverser*.** 2020. 77 minutes. French. VraiVrai Films. No Price Reported.

In *Traverser* (which means “to cross”), director Joël Akafou continues the work he began in *Vivre Riche*, his formidable first film in which he described the daily life of “brouteurs.” These are young men who scam men and women in Europe via online dating platforms from the screens of Abidjan’s cyber-cafés. The main character, *Traverser* (nicknamed *Bourgeois*), already appeared in this first film. We find him in this next installment a few years later in Italy, where he is staying while waiting to cross the French border, the last stage of an adventure that has taken him through Libya and the Mediterranean. Through the journey of this young man, Joël Akafou deals with the physical barriers—the desert, the Mediterranean, the migrant camps, the Alpine mountains—as well as the metaphorical boundaries—the relationships of love and friendship, the social and economic barriers—which these sub-Saharan migrants must go through to reach Europe.

When the film begins, *Bourgeois* and his friends have been waiting patiently for eight months for the commission to decide on their papers. They live as best they can, between the help of the local Ivorian community and that of the association “el campo” which accommodates them while they wait for the end of the process. But *Bourgeois* is in a hurry; he wants to get to France as soon as possible. We understand in the first scenes that he has just left the accommodation of “el campo” to settle down with his partner of the moment, *Michelle*, a young Ivorian woman with legal problems who lives with her child. But *Michelle* has difficulty accepting the dalliances of her lover, who continues to increase his conquests in the hope that one of them will be able to help him to settle in Europe. We follow in parallel the story of *Kader*, a young man whom *Bourgeois* met in Libya and with whom he crossed the Mediterranean. The two men are very close; *Kader* is as much a confidant as an advisor for *Bourgeois*.

The film, which borrows as much from Italian neo-realism as from direct cinema, follows *Bourgeois*’ journey as closely as possible for about four months. The filmic device, both simple and demanding, relies almost exclusively on Joël Akafou, who uses a hand-held camera in order to follow

Bourgeois' daily life. This proximity to the character is explicitly staged. We know from the start, in the scene where Joël Akafou arrives in Italy, that the director and the protagonist are friends. This element largely explains the success of the film. Indeed, the trust that Bourgeois places in the director allows the latter to film intimate moments of life rarely seen in a documentary. We understand the sorrows of Bourgeois when he talks with his mother, who has remained in Côte d'Ivoire, we follow his love affairs and the attendant setbacks with the various girls with whom he has relationships, we see him with his friends, talking about the fears and doubts of their everyday lives. It is obvious that Joël Akafou shares the daily life of this group of young people, going so far as to accompany Bourgeois at the start of a hiking trail as he tries unsuccessfully to cross the French border on foot, through the Alps, in the middle of winter. The director's involvement plunges us, at his side, into the heart of the concerns of this group of migrants who realize, in the words of one of them, that "the adventure is not even easy."

The formal success of the film is consolidated by the almost didactic aspect of the work that allows us to see these migratory realities "from the inside." While the first film of what promises to be a triptych deals with the "débrouille," the Ivorian word that defines a whole set of often illegal practices that allow these young people to live from day to day in the streets of Abidjan, this second opus plunges us into the disillusionment of migration and confronts us with the daily realities of these young people who are looking for nothing more than to find a place in society. While waiting for the bureaucratic key that is the residence permit, these young people wander the streets, killing time by having fun with each other or by just talking. In one scene where they are debating politics, the group of friends becomes angry about a statement by the Ivorian president Alassane Ouattara: "those who cross the Mediterranean are foreigners, they are not real Ivorians." Kader, a graduate of a BTS in communication and who studied law for three years at the university, responds to this pronouncement by saying that he tried to enter the Ivorian job market with his diplomas but that it was impossible in a country where corruption and clientelism too often govern access to employment. These difficulties, which they have all experienced, motivate them to "seek themselves" in Europe, in the absence of opportunities in their own country. At the heart of these young people's preoccupations, we also see their desire to keep their families alive. They make an effort to stay in regular contact with their families, notably through social networks where they stage themselves in front of monuments to let their relatives believe that all is well and that their situation is not so bad. The human focus of the film, which sidesteps the follow-up of administrative procedures or hearings, allows us to grasp more closely not only what motivates the migration of these young people, but also their innermost hopes and fears.

The film shows that these young people live in situations that are just as difficult upon their arrival in Europe as those they lived in before their departure; it would be salutary for this to be shown in West African cinemas. With no network to support them, and waiting for papers that sometimes

never arrive, each individual pursues different strategies to get by. Bourgeois seems to hope that one of his romantic relationships will allow him access to papers and then training for a job that will enable him to live with dignity. As for Kader, he waits patiently in the camp for the commission to decide his fate. It is the women who seem to have the most success. The various conquests of Bourgeois have regular employment in Italy and France, which allows them to help provide in part for the needs of this community. This last aspect, often invisible in documentaries (but very well treated in research on migration), is highlighted here, especially in the final climax.

Joël Akafou has told me in personal conversations that, two years after the end of the filming, after having crossed the border illegally, Bourgeois lives in Paris but is still in a precarious situation and without papers. Conversely, Kader waited in Italy, and he now has a residence permit, but he too wishes to leave Italy for France. Through these two journeys, and the few others that we glimpse throughout the film, the director demonstrates the diversity of migratory situations and ways of living them for these young men in search of stability. The film avoids falling into pathos, but simply captures these journeys, which communicates much more about migration than most of the public speeches of recent years.

Léo Montaz 

*Université de Lille / CEPED / Université de Paris / IRD  
Lille/Paris, France*

*leo.montaz@sciencespo.fr*

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