

IN FOCUS: Studying African Cinema and Media Today

Introduction

by ABOUBAKAR SANOGO, editor

There has seldom been a more propitious and exciting moment to study African cinema and media than today. The current configuration of the object referred to by the phrase “African cinema and media” and the discourses that seek to account for it, surround it, and in some cases make it visible are best perceived as being under the sign of the multiple. This indeed is the age of the proliferation of objects and a multiplication of discourses that seek to keep pace with developments in a field in perpetual motion.

The debates that rage in African cinema and media encompass the fields of the theoretical, the historiographic, and the critical, and indeed include the question of the articulation of the cultural, the political, and the economic. Chief among them (this is a nonexhaustive compendium) is arguably the question of the identity of the object (What, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, are the “cinema” and the “media” in African cinema and media? What is the “African” in African cinema and media?).¹ These questions lead to the problem of naming: How should the object be referred to? African film/cinema studies? Media studies? Screen studies? Moving-image studies? Screen media studies?² The advent of Nollywood and the question of the status of video add both complexity and uncertainty regarding the object. Is Nollywood cinema or video? Movie or film? What is this

1 This author started elaborating aspects of the present synthesis of strains of debates in African cinema following the “Semaphores and Surfaces” conference on African cinema held at Princeton University on November 1–3, 2013—co-organized by Wendy Belcher and Beatriz Leal Riesco and featuring several scholars of African cinema and media.

2 See Dovey in this In Focus issue.

category known as the “video film”? What might its relationship be to film theory? To video theory? To television and television theory? To aesthetics? Could Nollywood be discussed on the same continuum with *Touki bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambety, 1973) or *Heremakono* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2002)? Should Nollywood instead be analyzed in its own positivity, that is, as partaking in all the above and (potentially) more while remaining resolutely irreducible to either?

Another key site of debates in the field relates to an interrogation of the appropriate mode of accounting for the object around the dialectic of its generalizability and contingency. In that context the question of theory and theorizing has a particular resonance namely as it relates to the question of whether African cinema is an object of study like any other, which ought to be approached accordingly. Within this axis of debates a number of questions are raised: What is or might be the relationship of African cinema as an object and set of practices to so-called “Western” theory? Is it, or should it be, regarded in terms of the vampirism of applied theory, of epistemic violence, of “raw material” to be processed by the *logos* of “Western” theory, or should it instead be seen as a productive and mutually beneficial dialogue? Could “Western” theory offer useful insight for the study of African cinema? Conversely, could studies in African cinema and media help jettison a priori and aporias in so-called “Western” theory, itself unduly substantialized and presented as autotelic?

A major corollary to this debate is the status of oral culture and indeed of notions of cultural specificity as the most desirable and effective modes of inquiry into African cinema as an object.³ What might some of the distinguishing features of African cinema be? Can the multimillennial cultural heritage of the African continent be productively brought to bear on the object known as African cinema? How might this be helpful in producing theories, aesthetics, and politics of cinema in Africa? Is it acceptable to study African cinema without a minimum knowledge of aspects of African culture? Of African languages? Can African cinema be properly understood outside of such considerations?

Yet another strain of the debate seeks to examine the role contemporary African and Afro-diasporic thinkers might play in efforts to theorize African cinema. While in the past such African and Afro-diasporic figures as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and W. E. B. Du Bois were used, in more recent years, thinkers like Valentin Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy, among others, have been deployed in an effort to think the contemporary in relation to the cinema.⁴

African cinema and media is also the site of the emergence of new objects either from within Africa or in keeping with developments in the larger field of film and media studies. In the first case, the question of Nollywood, one of the single most important African interventions in global film and media, has increasingly been the subject of numerous studies and positionings through recourse to a diverse range of

3 In some ways, several articles in Frank Ukadike's latest book partake in this school of thought. See Frank Nwachukwu Ukadike, ed., *Critical Approaches to African Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

4 See Alexie Tcheuyap, *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 2011); Sheila J. Petty, *Contact Zones: Memory, Origin and Discourses in Black Diasporic Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008) *inter alia*.

methodologies and fields, such as popular culture studies, anthropology, media studies, and increasingly, transnational and global/world studies.⁵

In the second category, new objects of inquiry have emerged, ranging from the question of the digital in its multiple incarnations—in particular as an alternative or supplementary site of distribution and exhibition (online distribution platforms) and production (from shooting to crowdfunding), and as a producer of new modes of spectatorship—to the film festival phenomenon (inspired by the work of the Amsterdam and St. Andrews schools), both in its own positivity and in its status as mediator of taste and access to African film objects.⁶

In parallel with the rising interest in the transnational and the global, there has also been an increased recognition of the need for a new investment in the (re) exploration of the national—even as it is articulated with the first two categories along with the local, the regional, and the continental—in particular as new information becomes available and makes possible more thorough studies of the history of cinema in specific countries. Indeed, as the generic phrase “African cinema” situates these continent-wide sets of practices as always already transnational—perhaps, indeed, as one of the original case studies of the transnational—studying the national becomes an indispensable gesture that promises to offer more complexity and specificity.⁷

Finally, there has also been a renewed interest in the foundational moments of African film practice. This has taken several forms, from the historiographic to the theoretical and the critical, involving an investment in the study of the colonial; an interrogation of the periodization of African cinema (when and where does it begin?); the status of the pioneers of African cinema (is Sembene the actual or symbolic “father” of African cinema?); their lingering shadows in discourses of African cinema (their putative ruinous effects on the development of these discourses); and the still profoundly generative dimensions of their work, the whole corpus of which has yet to

5 See Matthias Krings and Onokome Okome, eds., *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Akin Adesokan, *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). For a more comprehensive bibliography on Nollywood scholarship, see Akudinobi in this In Focus issue.

6 On the digital see, Lizelle Bisschof and Ann Overbergh, “Digital as the New Popular in African Cinema? Case Studies from the Continent,” *Research in African Literatures* 43, no.4 (winter 2012); Lucy Gebre-Egziabher, “Digital Film-making: Panacea or Scourge for African Cinema.” *Teretproductions.com*. Teret Productions, Oct. 2006. Web. 13 November. 2012. On film festivals, see Lindiwe Dovey in this In Focus issue.

7 See Lucia Saks, *Cinemas in a Democratic South Africa: The Race for Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Jacqueline Maingard, *South African National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Guido Convents, *Images et démocratie: Les Congolais face au cinéma et à l'audiovisuel—Une histoire politico-culturelle du Congo des Belges jusqu'à la République démocratique du Congo (1896-2006)*, (Kessel-Lo, Belgique: Afrika Film Festival, 2006); more recently Carmela Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Guy Austin, *Algerian National Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Robert Lang, *New Tunisian Cinema: Allegories of Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); etc. The regional as a framework is also receiving specific attention. See for example, Andrea Khalil, *North African Cinema in a Global Context: Through the Lens of Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Florence Martin, *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); James Genova, *Cinema and Development in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) inter alia.

become accessible.⁸ In the same context, an interrogation of third cinema as an appropriate methodology for contemporary cinema has been raised, with a number of possible responses, ranging from “reenchantment” through revalidation of both second and first cinema in contemporary practice to *Aufhebung*.⁹ Neither this brief cartography nor the articles here assembled claim to, or seek to, exhaust all the debates in the field of African cinema and media. Instead, they humbly offer a freeze-frame on some of the contemporary obsessions of both practitioners and scholars.

Thus, Moradewun Adejunmobi’s stimulating essay seeks to account for one of many modalities through which the filmic and the televisual might be articulated in the context of film and media practice in Africa. She focuses on the emerging Nigerian and Ghanaian “video film” practice and foregrounds the notion of “televisual recurrence” as an element of commonality (given the televisual filiation of many Nollywood directors), characterized at the textual level by a high degree of tolerance for interrupted viewing, sequelization, and loosely knit mini-narratives, eerily evoking a redeployment of some of the tropes of the cinema of attractions.

Lindiwe Dovey’s reflexive essay interrogates some of the conditions of the emergence of discourse on African cinema and media and uses the film festival as one of the key sites that mediate both discourse and object. In examining film festivals as an object of study, Dovey ipso facto poses the question of the role and space of spectatorship in African film and media study, thereby contributing to its emergence as a sustained field of study with a set of methodologies yet to be fully developed. Her study also raises the question of the material specificity of the institution of the film festival in Africa, which became a default setting for the screening of films on the continent as a result of a confluence of circumstances, including exhibitor risk aversion, the weighty infrastructure of “celluloid” cinema, the ascendancy of piracy, concerns with safety and pricing as well as the meddling role of international financial institutions,—all of which contributed to a slow de-theatricalization until a recent move in the opposite direction.

Jude Akudinobi’s essay maps some of the dominant features of the Nigerian “video film” industry, which has generated a “Nollywood fever,” helping usher in new sets of relationships with the moving image across the African continent and beyond. Highlighting Nollywood’s modes of operation, political economy, and economic significance—and multiple contours including its appropriative and reconfigurative gestures—Akudinobi also points to the current identity crisis the industry has been experiencing: a crisis characterized by overproduction, rampant piracy (ironically also

8 Aboubakar Sanogo, *The History of Documentary in Africa: The Colonial Era* (forthcoming); Kenneth Harrow, *Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Manthia Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Politics and Aesthetics* (Munich: Prestel, 2010); Aboubakar Sanogo, “Reconsidering the Sembenian Project: Towards an Aesthetics of Change,” in *Critical Approaches to African Cinema*, ed. Frank Nwachukwu Ukadike (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 209–226.

9 See Rachel Gabara, “Abderrahmane Sissako: Second and Third Cinema in the First Person,” in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 320–333; Frank Ukadike, “Video Booms and Manifestations of First Cinema in Anglophone Africa,” in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2003); Sanogo, *After Third Cinema* (forthcoming).

one of the bedrocks of its success), a desire for more formalization of its business practices and a call for higher production values. He thus demonstrates that Nollywood itself is undergoing profound transformations and is poised to change many dimensions of its current outlook in order to give rise to a “new Nollywood.”¹⁰

Finally, my own contribution focuses on the auteurist tradition as a complementary counterpoint to the Nollywood tradition. In spite of its economic fragility, infrastructural challenges, and putative invisibility with audiences, the auteurist tradition remains vibrant and full of promise. This is demonstrated here in three case studies of auteurist film practice. The first two relate to the tradition’s institutional conditions of possibility by examining two recent developments: one related to the Africa First experiment, which was one of the first mechanisms through which a relationship between African cinema and the specialty wing of Hollywood studios was imagined, and the other related to a potential return of the state in the business of film auteurism. The Africa First experiment made possible what was arguably discursively unthinkable in the 1970s, given the war of maneuver unfolding in the heyday of the third cinema moment; and while it remains fraught with ambiguities and in spite of its limitations (small scale, short life span), it remains arguably one of the most interesting and productive auteurist experiments in recent years.

The second case study explores the recent renewed interest in the institutional role of the state in enabling an auteurist tradition. Although the relationships between the state and African cinema have taken multiple and often contradictory forms over the decades—ranging from indifference, laissez-faire, obstruction, and sabotage to co-optation, subsidy, and institutional support—there has been a renewed call in recent years for a more vigorous presence of the state in the cinema, in light of the experience of Morocco, which has become the largest producer of (auteurist) films on the continent. Finally, the essay examines the ways in which the auteurist tradition pursues and renews the critical tradition in African cinema invested in an ethics and politics of social responsibility in practice. New modes of engagement, analyzed here, invest the space of the imaginary and anticipate modalities of transformation.

How to conclude this introduction without briefly drawing out some of the implications for the field of film and media studies of what it means to study African cinema and media today? It ought to have become clear to the reader that such a move is not to be thought of as being on the order of the supplement but instead of the constitutive, indeed of the mutually constitutive. Indeed, the question of identity crisis at the heart of both the object and the discourses surrounding African cinema and media mirrors the profound identity crisis that the field of film and media studies is undergoing. For example, current anxieties around the object known as “film” or “cinema,” and whether it should be looked at in terms of technology, medium, or experience, were all arguably already crystalized in the form of Nollywood, which proposed an agnostic relationship to debates around medium specificity and instead produced a new and popular practice out of medium convergence (Jenkins), or promiscuity (Gunning).¹¹

10 See Jonathan Haynes, “The New Nollywood: Kunle Afolayan,” *Black Camera* 5, no. 2 (2014): 53–73.

11 These anxieties are well documented in Marc Furstenau, ed., *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

Africa, then, might be one of the sites where these questions are being most forcefully and clearly played out. Indeed, the historical experience of Nollywood may be read as having anticipated both the post-theatrical and indeed the post-celluloid moments in cinema history. It did so by operating its video turn earlier than most (from the late 1980s to the early 1990s) and by deploying it not only simply, as a mode of exhibition and circulation, but also as a mode of systematic mass production, thereby pushing the video medium beyond its previously experimental and domestic usage. In so doing, it arguably activated the Aristotelian notion of *entelechy*, which consists of actualizing the potential of a given matter, here the “popular cinema” potential of video.¹² In the process, it also sought to invest spaces outside of the theatrical space and produce alternative forms of spectatorship that have contributed to its global status today.

In other words, studying African cinema and media today consists not only of bringing new objects of study to the general field but also of posing questions to reigning orthodoxies by displacing the gaze and indeed offering a new corpus through which new debates or new ways of looking at existing debates become possible. Studying African cinema and media today implies recognizing the radical contingency of the legacy of the general field of film and media studies, often prone to generalizations about the object based on case studies located predominantly in what might be referred to as “G-8 cinema” and media practice. Studying African film and media entails rephrasing André Bazin’s classic question from a more abstract “What is cinema?” to a more reflexively situated “What is cinema for whom, where, and when?” These might be the best terms of reference for genuine mutual constitution. *

12 This reading of the term *entelechy* is partly inspired by Kodwo Eshun’s deployment of the term in relation to hip hop aesthetics in John Akomfrah’s classic Afro-futurist film *The Last Angel of History* (1995). See also Joe Sachs, *Aristotle’s Physics: A Guided Study* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

African Film's Televisual Turn

by MORADEWUN ADEJUNMOBI

There is an ongoing debate over how best to qualify the popular audiovisual narratives that are being released in large numbers across many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In her 2013 history of Ghanaian film, for example, Carmela Garritano enumerates the reasons she titled her book *African Video Movies* rather than *African Video Films*. The word *movie*, she says, conjures different associations than *film* and better “captures the aspirations and ambitions of video producers in Ghana.”¹ By contrast, in his discussion of the Nigerian film industry, Alessandro Jedlowski notes that while “Nollywood is often referred to as cinema[,] . . . [it] produces something that is located between cinema and television.”² Yet other scholars write of “home videos,” “video films,” and “cinema” in their examination of related phenomena in different locations across Africa. There is, in a sense, not much contradiction between the positions taken by both Garritano and Jedlowski. Many (though not all) filmmakers working with video do indeed aspire to create “movies”; however, relatively few of those “movies” circulate through theatrical exhibition.³ Given the fluidity of the media product itself and the associated terminology, it would be helpful to begin thinking of frameworks for understanding how to position these popular audiovisual narratives in relation to television, on the one hand, and cinema, on the other. In what follows, I examine what could be described as the televisual turn in African film from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century. I also identify some indicators for distinguishing between different kinds of films, depending on their propensity for televisual recurrence or ability to foster viewing habits typically associated with television.

1 Carmela Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013), 23.

2 Alessandro Jedlowski, “Small Screen Cinema: Informality and Remediation in Nollywood,” *Television and New Media* 13, no. 5 (2012): 432.

3 Like Garritano (23–24), I note that the award ceremonies, which have emerged around the continent recently and to which filmmakers working on video first began to submit their work, use the descriptor *movie*. The best known of these in West Africa is probably the African Movie Academy Awards (AAMA), established in 2005, which accepted video submissions as an adequate format for film exhibition from the onset. This occurred at a time when the internationally renowned FESPACO would not accept that video submissions vie for the coveted Yennenga Stallions in the main competition category alongside films submitted in 35mm. Instead, for two decades, FESPACO positioned video submissions alongside television in a separate exhibition and competition category titled “Television and Video.” The requirement separating video from film would eventually be dropped in 2013.

Cinema screen space is limited in much of sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, for example, Burkina Faso reportedly had twelve cinemas, Niger had five, and Namibia had three.⁴ By contrast, television is relatively widespread, even in poorer countries. In some instances, as recently noted by Marie-Soleil Frère for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, television has surpassed radio to become the most widely consumed medium.⁵ Though radio is frequently more accessible than television, television has become the primary form for consuming electronically recorded fictional narratives around Africa. In any case, when asked what “films” they have watched recently, many Africans are more likely to refer to filmed narratives that they have watched on television. To take one example, Nollywood films are most frequently watched as home video, and for this reason, Jedlowski calls Nollywood “small screen cinema.”⁶ The same is true for the output of the popular film industries that have emerged in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to name just a few. Many of the online platforms for African films that have come into existence in the past few years likewise allude to the primary site of spectatorship in Africa by adding the word *TV* to their name. Thus, for example, in the case of Nigerian video films, we now have iROKOTv, IbakaTv, NdaniTv, TheOkinTv, and NaijaTv, among many other online platforms established to make these films available to audiences around the world. This definitional uncertainty when it comes to separating television from “non-television” is not peculiar to Africa. William Uricchio observes that in today’s world, it is often difficult to know where one medium begins and another ends.⁷

Instead of revisiting familiar distinctions between art and commercial cinema, or between platforms of exhibition, I explore a different axis of differentiation, which pertains in particular to the function of audiovisual narratives on the media landscape. Specifically, I wish to propose that we differentiate audiovisual narratives according to their potential for televisual recurrence. For my purposes here, I define televisual recurrence as the ability to attract similarly constituted publics to the same or similarly themed and styled audiovisual texts on a fairly regular and recurrent basis. Heeding Lisa Gitelman’s call for attentiveness to the social and cultural dimensions of media, I foreground television’s capacity for generating a particular kind of sociality by periodically convening a locally diverse pool of viewers for shared engagement with an audiovisual text in a domestic or frequently shared work space.⁸ My primary argument, then, is that we distinguish filmed narratives that are organized in such a way as to successfully solicit a kind of periodic and even recurrent engagement with particular publics from filmed narratives that are not similarly constructed. Even when such fictional filmed narratives are not broadcast on either local or satellite television stations,

4 UNESCO Institute of Statistics, “Analysis of the UIS Survey on Feature Film Statistics (2009),” information sheet 1, <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/is1-international-survey-feature-film-culture-2009-en.pdf>.

5 Marie-Soleil Frère, *Elections and the Media in Post-Conflict Africa: Votes and Voices for Peace?* (London: Zed Books, 2011), 188.

6 Jedlowski, “Small Screen Cinema,” 432.

7 William Uricchio, “The Future of a Medium Once Known as Television,” in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 29.

8 Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 7.

the opportunity to watch these kinds of narratives may provide a major justification for having a television in the home, for making regular use of the television set, and for visiting public venues with television screens. My secondary and related argument is that these types of independently produced fictional film narratives enable local television stations to continue fulfilling the functions and promise of television in a neoliberal Africa.

Raymond Williams famously characterized television by referring to the flow of its programming.⁹ For their part, Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz remind us that television itself was initially understood as the media in the home, unlike other media that required one to leave home.¹⁰ Both of these characterizations, focusing on the structuring of content and the site of access, highlight television's capacity to solicit and sustain a particular kind of spectatorship. Though television has the potential for generating recurrent publics, certain kinds of content and programming better exploit this potential than others. The "regulatory and technological moment" in contemporary Africa is one in which independently produced filmed fiction has become one of the best ways for generating televisual recurrence today.¹¹ Audiovisual narratives with a high potential for producing televisual recurrence can be easily slipped into the scheduling flow of broadcast television or can alternatively engender a perception of programming flow in the absence of broadcasting.

What, then, are the qualities that anticipate and cater to the need for televisual recurrence in filmed narratives in Africa today? In the first place, one might note the topicality and currency of the themes explored in these fictional narratives. In the place of live transmission as a basis for maintaining audience interest, a topical immediacy often permeates the stories presented, even when the fictional narrative is set in a different time. Episodic diegesis and a certain degree of narrative incoherence are additional qualities of the fictions with a high propensity for televisual recurrence. Early Nollywood blockbusters like *Glamour Girls* (Kenneth Nnebue, 1994) exhibited this structure, with the "singular" audiovisual text consisting of several mini-stories loosely strung together. Later still, stories began to be subdivided into several parts released over time on separate video CDs (VCDs) numbered sequentially, as in *Fazebook Babes 1&2* (Uchenna Ivo, 2012). It is worth noting, though, that there are now films released in cinemas that retain the episodic format. Such is the case with Ghanaian filmmaker Shirley Frimpong-Manso's *Adam's Apples* (2011) films, which have been described as a "10-part movie series."¹² Although Frimpong-Manso chose to abandon the direct-to-video format used by most Ghanaian filmmakers and has aimed for higher production values in her films, the films were available for purchase as VCDs soon after an initial

9 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992).

10 Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz, *Television Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 6.

11 William Uricchio, "Television's Next Generation: Technology/Interface Culture/Flow," in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 168.

12 See, e.g., "Adam's Apples Series Airstarts this weekend," *Modern Ghana*, March 22, 2013, <http://www.modernghana.com/music/20817/3/adams-apples-series-airstarts-this-weekend.html>; "Ghana's Adam's Apples Launches an Innovative Ten-Part Film Series That Will Be Distributed to Cinemas with a Special Anti-Piracy Lock," *Balancing Act*, April 28, 2011, <http://www.balancingact-africa.com/news/broadcast/issue-no103/top-story/ghana-s-adam-s-apple/bc>.

theatrical run. To that extent, they represent a mixed strategy combining initial theatrical exhibition with the more familiar model of watching VCDs on home television.

In the period immediately following their release, films with a high propensity for televisual recurrence are endlessly available on VCD, sometimes DVD, on pay television, and increasingly on the Internet. However, they are valued not for offering a unique rendition of a story line but for being the newest and the latest interpretation of a familiar story. Thus, the filmed narratives that best cater to televisual recurrence show a preference for thematic iteration. In both the Nigerian and Ghanaian film industry, popular story cycles peak and then fade away, giving rise to new cycles. Recent years have seen cycles focusing on young women (and especially female undergraduates) who defy local morality codes, Africans seeking fortune abroad, men who sacrifice family members to become wealthy, and many more. A heightened adherence to the conventions of genre, and beyond that even to the outline of specific stories, is a characteristic of these audiovisual narratives. While the narrative structure is open-ended to accommodate the possibility of deferred resolution, the stories aim for decisive ideological closure. Thus, each subsequent installment of the story is another opportunity to reaffirm conservative social values.

Although there is a great deal of fluctuation in this area, the most popular audiovisual narratives oriented toward televisual recurrence can be watched in the company of audiences comprising mixed genders, ages, and ethnic groups. Indeed, the need to entertain mixed audiences is a further reason for tolerating varying degrees of narrative incoherence. Somewhat shocking scenes can be included in the narrative as long as they account for the prevailing ideology. One thinks, for example, of the scene in the popular film *Billionaire's Club* (Afam Okereke, 2003) in which a woman with occult powers places an infant in a wooden bowl and slowly pounds the baby to death. As noted by Comaroff and Comaroff, popular imaginaries in neoliberal Africa increasingly rely on references to occult economies and ritual murder for making sense of what appears to be an inexplicable accumulation of wealth on the part of individuals with no visible source of revenue.¹³ However, African films that portray sexual activity in an explicit manner are less likely to sustain a high degree of televisual recurrence.

Perhaps the most important quality of films with a high potential for televisual recurrence is their narrative accommodation for interrupted viewing. These interruptions do not have to depend on commercial breaks or the indiscriminate use of remote control devices.¹⁴ Fictional film narratives with a potential for televisual recurrence can be enjoyed even when viewing must be suspended to receive guests, to serve meals, or to attend to mundane tasks like house cleaning. The stories and their outcomes cannot be so singular or so brief that one would lose sight of the narrative thread if viewing were repeatedly interrupted. Although singular narratives with an earlier history of theatrical exhibition might be watched on television, they do not foster similarly high levels of televisual recurrence.

13 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony," *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 2 (1999): 279–303.

14 Uricchio, "Television's Next Generation," 168.

Films intended primarily for theatrical exhibition may exhibit one or more of the attributes discussed thus far, signaling some movement in the direction of televisual recurrence. However, it is the concurrence of most of the features identified here in a particular audiovisual narrative that makes for a high degree of televisual recurrence, rather than the incidence of any one element by itself. Thus, there are African films that benefit from theatrical exhibition that retain many of the qualities associated with televisual recurrence, such as, for example, the very successful Yoruba language film *Jénifà* (Muhydeen Ayinde, 2008). There are other films that may or may not be shown on broadcast television—like *The Figurine* (2010), by new Nollywood filmmaker Kunle Afolayan; *Sinking Sands* (2010), by Ghanaian Leila Djansi; and *Sam le Caïd* (2008), by Burkinabé filmmaker Boubacar Diallo—that eschew episodic diegesis as well as other conventions popularized by local film industries while making few concessions to the possibility of interrupted viewing. Within the broad spectrum of commercially oriented and popular films produced in Africa today, therefore, I would separate films with a higher propensity for televisual recurrence from films with a limited potential for sustaining televisual recurrence, whether they are watched in cinema or on a television screen. What counts here is not the specifics of the platform or the site of spectatorship, but the kinds of spectatorship generated by audiovisual narratives constituted in different ways.

Until the late twentieth century, theatrical exhibition was the norm for African films, though limited screen space was more often dedicated to foreign films, and especially a wide range of foreign B-grade movies.¹⁵ By the early twenty-first century, however, the percentage of African films benefiting from theatrical exhibition had undergone considerable contraction. A televisual mode of production and reception for audiovisual narratives grew in popularity alongside the gradual detheatricalization and decline in cinema attendance experienced in many African countries.¹⁶ By default, the television screen became the privileged site for watching films, and many would-be filmmakers undertook the televisual turn. Initially, television in Africa was conceived of as a medium for developing the modern citizen and a shared patrimony.¹⁷ However, starting in the 1990s, economic liberalization and deregulation across the continent led to the proliferation of private radio and television stations. Coupled with sharply reduced government expenditure on publicly owned television stations, both privately and publicly owned television became increasingly dependent on entertainment for revenue, as Bourgault notes for specific countries.¹⁸

15 For more on this, see Jonathan Haynes, "African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions," *Situations, Projects of the Radical Imagination* 4, no. 1 (2011): 69; Frank Ukadike, "Images of the 'Reel' Thing: African Video-Films and the Emergence of a New Cultural Art," *Social Identities* 6, no. 3 (2000): 245.

16 See Alexie Tcheuyap, *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011): 22; Jonathan Gray, "Mobility through Piracy, or How Steven Seagal Got to Malawi," *Popular Communication, the International Journal of Media and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2011): 101–102; Jonathan Haynes, "Video Boom: Nigeria and Ghana," *Postcolonial Text* 3, no. 2 (2007): 1; Olivier Barlet, "Cinema: An Audience without a Market," *Black Camera* 1, no. 2 (2010): 84–88.

17 Louise Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 118, 120, 123.

18 *Ibid.*, 103.

Similar forces were at work in Nigeria, making it difficult for local television stations to continue producing their own content. Bourgault reports, for example, that by the 1990s local television crews found that the production of extended narrative serials was no longer sustainable on public television.¹⁹ While this moment marked a decline in the production of extended narrative serials by both public and private television stations in Nigeria, it did not in fact signal a parting of ways between an emerging film industry and the televisual medium. To the contrary, the first Nollywood films were produced on VHS and watched in home settings on VHS players. The convergence between television and the emerging film industry existed at the points of both reception and production. As Jonathan Haynes notes, the immediate antecedent for Nigerian videos was “television serials made in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s.”²⁰ It is no accident, then, that Nigeria, which was the first country to establish television in all of Africa and had by the 1990s produced more programming for television than any other African country, became fertile ground for the growth of the biggest film industry on the continent.²¹

Even in countries like Mali or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which lacked Nigeria’s extensive history of creating local programming for television, both notable and aspiring filmmakers began to find television a more accessible outlet for their work.²² Ghana, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Tanzania, and Kenya likewise witnessed the emergence of media industries producing films watched almost entirely on television. And because so many of those who operated in these film industries had little choice but to work within the possibilities and constraints afforded by production on video and exhibition on television, their filmed narratives were often characterized by an aesthetic that anticipated and catered to the need for televisual recurrence.

Television in Africa today does not necessarily aim to be “a broadcasting system historically cemented in centralized production, simultaneous programming, and mass reception.”²³ What counts here is not the simultaneous viewing of audiovisual texts by many privatized citizens but the shared viewing of audiovisual texts by associates and kin. Whether or not broadcasting is occurring, fictional narratives alternatively described as “films” or “movies” with a high potential for televisual recurrence contribute enormously to enabling the television screen to function as television, that is, as the audiovisual medium that most frequently convenes a localized, diverse, and recurrent public.

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19 Ibid., 148.

20 Jonathan Haynes, introduction to *Nigerian Video Films*, 2nd ed., ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 21.

21 Bourgault, *Mass Media*, 131, 137; André-Jean Tudesq, *Les médias en Afrique* (Paris: Ellipses, 1999), 55.

22 See Katrien Pype, *The Making of the Pentecostal Melodrama: Religion, Media, and Gender in Kinshasa* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Alioune Sow, “Alternating Views: Malian Cinema, Television Serials, and Democratic Experience,” *Africa Today* 55, no. 4 (2009): 51–70.

23 José van Dijk, “Television 2.0: YouTube and the Emergence of Homecasting” (paper presented to the conference “Media in Transition: Creativity, Ownership and Collaboration in the Digital Age,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, April 27–29, 2007), 2.

Through the Eye of a Film Festival: Toward a Curatorial and Spectator- Centered Approach to the Study of African Screen Media

by LINDIWE DOVEY

Most scholarship on African screen media acknowledges outright that there have been, and continue to be, many trends and traditions in filmmaking across the continent and in the African diasporas, making it impossible to distinguish any particular coherence to the category of African filmmaking. Many scholars have advanced this argument through analysis of distinct production infrastructures, films, genres, nationally located cinemas, particular filmmakers, and critical concepts such as tradition and modernity.¹ Furthermore, the rise of popular video-movie making in Ghana and Nigeria from the late 1980s onward, and the discussion and research that have grown around that practice, have compelled scholars of African screen media to pay far greater attention to the “different material conditions of creation, circulation, and consumption” of audiovisual cultural products.² There has been relatively little

1 On production infrastructures, see, e.g., Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Claire Andrade-Watkins, “France’s Bureau of Cinema—Financial and Technical Assistance, 1961–1977: Operations and Implications for African Cinema,” in *African Experiences of Cinema*, ed. Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 112–127; Alessandro Jedlowski, “Small Screen Cinema: Informality and Remediation in Nollywood,” *Television and New Media* 13, no. 5 (2012): 431–446. On films, see, e.g., Françoise Pfaff, ed., *Focus on African Films* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). On genres, see, e.g., Akinwumi Adesokan, *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Lindsey Green-Simms, “Occult Melodramas: Spectral Affect and West African Video-Film,” *Camera Obscura* 27, no. 2 80 (2012): 25–59. On nationally located cinemas, see, e.g., Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, *Le cinéma au Sénégal* (Brussels: OCIC; Paris: L’Harmattan, 1983); Jonathan Haynes, ed., *Nigerian Video Films* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000); Jacqueline Maingard, *South African National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Carmela Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013). On particular filmmakers, see, e.g., David Murphy and Patrick Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007). For critical concepts, see, e.g., Jude Akudinobi, “Tradition/Modernity and the Discourse of African Cinema,” in *Critical Approaches to African Cinema Discourse*, ed. Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 47–60.

2 For a comprehensive literature overview, see Jonathan Haynes, “A Literature Review: Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2010): 105–120. Also

research, however, on the specific sites where films are screened, consumed, and interpreted: film festivals, multiplex cinemas, makeshift video halls, people's homes and courtyards, and internet cafés. The focus of my current research, and of this essay, is film festivals, both as global sites for the curation and reception of films by Africans and as sites within the African continent for the curation and reception of films from all over the world.³

One apparent typology (and chronology) for analysis would group film festivals that screen films by Africans as follows: African film festivals on the African continent (founded from the mid-1960s, such as FESPACO, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou, in Burkina Faso), international film festivals on the African continent (founded from the late 1970s, such as the Durban International Film Festival in South Africa), African film festivals outside of the continent (founded from the late 1970s, such as the New York African Film Festival), and international film festivals outside the continent that have particular curators and/or programs dedicated to films by Africans (where this specific focus on Africa has emerged since the late 1990s, such as at the Dubai International Film Festival).

Other typologies worthy of analysis cut across this map, however. For example, in the category of international film festivals on the African continent (which have proliferated at a rapid rate since 2000), there are markedly distinct curatorial visions and practices. Where many (African) filmmakers feel that the Durban International Film Festival, with its Talent Campus and FilmMart (a film market) modeled on those of "A-list" film festivals, offers the most significant professional opportunities to filmmakers of all the festivals on the continent, other festivals bring a different version of the international and global into play to distinct ends. For example, the FiSahara Film Festival (founded in 2004), which is the only annual film festival in the world to take place in a refugee camp (Dakhla, in Algeria), has as its aim mobilizing international activism on behalf of a specific, local cause: the claim of the Sahrawi people to the Western Sahara, which was annexed from them by Morocco in 1975. The arrival in 2013 of a completely new kind of film festival related to African film—the first Online South African Film Festival—unsettles festivals' typical relationship to live publics and suggests further productive typologies for analysis of both film festivals and online, digital platforms and their respective curatorial approaches to films by Africans. Initiated by the video-on-demand (VOD) platform AfricaFilms.tv, presided over by veteran South African filmmaker Ramadan Suleman, and curated by Lesedi Moche (former director of the Encounters Documentary Film Festival in South Africa), the first Online South African Film Festival ran from July 18 to September 22, 2013, and offered viewers the chance to rent or buy 150 rarely accessible South African films and television series.

The impulse behind much of the African video-movie scholarship is the same as the impulse behind the study of film festivals, a relatively new academic subfield, and one that seeks to rematerialize film studies, albeit from an entirely different angle to the

see Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, eds., *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Garritano, *African Video Movies*, 7.

3 See Lindiwe Dovey, *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

video scholarship.⁴ My current research aims to take up the gauntlet presented by the scholars of African video, by looking not at the video industries themselves but at those entities—film festivals—that have frequently been positioned as their polar opposite, because of their assumed investment in concepts such as high art and quality film.⁵ When Senegalese filmmaker Moussa Sene Absa told me in an interview that “without festivals, African cinema wouldn’t exist,” he was referring to that broad group (though not a genre) of films made by Africans that is best defined through analysis of the curatorial, exhibition, distribution, and reception architecture of film festivals.⁶ The ambiguous nature of Absa’s statement, which can be read either as an endorsement or as a critique of the role film festivals have played in producing *certain kinds* of African cinema over the years, raises the question not solely of which specific films have been selected for and lauded at festivals but also of the specters, shadows, and exclusions of festivals’ curatorial and canon-making processes—what Arjun Appadurai resonantly calls the “traffic in criteria.”⁷ After all, as codirector of the Toronto International Film Festival Cameron Bailey says, “Festivals have multiplied and spread to become the single most important arbiter of taste in cinema—more important than scholars, or critics, more important even than film schools.”⁸ In many ways, film festivals have been the unacknowledged enablers and mediators of scholarship in the field of African cinema (as opposed to the broader field of African screen media), shaping canons and making certain films accessible to scholars and others not. They are, for this reason, an important heuristic device for exploring not only the mass media of Nollywood movies or television shows such as *Big Brother Africa* (MNet, 2003–) but also the “small media” that rarely enjoy mainstream distribution and exhibition outside of festivals.

My contention is that by analyzing African screen media “through the eye” of film festivals and their audiences, we can sharpen our critical understanding of certain kinds of film cultures within and beyond Africa and of how particular canons of African cinema and cinema *tout court* are constantly being reframed for and by specific, situated publics. Film festivals are a heuristic device for the analysis of two related practices, then: first, the selection and contextualization of certain films by curators; and second, the responses of *actual* (rather than hypothetical) spectators to these films. I want to focus first on several examples of the role of the curator in shaping what comes to constitute “African film” at any particular moment. Through a major program of more than seventy African films at the 2010 International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR), curators Alice Smits and Lee Ellickson questioned the common assumption in the field that Ousmane Sembene is the only “father of African cinema”; by showing

4 For a constantly updated bibliography of scholarship on film festivals, see Skadi Loist and Marijke De Valck’s Film Festival Research Network Bibliography, at <http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org/index.php/ffrn-bibliography/>. Dina Jordanova has also been a pioneer in this field, and her series of (co)edited books on film festivals published by St. Andrews Film Studies are an important resource.

5 See, e.g., Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: BFI, 2012).

6 Moussa Sene Absa, interview by author, Tarifa African Film Festival, May 25, 2010.

7 Sarah Nuttall, introduction to *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 13.

8 Jeffrey Ruoff, *Coming Soon to a Festival near You: Programming Film Festivals* (St. Andrews, Scotland: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2012), iv.

films made before Sembene's *Borom sarret* (1963)—such as Gadalla Gubara's *Song of Khartoum* (1955) and Momar Thiam's *Sarzan* (1963)—they suggested that conventional African film history should be prized open for reassessment. A similar impulse toward the rewriting of African film history occurred at the Tenth African Film Festival of Córdoba in Spain in October 2013 in a program strand called “Diez fragmentos de un discurso amoroso (africano)” (“Ten fragments of an [African] discourse on love”), curated by Marion Berger. The program included newer films, such as Jocelyne Saab's sensual feature film *Dunia* (2005), and films considered African film “classics”—such as *Touki bouki* (1973), *Muna moto* (1975), and *Tiläi* (1990). A printed flyer that accompanied the program reflected on its origins as follows:

Many festivals tend to valorize African films on account of their social, political, or historical dimensions, conditioning the Western spectator to expect didactic content. . . . With this retrospective, we are not trying to elaborate an anthropological analysis of practices of love or manifestations of desire in Africa. Rather, we wish to affirm, across this subjective selection of films with which we feel a special affinity, an African discourse of love. . . . Ten sessions of cinema, ten fragments in which the filmmakers conjugate the verbs of love, play with romantic ideals and fashion a visual map of this universal sentiment.⁹

In these poetic and affective terms, Berger shaped the mode in which first-time (mostly Spanish) viewers of these films would approach them. She argued that certain films have been burdened by a discourse claiming the politicized nature of African cinema and that those films are overdue a re-viewing from new angles. Of course, one could take issue with the curatorial approaches of Smits, Ellickson, and Berger. In an interview at the 2010 IFFR, Momar Thiam told me that Sembene deserves the title “father of African cinema”—not because he was the first African to make a film in sub-Saharan Africa (which he was not), but for the specific vision he brought to his filmmaking.¹⁰ One could also raise questions about the extent to which romantic love is, and has been, a “universal sentiment” and whether Berger's program at Córdoba was involved in rewriting African film history or in helping to hasten its steady incorporation into the generic field of world cinema. Such questions and challenges are part and parcel of the curatorial approach for which I am advocating, however; they insist on the subjective, dynamic, and—crucially—*public* nature of any act of curation, and the necessity of curators making explicit their criteria of judgment.

The shared inspiration behind Berger's program and recent work in African screen media studies, which has sought to highlight the pleasures rather than politics of films by Africans, shows that the practices of curating and scholarship do not have to operate in competition but might chart a reciprocal relationship in the future.¹¹ My own work with African film over the past thirteen years has consistently combined these two modes—curating and academic research—since I enjoy making the more abstract

9 My translation from Spanish.

10 Momar Thiam, interview by author, International Film Festival of Rotterdam, February 3, 2010.

11 See, e.g., Alexie Tcheuyap, *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011).

arguments in my scholarship available to a broader audience through my curating and in turn reflecting on my curatorial practice in my scholarship.¹² Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, teaching, too, needs to be seen as a form of curatorial work (though a far less public form of curating than film festivals demand), because the creation of syllabi inevitably involves selecting and contextualizing certain films and readings to the exclusion of others.¹³ Dina Iordanova goes even further, arguing that, in a world in which films are increasingly moving online, “scholars now resemble curators and guides; no longer helping students discover cinema itself, but mostly assisting them in connecting, comparing, and making things meaningful in cinema’s relation to history, aesthetics, and politics.”¹⁴

However, we must not forget that other side of the curatorial coin: spectatorship. As media ethnographers have emphasized, films are material objects that have social lives, and their meanings constantly change as they circulate through distinct contexts.¹⁵ If we are serious about incorporating broader publics into our scholarship, then we need to include a “distribution-centred model of film studies” that asks, “Who is the audience? How are they constructed as such? What are the material limits that determine which texts are available to which audiences?”¹⁶ And, as Karin Barber has asked, what are the interpretive repertoires of these audiences, and how do they refashion the meanings of films?¹⁷ African screen media scholarship remains relatively impoverished on the question of spectatorship.¹⁸ Furthermore, as Harrow has pointed out, the “irony . . . is that when popular critical approaches are employed, audience perspectives are recorded that would be considered naïve by academic or scholarly critics.”¹⁹ Such “naïve” perspectives are not necessarily the case, however, and film festivals are one of those sites at which scholars can directly access the diverse ways in which spectators negotiate the meanings of films—through observing Q&As or through more directed control-group discussions and interviews.

The most important lesson I have learned through my field research with spectators at film festivals is that—as Olivier Barlet puts it—the “African audience is anything but homogeneous.”²⁰ We cannot simply argue, as Harrow does, that “Nollywood . . .

12 See, e.g., Lindiwe Dovey, “New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers,” *Feminist Africa* 16 (2012): 18–36; Dovey, *Curating Africa*.

13 Lindiwe Dovey, “Curating Africa: Teaching African Film through the Lens of Film Festivals,” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* 26 (2014): 6–9.

14 Dina Iordanova, “Instant, Abundant, and Ubiquitous,” *Cineaste* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 49.

15 Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds., *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002).

16 Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, 6.

17 Karin Barber, “Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa,” *Africa* 67, no. 3 (1997): 347–362.

18 See, however, Minou Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos: Female Youth Culture on the Kenyan Coast* (Stockholm: Gotab, 1994); Brian Larkin, “Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities,” *Africa* 67, no. 3 (1997): 406–440; Laura Fair, “They Stole the Show! Indian Films in Coastal Tanzania, 1950s–1980s,” *Journal of African Media Studies* 2, no. 1 (2010): 91–106; Krings and Okome, *Global Nollywood*, 179–284.

19 Kenneth Harrow, “An Afromodern Cinema: Review of *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, Edited by Matthias Krings and Onokome Okome,” *Journal of African History* 55, no. 2 (2014): 286.

20 Olivier Barlet, *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Zed Books, 2000), 232.

is the answer to African culture's quest for a viable economic basis that rests upon *an African audience and its taste*.²¹ As popular as Nollywood may be across Africa and in the diaspora, film taste is as diverse as are Africans themselves. This point became overwhelmingly apparent to me at the 2010 Kenya International Film Festival, when I brought twenty-two young women from Kibera, Nairobi's largest "slum," to the Alliance Française in downtown Nairobi (the festival's headquarters) to see *Soul Boy* (Hawa Essuman, 2010), a film shot in Kibera with Kiberans and which had won the Dioraphte Award (an audience prize) at its world premiere at the 2010 IFFR earlier that year. The young women were, at the time, students at the Kibera Girls Soccer Academy (KGSA), a high school founded in Kibera in 2006 by Abdul Kassim.²² After the screening, I held two separate, two-hour discussions with the women with the help of a colleague, Julie MacArthur.²³ Before the discussions, I had assumed that the young women would respond most enthusiastically to "popular" African video movies and not to an acclaimed "festival" film such as *Soul Boy*, given what I had read in African screen media scholarship about the influence of class and location on spectatorship in Africa. The women, however, brought a conventional notion of aesthetic quality to bear on their interpretation of *Soul Boy* in relation to the films that they are more accustomed to watching—Mexican soap operas, Nigerian video movies, Bollywood films, kung fu films, and cheaply produced Kenyan horror films. Of the latter, one respondent said: "The cameras are shaking. . . . Instead of enjoying you are crying. The light is so bad—there is just darkness. The quality of the movies is just down." Similarly, of Nigerian video movies, one respondent said: "They don't do auditions there in Nigeria. They just tell people, 'Come and act!' . . . That shows that they are not even close to being creative." Of *Soul Boy*, in contrast, one respondent said: "I've seen many Kenyan movies. That kind of creativity did not exist. . . . And the creativity of putting cameras on the railway line [in *Soul Boy*], I've never seen that." Notably, *creativity* was the term the women constantly used to distinguish *Soul Boy* from other films, and it is a term that they made me realize is far more appropriate than *aesthetic quality*, because it conjoins the look and sound of a film with the decisions of the director, crew, and actors. Although there was debate about specific elements of the film (emphasizing the heterogeneity of taste), there was also remarkable consensus about the creative value of *Soul Boy*. What the discussions revealed, then, is that there is no homogeneous "African audience" with homogeneous taste. As African screen media scholars, we might think, erroneously, of the category of "aesthetic quality" as something produced exclusively at film festivals, whereas it was a criterion by which the young women of the KGSA were judging films, even though they do not often have access to festivals. Further research I co-conducted in the context of the new Slum Film Festival in Kibera and Mathare also revealed that *Soul Boy* is one of the most popular films in this context, a "cross-over" film that has found validation on the international film festival

21 Kenneth Harrow, *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 6; my emphasis.

22 More information about Abdul Kassim and the KGSA can be found at <http://secureafuture.wordpress.com/about/>.

23 To test the similarities and differences of the responses, we divided the young women into two separate groups of eleven, and each of us recorded our discussions.

circuit as well as within a community generally marginalized from this circuit, thereby complicating any easy dichotomy of festival cinema and popular film.²⁴

Studying African screen media “through the eye” of film festivals should inspire us, as scholar-curators, to reflect on the subjectivity and volatility of film taste and on our own criteria of judgment. Doing so will also bring us into contact with diverse, actual spectators of African films, and of films in Africa, compelling us to move beyond interpretive repertoires limited to the “ivory towers” of university spaces. One might argue that access to film festivals and to such “ordinary” spectators paradoxically requires the “ivory tower” funding of these same university spaces. More positively, however, we could argue that making film festivals one of our sites of research will privilege scholarship emerging from the African continent itself (where the majority of these festivals take place, and where most African spectators are of course located); will encourage new avenues for audience research within the (arguably more accessible) digital sphere (through online film festivals and audience responses to festival films through social media); and will inspire more collaborative research, given the multidimensional and complex nature of festivals. *

24 Lindiwe Dovey, Joshua McNamara, and Federico Olivieri, “‘From, by, for’: Nairobi’s Slum Film Festival, Film Festival Studies, and the Practices of Development,” *Jump Cut* 55 (2013), <http://ejumpcut.org/currentissue/DoveySFFNairobi/index.html>.

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Nollywood: Prisms and Paradigms

by JUDE AKUDINOBI

The emergence in the 1990s of Nollywood, the iconoclastic Nigerian popular film culture, was met with ambivalence, even derision, in normative African cinema circles partly because of its rough-and-ready production practices, stylistic *mélanges*, hum-drum soundtracks, stilted dialogue, prevalent technical lapses, chaotic straight-to-video distribution, commerce-driven ethos, and proclivity for melodrama, the supernatural, and occult horror.¹ However, in melding various film genres and establishing diverse representational registers, narratives, and themes; by exploring global popular cultural forms but emphasizing stories that ordinary Africans can identify with; and by allowing wellsprings of talent to emerge and develop, it has created critical spaces and reference points for the reappraisal of African cinema, of its history and future.

Remarkably, without critical sustenance, plaudits in Western festival circuits, government support, or international funding schemes, Nollywood's eclecticism has inspired a renascent filmmaking movement across Africa, as illustrated by the number of "woods" springing up across the continent: for example, Riverwood (Kenya), Ghollywood (Ghana), and Bongowood (Tanzania), all enkindling prospects for national cinemas.² Deeply plugged into the dynamics of contemporary African cultural formations and eschewing orthodox expectations, in establishing thriving continental and global markets, Nollywood has transcended a long-standing challenge for African cinema.

Whether seen as a touchstone or a scourge for African cinema, Nollywood is a complicated cultural, artistic, commercial, and transnational phenomenon. Whereas African cinema emerged during the era of anti-colonial nationalism, Nollywood, in a "postcolonial" milieu, embraces "globalized" popular cultures, creatively linking them to local concerns and purposes and engendering vibrant hybrid

1 For detailed histories of Nollywood beyond this survey, see Jonathan Haynes, "A Literature Review: Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2010): 105–120.

2 See Gaston Kabore, "The African Cinema in Crisis," *UNESCO Courier*, July–August 1995, 70–73; see also Mbye Cham, "African Cinema in the Nineties," *African Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1998): 47–51. Ghanaian video films, remarkably, predated Nollywood. See Carmela Garritano, *African Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013); Mahir Şaul and Ralph A. Austen, eds., *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

cultures and identities.³ In breaking the mold of African cinema, through the formulation of unique, vernacular grammars of representation, Nollywood challenges conceptualization of the former through erstwhile, ostensibly inviolate categories, even approximating Djibril Diop Mambety's vision of *films de poche* (pocket films).⁴

Emerging out of a tense Nigerian social milieu and heady entrepreneurial culture, Nollywood's commercial pressures engendered, in a self-reflexive way, an enduring palimpsestic framework; in its formative era, unsold VHS copies of Nollywood films were simply taped over, and proven formulas, or successful narratives, still see seemingly endless cycles of repetition and permutation. The focus in this essay is on the institutional, social, and economic configurations that shape its creative thrusts, modes of production, and consumption; as Nollywood, given the relentless dynamics that drive it, is always in a state of flux, constantly reworking proven formulas and reformulating conventions of the "popular."

Not surprisingly, Nollywood's breakout production, *Living in Bondage* (Chris Obi Rapu, 1992), with its pact-with-the-devil premise, is a melodramatic narrative about social ambiguities, cultural and moral fragmentation, juxtaposed to elements of Pentecostalism, the arcane, and critiques of materialism that laid tracks for a popular cinema culture that attracts and sustains its audiences by exploring the shadows and paradoxes of the quotidian.

It merits underscoring how decades of social, cultural, and political upheavals provided ready indexes and a nexus for Nollywood narratives and offered frameworks of engagement with the complicated tangents and trajectories of the everyday. These narratives, whether spurred by the rise of the tabloid press in Nigeria or rumors and gossip floating in the social imaginary, were often presented as "true stories" or "based on a story." With such intertextual resonances, the narratives' relationship between "the real" as source or inspiration and its reworking—with dramatic twists or even commentary—is very significant. Nollywood's penchant for the quotidian and its focus on life lessons inevitably intervene in the social and political imaginaries not just through its narrative premises but also in terms of how its narratives unfold as bearers of meanings. Its practitioners and producers, aiming for profit, often abdicate intricacies. Remarkably, no sooner had an Ebola outbreak in West Africa been reported in March 2014, and the abduction of school girls in Chibok, Nigeria, by Boko Haram a month after, all causing global consternation, than some Nollywood titles ostensibly on the subjects emerged, even though neither issue had been resolved and that some Nollywood practitioners joined the ensuing wave of social activism.

The contemporary was and continues to be integral to Nollywood diegetic realms, even though one of its unique genres, the "epic," usually set in indeterminate times or places, mixes elements from oral traditions, folk theaters and idioms, headlines, hearsay, speculations, and horror with invented "traditions" (manifest in costumes and makeup) and special effects to forge its own representational repertoire and conjure

3 Manthia Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (Munich: Prestel, 2010); Akin Adesokan, *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2012); Françoise Ugochukwu, *Nollywood on the Move: Nigeria on Display* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013).

4 See N. Frank Ukadike, "The Hyena's Last Laugh: A Conversation with Djibril Diop Mambety," *Transition* 78 (1998): 136–153.

distinctive worlds. Hence, in epics like *Igodo* (Andy Amenechi and Don Pedro Obaseki, 1999), special effects merge with indigenous epistemological systems to map social realities and assert ostensible realities beyond the material, eliciting an intricate interplay of cultural, aesthetic, technological, and commercial discourses.

Furthermore, the oscillation between commerce and art has seen Nollywood productions also run the gamut of conventional genres, including the musical (*Inale*; Jeta Amata, 2010), dance (*I Will Take My Chances*; Desmond Elliot, 2011), sci-fi (*Kajola*; Niyi Akinmolayan, 2010), psychodrama (*Tango with Me*; Mahmood Ali-Balogun, 2010), history (*Invasion 1897*, Launcelot Imasuen), and comedy (*Osuofia in London*; Kingsley Ogoro, 2003). Even so, most Nollywood productions are inordinately lengthy and open-ended narratives, shot often as two-, three-, or even four-part films, with insubstantial relationships, if any exist, between the original and its ostensible “sequels.” While this may be attributable to the technical limitations of the VHS format earlier, and now the more popular, cheaper VCD format, it also derives, arguably, from narrative styles lacking in vitality and purpose other than commercial inclinations. While this may also be reflective of the to-be-continued serial TV roots of Nollywood, it is a peculiar marketing strategy, because, unlike sequels, these Nollywood productions usually have no cliff-hanger endings or proven commercial success to exploit. In another unique trade practice, unsold films are underpriced and liquidated in the “oil market,” Nollywood parlance for the closeout phase of surplus inventory—metaphorical of the inscrutable and volatile dynamics of the nation’s economic mainstay, the oil sector.

Central to advertising strategies and often plastered over public spaces, the ubiquitous posters of Nollywood productions uniquely constitute part of its visual and commercial cultures. These posters engender a unique street culture, function as semiotic bait to arouse curiosity, capture the imagination, generate buzz, and offer points of entry and identification to Nollywood’s diffuse audiences, which cut across geographical locations, gender, ethnicities, cultures, and social classes. With an emphasis on visual impact, the posters’ layouts, which prominently feature stars, are often spiced with a collage of scenes, usually of spectacular dramatic moments and emblematic of themes and genres.

On a related note, Nollywood titles, like the posters, open up diegetic vistas and are integral to establishing a film’s distinctiveness, genre, cast, interpretive frame, and a broad range of tropes through which the narrative is imagined. In such an inchoate market, titles become significantly strategic and evocative. Generally, Nollywood titles range, irrespective of thematic congruence, from the sappy—*End of Facebook Love* (Yomi Adejumo, 2014), *Emotional Blunder* (Ikechukwu Onyeka, 2014)—to the sensationalist, like *Hottest Babes in Town* (Charles Inojie, 2013). Others are declarative, such as *Career Woman* (Chidi Anyanwu Chidox, 2014); contemplative, such as *Through the Glass* (Stephanie Okereke, 2008); titillating, such as *Mad Sex* (Ifeanyi Ogbonna, 2010); poetic, such as *Dazzling Mirage* (Tunde Kelani, 2014); or even cryptic, such as *Native Fowl* (Tchidi Chikere, 2014).

Films such as *Beyonce and Rihanna* (Afam Okereke, 2008), *Sharon Stone in Abuja* (Adim Williams, 2003), *Gangnam Style Reloaded* (Ejike Chinedu Obim, 2014), *Lady Gaga* (Ubong Bassey Nya, 2011), *Margaret Thatcher* (Prince Iyke Olisa, 2012), *Hoodrush* (Dimeji Ajibola, 2012), and *Girls in the Hood* (Fred Amata, 2005) are not biographies, spoofs, or

mere attempts at cosmopolitan narratives. They point to the many possible conjugations of fame, stardom, and fandom arising out of global popular cultural exchanges and, crucially, Nollywood's openness to global cultural traffic.⁵ While they may derive from commercial calculations, they are significant, too, in terms of intertextuality, cultural discourses, and contexts, particularly how they acquire new meanings and how specific lived experiences or inspirational sources can be reconfigured and used to unsettle boundaries and subvert expectations.

In a broader context, the contradictions and tensions intrinsic to Nollywood's commercial culture coalesce vividly around women and their relationship to the dynamics of contemporary Nigerian society in titles like *Mrs. Somebody* (Desmond Elliot and Tom Robson, 2012), *Mr. and Mrs.* (Ikechukwu Onyeka, 2013), *Glamour Girls* (Chika Onukwufor, 1994), *BlackBerry Babes* (Sylvester Obadigie, 2011), *Barren Women* (Morgan Ukaegbu, 2013), *Games Women Play* (Launcelot Imasuen, 2005) and its corollary *Games Men Play* (Launcelot Imasuen, 2005), *Today's Women* (Chidi Anyanwu Chidox, 2013), *Swaggar Mamas* (Ifeanyi Azodo, 2013), *The Widow* (Aquila Njamah and Kingsley Ogoro, 2007), and *The Pastor and the Harlot* (Charles Novia, 2002). Remarkably, although patriarchal values are critiqued, and even parodied, in Nollywood, they remain part of its fundamental assumptions and derivative stereotypes. To a great extent, such representations navigate the variegated cultural and ideological terrains intrinsic to the nation's cultural diversity, indigenous patriarchal traditions, and the values—literally and metaphorically—of the marketplace. In that sense, Nollywood shows women negotiating new subjectivities, identities, roles, positions, and even sexualities. For instance, *Lagos Cougars* (Desmond Elliot, 2014), produced by one of Nollywood's doyennes, Emem Isong, is about desire, age, and sexuality. However, “nonnormative” sexualities, as defined by Nigeria's stringent legislation, present representational debacles within the conceptual, creative, cultural, and commercial matrices of Nollywood, as shown by *Emotional Crack* (Launcelot Imasuen, 2003), involving a lesbian relationship, and *Girls on Fire* (2013), which makes it part of an initiation ritual.⁶ Ultimately, Nollywood's women are diverse but often framed within dilemmas, relationships, transgressions, and patriarchal forms.

Nigeria's belated recognition of Nollywood in April 2014 as contributing \$5.1 billion dollars to the nation's economy is of strategic significance and has raised hopes of investments, capital, and infrastructural boosts, as well as concerns about whether such investments would come from the domestic private sector, government, or global financial institutions. Their interests, it is feared, may be at odds with those of the industry and its proven constituencies in ways that may compromise its creative autonomy and redefine its trajectories and configurations. In 2001, for instance, the “marketers,” Nollywood's de facto producers and distributors, went on “strike” for about

5 See Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2013).

6 See Lindsey Green-Simms and Unoma Azuah, “The Video Closet: Nollywood's Gay-Themed Movies,” *Transition* 107 (2012): 32–49; Lindsey Green-Simms, “Hustlers, Home-Wreckers and Homoeroticism: Nollywood's Beautiful Faces,” *Journal of African Cinemas* 4, no. 1 (2012): 59–79. See also Phil Hoad, “How Does Nollywood Picture Its LGBT Community?,” *Guardian*, August 1, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/aug/01/nollywood-lgbt-community>.

three months, shutting down production and threatening a ban on all who breached their efforts to clear the stock and streamline releases. Facing the prospects of corporatization and conglomeration, however faint on the horizon, issues such as scrupulous market research, budget, and criteria for credit (like collaterals, interest rates, and track records) have become worrisome factors for the practitioners, who are mostly struggling independents. Overall, these changes may establish new criteria for entry into the field where, arguably, none had ever existed.

So, while the recent government support of Nollywood—for instance, a loan scheme, the Entertainment Industries Intervention Fund, in 2010, through the Nigerian Export-Import Bank, and Project ACT-Nollywood in 2013, with grants for production, distribution, and capacity building through the Bank of Industry—appears primarily economic, even altruistic, there are also ideological stakes that may present challenges. Nigeria's most expensive production to date, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Biyi Bandele, 2013), which won the 2014 Golden Dhow in the Zanzibar International Film Festival and is an adaptation of Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's multiple-award-winning book, had its release in Nigeria suspended by the Nigerian Film and Video Censorship Board (NFVCB), due not to questions of propriety but to "national security concerns," even though the book is widely available in the country.⁷ Arguably, the government envisions a cinema of public good, a grandiose project embodying the ethos of nation, heritage, cultural conservation, and even tourism, and may conflate nationalist sentiments with artistic merits.

More than twenty years after its dawn, Nollywood is in the process of renewal and rebuilding at the goading of the Nigerian government which, to date, has no co-production treaty with any country or tax incentives for prospective investors. Its regulatory agency—notably, the Nigerian Film and Video Censorship Board, whose attempted market reforms in 2006 to establish formal structures, lure prospective investment partners through international "road shows," and from a more practical side, curb endemic piracy were largely ineffectual. Remarkably, the censorship board, whose operative principles evolved from colonial censorship laws to the postindependent Cinematographic Act of 1963, was established in 1993.

The *Half of a Yellow Sun* imbroglio has significant implications for understanding the relationship, even tensions, among the government, its regulatory and cultural institutions, and Nollywood, especially in light of the latter's progressive affinities to technologies of production and consumption, from TV, VHS, VCD, and DVD to the Internet and cell phones. In a way, and owing to the pressures of the marketplace, the relationship between digital media technologies and Nollywood can be said to be reflexive, insofar as each is constantly changing and yielding dynamics for regeneration and networks of possibilities. With profound implications for the commercial logic that

7 Tambay A. Obenson, "Half of a Yellow Sun STILL Has Not Been Released in Nigeria—Director Biyi Bandele Addresses Delays in Op-Ed," Shadow and Act (blog), May 21, 2014, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/half-of-a-yellow-sun-still-has-not-been-released-in-nigeria-director-biyi-ban-dele-addresses-delays-in-op-ed>. Remarkably, the Nigerian theatrical release eventually occurred on August 01, 2014, days after its DVD release in the US, and profligate piracy. Even then, its opening weekend broke domestic box office records. Notably, an earlier film, *Across the Niger* (Izu Ojukwu, 2004) with similar political edges and love-in-the-time-of-crisis resonance set against the Nigerian civil war, did not generate such censorial scrutiny, anxieties or controversies.

drives Nollywood, digital platforms not only decentralize existing channels of distribution but also destabilize power relations inscribed within the governmental and institutional gatekeeping systems, which may in turn circumscribe economic opportunities.

Lately, prolonged saturation of the domestic market, widespread piracy, and the emergence of other continental commercial film cultures has to some degree spurred Nollywood's search for new thresholds and further growth, particularly a drive to go beyond formula and transcend genericness. The increased casting of Ghanaian stars and collaborative exchanges are examples of such practical initiatives with accompanying commercial interests. Furthermore, production partnerships with corporations, like Globacom for *Phone Swap* (Kunle Afolayan); a Nigerian pharmaceutical firm for *Musical Whispers* (Bond Emeruwa, 2014), a film on autism, family, and stigma; and an aggregation of state government and private-sector backing for *Dazzling Mirage*, which deals with sickle-cell anemia, love, and self-affirmation, are auspicious for Nollywood. Notwithstanding, Nollywood is at a juncture where it needs to "reinvent" itself or redefine its relationship with its disparate publics. In the emerging scenario, production values have improved considerably, production rates and numbers have slowed, global attention has been sustained, and new talents and diverse styles are enriching the industry's creative palette.⁸ In uniquely reflexive trajectories, Nollywood has inspired a controversial photo-essay and, since 2008, a popular M-NET produced soap opera, *Tinsel*, with the industry as a backdrop.

Nollywood has not only been the subject of international documentaries;⁹ it is also establishing a steadfast presence in international film festivals. Burgeoning film festivals in Nigeria, like Africa International Film Festival, Abuja International Film Festival, and Zuma International Film Festival—run by the Nigerian Film Corporation, which has also established the Nigerian Film Institute—augur well, too, for Nollywood. Pertinent, as well, are Nollywood-inspired BOBTV's African Film and Television Programmes Expo and Market, and African Movie Academy Awards. Moreover, the resurgence and refurbishment of cinema theaters, often multiplexes, in Nigeria indicate a renewed cinemagoing culture with potential for the industry's growth. The current trend for theatrical releases, coupled with the "eventness" and prestige of theatrical premieres, usually in Lagos, to build up buzz ahead of the DVD release, help stem piracy and engender greater financial returns. The revival of the cinema theaters and their Nollywood roster, however sparse, provides a framework for a "new-and-improved," "upmarket" Nollywood and significant reference points to gauge through box-office returns and exhibition records the relationships between the industry and its crucial home market. The choice of Nigerian-born Parisian Newton Aduaka, a remarkably brilliant auteur whose *Ezra* (2007) won FESPACO's most coveted trophy, as the jury chair of the 2014 Zuma International Film Festival, underscores the need for

8 See Pieter Hugo, *Nollywood* (Munich: Prestel, 2010); also, Nomusa Makhubu, "Politics of the Strange: Revisiting Pieter Hugo's Nollywood," *African Arts* 46, no.1 (2013): 50-61. In another momentous reflexive twist, a Nollywood actor, Femi Ogedegbe, caused a stir in June 2014 when his newborn twins, a girl and boy, were christened Nollywood and Hollywood, respectively, among other names.

9 For example, *Nick Goes to Nollywood* (Alicia Arce and Brenda Goldblatt, 2004); *This Is Nollywood* (Franco Sacchi, 2007); *Welcome to Nollywood* (Jamie Meltzer, 2007); *Nollywood Babylon* (Ben Addelman and Samir Mallal, 2008); *Nollywood Lady* (Dorothee Wenner, 2008); *Nollywood Abroad* (Saartje Geerts, 2008).

Nollywood's creative ferment to engage other global, particularly diasporic, markets and film cultures, as the success of iROKOTv indicates.

Jason Njoku, the British-born founder of iROKOTv, considered the "Netflix of Africa" and the largest archive of Nollywood films, was inspired by his relatives' enthusiasm, in London, for Nollywood.¹⁰ In this case, issues of origin, "home," belonging, identity, and memory—common to diaspora subjects—evoke channels of identification, provide reference points for a sense of community, and assuage feelings of alienation. Crucially, these issues also underscore Nollywood's positioning, especially through technologies of communication, at the interstices of the local and global, the national and transnational marketplaces. As veritable digital platforms like iBAKATV, Buni TV, Pana TV, and Afrinolly, among others, thrive, flourishing online communities devoted to Nollywood create new forms of interaction, circuits of circulation and consumption, and, inevitably, provinces for piracy.¹¹ Remarkably, Afrinolly even offers the Afrinolly Master Class to train budding filmmakers, and the Afrinolly Short Film Competition to exhibit their films.

With respect to diaspora narratives, however, the challenge for Nollywood is to find a representational middle ground, one where these narratives affirm certain specificities but, importantly, generate points of identification with other constituents and navigate a more complex global marketplace. Films like *Anchor Baby* (Lonzo Nzekwe, 2010), *Mother of George* (Andrew Dosunmu, 2013), *Onye Ozi* (Obi Emelonye 2013), *Dr. Bello* (Tony Abulu, 2013), *Man on Ground*, (Akin Omotoso, 2011), *Ijé: The Journey* (Chineze Anyaene, 2010), and *Through the Glass*, are in different ways intricately linked to Nollywood through casting, opportunities for coproduction, thematic overlaps, and the directors' origins in Nigeria.

Nollywood's efflorescence has led to the development, in Nigeria, of film education workshops, symposia, and production infrastructure, like Tinapa Studios—where *Half of a Yellow Sun* was largely shot—with the growing number of youths seeking formal training or education in drama, film, and media constituting a new vanguard. With filmmaking now considered a viable career and with the rise of professional guilds, practitioners have enjoyed unprecedented social respectability, including national honors. Whereas the founding talents came, chiefly, from television and indigenous theatrical traditions, new talent now emerges constantly from the drama or theater arts programs of Nigerian universities, from reality TV shows, like *Project Fame* (MTN, 2010–), *Big Brother Africa* (M-Net, 2003–), and *The Gulder Ultimate Search* (Nigerian Breweries, 2004–), and elsewhere, including the ranks of extras (*waka pass*, or roughly, passersby, in Nollywood pidgin idiom), with many becoming institutional or corporate brand ambassadors. For example, actress Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, named in 2003 as one of *Time* magazine's one hundred most influential people in the world, is a UN goodwill ambassador. Others parlay their stellar status in a dynamic celebrity culture where, in addition to founding private businesses outside of the industry, such as in fashion,

10 Teo Kermeliotis, "'Netflix of Africa' Brings Nollywood to World," *CNN*, July 5, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/04/business/jason-njoku-iroko-nigeria/>.

11 Piracy has been an endemic issue for Nollywood. For instance, see Brian Larkin, "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video Industry and the Infrastructure of Piracy," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 289–314.

beauty, and event planning, they are coveted as emcees, or star attractions, at private and public events and as voice-over artists on commercials. In this context, *Ladies Secret* (Donkollins Onuekwusi, 2014), an aspirational narrative on fame, and *Last Celebrity* (Launcelot Imasuen, 2009), a meditation on stardom, aging, and social worth, acquire a particularly self-reflexive significance.

Insofar as Nollywood is a convenient but contested term, given its erroneous conflation with national cinema and its use as an umbrella term for diverse expressive practices, it may be best understood as a heuristic rather than a self-evident category.¹² Its openness to the dynamics of appropriation and transformations makes it critical in exploring the interstitial spaces of African modernities.¹³ Its prodigious productions are also valuable as cinematic and cultural archives. In many respects, Nollywood practitioners have entered a phase of critical self-consciousness: redefining the scope of their creativity, adopting more pragmatic approaches, seeking to refine modes of production, and aiming at structural changes essential to the industry's sustenance. *

12 The term was first used in Norimitsu Onishi, "Step Aside, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood," *New York Times*, September 16, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/16/international/africa/16NIGE.html>; see also Jonathan Haynes, "Nollywood: What's in a Name?," *Film International* 5, no. 2 (2007): 106–108.

13 Emerging scholarship on Nollywood may be found in the "special issues" of the following journals: "Close-up: Nollywood—A Worldly Creative Practice," *Black Camera* 5, no. 2 (2014): 44–185; "Nollywood's Unknowns," *Journal of African Cinemas* 6, no. 1 (2014); and, earlier, "Nollywood and the Global South," *Global South* 7, no. 1 (2013).

Certain Tendencies in Contemporary Auteurist Film Practice in Africa

by ABOUBAKAR SANOGO

African cinema is undergoing a number of important changes that might go unnoticed by the occasional observer. While the advent of Nollywood has arguably had a seismic effect on the map of African cinema—offering an alternative mode of production, distribution, and circulation; alternative modes of address and new forms of affects, generating and sustaining audiences across Nigeria, Africa, the diaspora, and indeed the world—often displacing the hegemony of Hollywood, Bollywood, and Hong Kong cinemas—it is by no means the only major development in contemporary African film practice. Indeed, there have also been in recent years less spectacular yet significant developments in the auteurist tradition (for a long time the default setting for African cinema) that deserve our full attention. These include the diversification of avenues for the making of films in Africa, the premise of a return of the state as an

enabler of the cinema, and finally a prospective textual practice articulated around the concept of engagement. Together these three elements represent the promise of compelling futures for film practice on the continent.

In the past few years, there has been a multiplication and diversification of avenues for the making, exhibiting, and reception of auteurist cinema in Africa, including the proliferation of workshops, training facilities, and film schools, along with partnerships that have produced new routes and new links with institutions, structures, and circuits in Africa, Europe, the Americas, Asia, and beyond and have opened in unprecedented ways horizons of fabrication and modes of experiencing African cinema. It is a truism that relationality was always embedded in the DNA of the auteurist tradition in African cinema, which was never simply face-to-face with itself but was always also in conversation with other traditions: neorealism, the French new wave, the montage school, African American cinema, Satyajit Ray, Ozu, Solanas and Getino, Pereira dos Santos, Tarkovsky, Parajanov. Similarly, at the level of production, the auteurist tradition has frequently interacted (often in an uneven and asymmetric manner) with forces outside of the continent that enabled its existence. While these initially included such institutions as the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, La Francophonie, and the European Union, among others, in recent years other countries and institutions have started to intervene in the field, including Spain, Portugal, and Brazil, as well as various production funds from international film festivals, including Berlin, Rotterdam, Locarno, and Dubai. For a long time, however, the Hollywood tradition was, overall, glaringly absent from this roll call. The groundbreaking yet unfortunately short-lived Africa First experiment gave brief institutional form to the relationship between auteurist African cinema and Hollywood (or perhaps more accurately, Indiewood).¹¹

Initiated by Completion Films founder Kisha Cameron Dingle, who was associate producer on Raoul Peck's HBO-produced *Sometimes in April* (2005) and on Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), Africa First sought to open up a space whereby African cinema and the Hollywood film industry could enter into a productive conversation.² It was created as a result of a series of conversations between Cameron Dingle and Focus Features' then-CEO James Schamus, noted, among other things, for his long-standing screenwriting and producing collaboration with Ang Lee on such films as *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2006).³

1 Geoff King defines Indiewood as follows: "The term 'Indiewood' was coined in the mid-1990s to denote a part of the American film spectrum in which distinctions between Hollywood and the independent sector appeared to have become blurred. It suggests a kind of cinema that draws on elements of each, combining some qualities associated with the independent sector, although perhaps understood as softened or watered-down, with other qualities and industrial practices more characteristic of the output of the major studios." See Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 3.

2 Kisha Cameron Dingle: "The premise was to figure out a way whereby this world of African cinema and filmmaking and this world of studio and industry could meet. Is there any overlap? Is there any business that could be done together? What could we create in this space?" E-mail interview with author, July 4, 2014.

3 "When I met James . . . it was really initially casual conversations about Sembene, Mambety. . . . We would talk about these films with James. He was someone who had seen them, had a lot of passion for them." Cameron e-mail interview, July 4, 2014.

Located in New York City, and housed at and funded by Focus Features (the art-house division of NBC/Universal), Africa First was a project that from its inception in 2008 sought to produce first-rate short fiction films from Africa by discovering or enabling film directors early in their careers.⁴ Deliberately inscribing itself in an art-cinema context, cultivating a sense of cool cosmopolitanism, and invested in global auteurist cinema discourse, Africa First sought to produce and make available films for the film festival, museum, and college and university circuits.⁵ Functioning on the basis of an open call for projects, and sometimes recommendations, Africa First operated through a strict yearly selection of five projects from more than one hundred submissions and invited the directors selected to take part in a “Summit Weekend” in New York City, consisting of workshops, film screenings, and networking.

Part of the uniqueness of the summit rested on the fact that filmmakers met not only with executives from Focus Features but also with an advisory board, consisting of a selection of major African and Afro-diasporic figures operating in the world of African cinema. These included scholars (Imruh Bakari); film programmers and curators (Mahn Bonetti, Keith Shiri, June Givanni); major directors (Jihan El-Tahri); a film producer, founder of a documentary film festival, and part of radical revolutionary cinematic movements (Pedro Pimenta and *kuxa kanema* and *dockanema*); and an acquisitions and coproduction manager for Hollywood indie labels and founder of a media arts organization (Sharifa Johka, New Line Cinema and African Voices Cinema Series).⁶ Deeply schooled in the multilayered debates in African cinema, they participated in shaping the films in a way that potentially offers an important counterpoint to the argument related to the purported always already “being-for-other-ness” of films from outside Europe and North America, simply by virtue of their articulation with the art-cinema and/or film festival circuit.⁷

4 As Yannis Tzoumakis reminds us, “Focus Features, the specialty label established by Vivendi Universal in 2002, has been the one division from the group comprising the most recent wave of studio specialty film arms that succeeded in establishing a distinct and consistent brand identity from inception...” He also adds that it is looked upon by scholars as ‘the definitive indie company in the 2000s, in the same way that Miramax once defined the 1990s independent landscape.” See Yannis Tzoumakis, *Hollywood’s Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market*. (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2012), 178. For more on Africa First, see its web site: <http://www.focusfeatures.com/africafirst/index.php>.

5 “Our audience doesn’t follow the in-crowd, they are the in-crowd. . . . Our audience is well-informed and passionate about the world and national politics, and have traveled internationally. They actively seek to broaden their knowledge and experiences on these subjects in various ways” (Africa First prospectus, unpublished). “From South Africa to Paris, Lagos to Tokyo, London to LA, Africa First filmmakers come from diverse places, backgrounds, and perspectives and are making films with an eye toward the global market” (prospectus). Indeed, adds Kisha Cameron Dingle, “[f]ocus was all about voices from all over the world, working with some of the most talented filmmakers from all over the planet. And they just recognized that there was a whole part of the planet that they were not working with.” Cameron Dingle e-mail interview, July 4, 2014.

6 *Kuxa kanema* means literally “the birth of the cinema.” The term was used to refer to an avant-gardist filmmaking experiment that took place in Mozambique between the country’s independence in 1975 and the advent of liberalization in 1990. It consisted of making newsreels, documentaries, and fiction films that would cinematically translate the Marxist revolutionary project at work in the then-newly independent country. *Dockanema* means “documentary cinema” and is the name given by founder Pedro Pimenta to his international documentary film festival as an homage to the *kuxa kanema* experiment.

7 Randall Halle, “Offering Tales They Want to Hear: Transnational European Film Funding as Neo-Orientalism,” in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 303–319; Azadeh Farahmand, “Disentangling the International Festival Circuit: Genre and Iranian

After the summit, and upon submission of their budget and production plan, each director received \$10,000 to finance a short film project. By the year 2013, twenty films had been completed, several of which were screened at major film festivals, as diverse as FESPACO, Sundance, Toronto, Dubai, Los Angeles, Rotterdam, New York, Durban, and Seattle, and many garnered nominations and won awards. The films themselves covered the various corners of the continent along with a wide range of genres. Some of the most important include Kenyan Wanuri Kahiu's sci-fi *Pumzi* (2009), Senegalese Dyana Gaye's musical *Saint-Louis Blues* (2009), Malian Daouda Coulibaly's *Tinye So* (2011), Zambian Rungano Nyoni's *Mwanza the Great* (2011), and Burkinabé Cedric Ido's superhero film *Twaaga* (2012). With *Tinye So*, Daouda Coulibaly experimentally revisits the grand narratives of colonialism and African independence through voice-overs from spirits reading Negritude poems, deploys Malian puppetry to evoke the colonial encounter, and reactivates the Fanonian trope of madness as one normative reaction to the colonial situation. Rungano Nyoni surrealistically renders the blurred boundaries between the imaginary and the real in *Mwanza the Great*, whereas Cedric Ido's *Twaaga* is arguably the first fiction film in the history of African cinema to be set during the Thomas Sankara revolution in Burkina Faso, establishing a parallel between the radically anti-imperialist and fundamentally pan-Africanist leader with the figure of the superhero.⁸ Finally, Dyana Gaye offers a loving homage to the cinema of Jacques Demy in *Saint-Louis Blues*, and Wanuri Kahiu's original sci-fi film *Pumzi* explores a postnature world in which the possibility of regeneration lies in the hands of the curator of a virtual natural history museum.

While the Africa First experiment has undoubtedly contributed a superb corpus to the national, the regional, and indeed the continental in African cinema, its early demise, following the sacking in late 2013 of James Schamus by NBC/Universal, is symptomatic not only of some of the limitations of the articulation of African film practice with the Hollywood machine, always susceptible to the hegemony of bottom-line ideology; it perhaps also indicates the ways in which aspects of the destinies of elements of African cinema become intertwined with those of independent American cinema, and possibly other traditions, all here conjuncturally positioned by the cleaver of market fundamentalism under the aegis of economic censorship.⁹

It is partly in reaction to some of the limitations of the relational paradigm, encompassing not only Hollywood but also various European funding schemes, that other avenues are also being regularly sought within the African continent itself in order

Cinema," in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 263–284.

8 A recent popular uprising in Burkina Faso has led to the downfall on October 31, 2014, of the Blaise Compaore regime, which was responsible for the assassination of Thomas Sankara and which made the 1983–1987 years of the country's history virtually unrepresentable in the cinema. Indeed, the fact that Cedric Ido set his film in the realm of fantasy underscores the difficulty/impossibility of realistic representation of that moment. The post-Compaore period will hopefully help create new conditions for the representability of this profound historical and traumatic erasure.

9 The decision by Universal to dismiss James Schamus, downsize Focus Features, and relocate it from New York to Los Angeles naturally had ripple effects beyond the world of African cinema. See Frank DiGiacomo, "Does the Departure of Focus Features' James Schamus Foretell the End of the Studio Indie?," *Vulture Magazine*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/10/james-schamus-career-middlebrow-films.html>.

to make possible a viable auteurist tradition through a reengagement of the state. Indeed, it might be argued that the significance of private initiatives like Africa First and others across the continent are better examined in relation to the endemic structural problems related to the existence, perpetuation, and growth of auteurist cinema on the African continent. These efforts are partly symptomatic of the structuring absence of the state and, in some cases, the state's abdication of its role and responsibilities vis-à-vis moving-image culture in many African countries. Nollywood itself was arguably in part a response to the absence of the state (*l'État manquant*, to paraphrase Deleuze) both in terms of film policy and in terms of its inability to guarantee the personal safety of potential theatergoers. The necessity of the presence of the state in cinema is not unique to African film practice. Any serious study of world cinema, in particular in its independent auteurist version, must come to terms with the indispensable role of the state as an enabler of that tradition in terms not only of creating legal frameworks but also of establishing and supporting institutions across the chain of production, exhibition, circulation, and distribution. Indeed, many new waves would simply not have emerged had the cinema been left to the devices of the laws of the free market. Paul Willemsen reminds us that Hollywood itself, the industry most wedded to free-market and supposedly laissez-faire ideology, "is by far the most lavishly subsidized film industry in the world."¹⁰ In light of this, the necessity of the presence of the state in African cinema is on the order of the axiomatic. The question at hand remains the modalities of such an intervention.¹¹

There was arguably never a complete or fully cooperative presence of the state in the cinema in most countries in Africa. Indeed, in many cases, the state was often absent, aloof, instrumentalizing, and sometimes even hostile and partaking in sabotage. In others, the state was often involved in regulating the filmmaking profession, censoring, managing the circulation and exhibition of films—in some cases, it was involved in the production of films through the establishment of a fund disbursed following a selection of projects submitted to various national film commissions. This was, for a long time, the case in such countries as Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The state was also sometimes involved in supporting such regional and continental institutions as FEPACI (Burkina Faso and South Africa) and major film festivals like FESPACO and the JCC (Burkina Faso and Tunisia).¹²

But the various possibilities of state intervention in the cinema across Africa were severely curtailed in the 1980s and 1990s (and indeed the early 2000s), by the

10 Willemsen adds: "That such an approach has long underpinned the US film industry is particularly evident in the massive state subsidies allocated to the Hollywood companies (in the form of tax incentives, market research, protectionism, legalized accounting scams, publicly funded public relations and marketing campaigns, and so on), subsidies amounting to billions of dollars over the last two or three decades." Paul Willemsen, "For a Comparative Film Studies," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (2005): 102.

11 In a recent article, Roy Armes also examines the role of the state in African cinema, in particular in North Africa. See Roy Armes, "African Cinemas and the Role of the State" in *Critical Approaches to African Cinema Discourse*, ed. Frank Ukadike (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 87-106.

12 FEPACI is the Federation of Pan African Filmmakers, the only institution of its kind in the world that seeks to lobby in favor of cinema-friendly measures across the continent—and indeed the world—on behalf of African filmmakers. *The Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage* (JCC) were founded in Tunisia in 1966 and debates around the creation of both FEPACI and FESPACO took place there.

intervention of international financial institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund), which, through their proselytization of the gospel of minimal state presence in the management of the affairs of the agora, sought to privatize public assets and imposed on several states the view that they should best refrain from involvement in cultural policy. In Burkina Faso, for instance, an important factor in the decline in theatrical attendance and thus of national film policy was the divestment of the state from the field of culture.¹³ While moviegoing was under pressure, as it was elsewhere in the world, with the rise of piracy and the ubiquity of satellite television, among other things, the imposition of this divestment was symptomatic of the ways in which a global neoliberal agenda was remotely shaping cinema culture on the African continent.

In recent years, however, the call for a critical reexamination of the role of the state in the cinema is increasingly making itself audible with the mounting realization and criticism of the fallacy of—and indeed the dangerous implications of—many of the suggestions offered by the said international financial institutions. Consequently, a number of colloquia have been taking place calling for renewed public policies vis-à-vis the cinema.¹⁴ These efforts call for the taxation of cell phone, Internet, and satellite television services in order to fund filmmaking.¹⁵ While these endeavors are still in their early stages, one of the examples that has been a major source of inspiration is the Moroccan experience, which has seen the country rise to become a major regional and even continental actor, enabling auteurist cinema through the creation of a range of institutions and practices under the aegis of the state-funded Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM).

Under the leadership of Nourredine Sail (a key figure of “Moroccan cinephilia”), yearly feature film production has jumped from three to twenty-five over the years and about a hundred shorts are also produced each year.¹⁶ Additionally, an active policy of coproduction (seen by many as a necessary complement and sometimes palliative or indeed even as an alternative to those with Europe) was implemented that helped make possible the existence of films as diverse as Ousmane Sembene’s testament film

13 This was made clear during a summer class I took to Burkina Faso in 2012 and during which we met with the head and a member of the National Association of Theater Owners of Burkina Faso. According to Badiel Lassane, also a former employee of Société Nationale d'Exploitation Cinématographique du Burkina (SONACIB, the national film distribution and exhibition company, which owned most of the movie theaters at the time), the liquidation of the state-run company was the result not of the institution's insolvency or bankruptcy but of external pressures underwritten by the blind wind of full-fledged privatization that was blowing across the continent at the time. Randall Halle also mentions the demise of Algerian cinema as a result of the enforcement of free market agreements. See Halle, “Offering Tales,” 311.

14 At the end of FESPACO, the Pan African Film and Television Festival, the Ouagadougou Declaration was signed by participants of the colloquium “African Cinema and Public Policies in Africa”; the declaration called on heads of African states regional and continental institutions (the African Union) to get more involved in the cinema. FESPACO, “Declaration solennelle de Ouagadougou” (Solemn Declaration of Ouagadougou), Twenty-Third Annual Ouagadougou FESPACO, Ouagadougou, February 26–27, 2013, <http://scd.rfi.fr/sites/filesrfi/D%C3%A9claration%20de%20Ouagadougou%20Fran%C3%A7ais.pdf>.

15 Ibid. This is partly inspired by the French Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée (CNC).

16 Siegfried Forster, “La nouvelle politique du cinéma en Afrique,” *Les voix du monde*, March 1, 2013, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130301-nouvelle-politique-cinema-afrique-declaration-solennelle-de-Ouagadougou-FPCA/>. In 2013, the CCM delivered 23 shooting authorizations for features, 131 for shorts, and 72 for documentaries. See “Autorisations de tournage—2013,” CCM, <http://www.ccm.ma/pdf/dp/productions2013.pdf>.

Moolaade (2004), Newton Aduaka's *One Man's Show* (2013), Zeze Gamboa's *O grande Kilapy* (2012), Alain Gomis's *Téy* (2012), and Nadia El Fani's *Ouled Lenin* (2008).¹⁷

With seventy screens, thirty multiplexes in construction, and at least fifteen film festivals, Morocco is also arguably the country with the largest number of film festivals on the continent, ranging from international and regional (Mediterranean) to continental (African), to animation, short, and documentary. Two of the most prestigious are the Marrakech International Film Festival and the Khouribga African Film Festival. The Marrakech Film Festival seeks to position itself as a "world cinema" event, with an international competition, retrospectives, a focus on national cinemas, master classes, and so forth. The 2013 international jury featured such figures as Martin Scorsese, Fatih Akin, Marion Cotillard, Anurag Kashyap, and Park Chan-Wook, among others, along with a retrospective on Scandinavian cinema (in 2014, Japanese cinema was the focus).¹⁸

With this infrastructural background and a positioning of its cinema at the local, national, regional, continental, and global levels, Morocco has sought to inspire the same dynamism in other countries and could be considered as partaking in the vanguard of a potentially viable auteurist tradition, which also contributes major names like Faouzi Bensaidi to the canon of world cinema and therefore demonstrates, almost in a reverse manner to the Africa First experiment, the possibility for state policies at the level of the national to have significant implications for larger debates in world cinema.¹⁹

It is by now clear that many of the objective conditions for the continuing existence of African film practice are inseparable from (geo)political and economic considerations, that culture and politics, and indeed aesthetics and politics, seem to need to be considered on the same continuum. In that regard, a final important development requires our attention. Indeed, a certain renegotiation of the concept of engagement in a post-third cinema or post-Cold War moment seems to be at work among a number of filmmakers across the continent. While the African continent finds itself under the sway of many "posts," and even as it is the subject of a multitude of contradictory and complex transformations, it remains forcibly positioned at the bottom of the world geopolitical order. Africa is still to a large extent the site of thoroughly uncontrolled extractive and predatory relationships. Continuously instrumentalized, and at the mercy of merciless political manipulations, state delegitimization, and economic turpitude, it is often used as the ultimate laboratory for all forms of social engineering in situations that combine residuals of the colonial and the neocolonial with neo-imperial and techno-capitalist modes of ordering the world and ascribing a place for Africa in it. In spite of ceaseless efforts (sometimes partially or temporarily successful) to open up the realms of the possible, the continent largely remains hostage to an often careless, self-centered, kleptocratic, and self-gratifying ruling apparatus that keeps

17 Indeed, there were at least thirty-five feature films coproduced between Morocco and other African countries. CCM, "Œuvres africaines en coproduction avec le Maroc—Avril 2014," <http://www.ccm.ma/inter/phactualite/co-prod31042014.pdf>.

18 See Festival International du Film de Marrakech (FIFM), <http://www.festivalmarrakech.info/>.

19 Faouzi Bensaidi's symmetrical aesthetics makes him one of the most interesting filmmakers working today, with such films as *What a Wonderful World* (2006) and *Death for Sale* (2011). The latter was shortlisted for the 2013 Oscar nominations and received praise from Martin Scorsese.

the majority of the aspirations of the billion-person-strong continent at bay. In this context, the question of engagement remains crucial to the intellectual, the artist, and thus to the film and media maker.²⁰ Yet the uniqueness of the present conjuncture of quasi-totalitarian capitalist hegemony poses the problem of a new way of negotiating this question, and prospective engagement appears to be one of the answers conjured by filmmakers.

Prospective engagement (admittedly a tautological term) may be thought of as the way in which filmmakers and artists, interpellated by situations of dominance present in social and historical reality, inscribe themselves and their creative act in that reality, situating it in relation to some form of futurity or virtuality, which, because of its anticipatory quality (not always visibly inscribed in the text), has the potential (but not the guarantee) to create or evoke real-life effects (either immediate or deferred) on the politics of representation and/or the agora. This mode of filmmaking is arguably best observed in the work of such directors as Abderrahmane Sissako, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, and Nadia El Fani—all three incidentally belonging to the film movement known as the *Guilde of African Filmmakers and Producers*.²¹

Two of Abderrahmane Sissako's films might best illustrate this concept. In *Life on Earth* (1997), the filmmaker, then based in Paris, returned to his village, Sokolo, to make an Arte-commissioned film (Arte is a French-German TV channel) to celebrate the turn of the millennium. Setting the film in Sokolo, using himself as an authorizing point of view into what it means to await this event, which, as he put it, will not change much in the lives of the inhabitants, Sissako uses the poetry of Aimé Césaire as a prospective, transcendent form that allows him to imagine the future Africa emerging from the hard work and vision of its children. Positing that "the work of man has just begun," he proceeds, through that very quotational gesture, to imaginatively and radically reset the clock of human history itself. In doing so, Sissako reminds us that "engagement is unthinkable outside of definition of some historical objectives. It is at the service of a definable future, not certain, but possible. That is its horizon."²² This future-invested engagement takes its ultimate form in his film *Bamako* (2006), in which Sissako imagines the very possibility of putting the Washington Consensus quartet—World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and the US government—on trial in a courtyard in the city of Bamako, the capital city of Mali. Unearthing the effects and mechanisms of globalization, seen as a new strategy of dominance with a quasi-totalitarian project that involves the privatization of even life itself, *Bamako* enacts a fictional gesture that imaginatively ascribes to itself the power that the forcibly disempowered African states lack. It succeeds in doing in the realm of the fictional that which the former cannot in the space of historical and geopolitical

20 As a reminder, engagement is understood as the "action of intellectuals [and artists] . . . in the political sphere." It has within its definitional spectrum the sense of social and political responsibility, a collective horizon and a critique of the reigning order. See David L. Schalk, *The Spectrum of Engagement: Mounier, Benda, Nizan, Brasillach, Sartre* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 5–15.

21 For another look at the *Guilde*, see Manthia Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (Munich: Prestel, 2010).

22 Alain Badiou, "L'engagement de Sartre," in *La nuit Sartre: Table ronde autour de l'héritage de Sartre*, June 7, 2013, École Normale Supérieure: Savoirs en MultiMedia, <http://savoirs.ens.fr/expose.php?id=1214>.

reality (at least not yet). In the process, Sissako multiplies the registers of engagement through an induction of the space of the imaginary.²³

With Jean-Pierre Bekolo, prospective engagement could also be located in at least two films: *Les saignantes* (2005) and *The President* (2013). In *Les saignantes*, Bekolo makes a genre-interrogating film that deconstructs the codes of sci-fi, horror, and action. Set in the year 2035, the film figures the state as exploiter, as unaccountable, indeed as hyperlibidinous—as a monster adept at producing spectacle out of the dejection of its subjects. To respond to this, he imagines femininity as a recourse to forms of absolute power, an empowered femininity that challenges a masculinist, possessive state power that encroaches on every aspect of life, indeed on the body itself, as well described by his compatriot Achille Mbembe.²⁴

Similarly, in his latest film, *The President*, Bekolo imagines the possible implications of the sudden disappearance of a lifelong sitting African president on the management of the polity. The film's rhetorical inscription in the real is secured by the documentary mode, which is placed in a dialectical yet blurred relationship to the fictional. Indeed, the principle of proximity between the two is symptomatic of Bekolo's overall desire, which is to have his film bear a transformational effect on historical reality. The centrality of the televisual apparatus, the prolonged use of the direct address mode, and the extended looks at the camera translate this interventionist aesthetics at the heart of the film's politics. Bekolo wished to make a film that mattered, and it did. The film was reportedly banned in Cameroon.²⁵

With Nadia El Fani, the question of prospective engagement accrues a dimension of life and death in the context of profound political transformations stemming from what has become known as the Arab Spring, the reverberations of which are still being felt across the world. It is possible to trace various dimensions of this question from her anticipatory feature film *Bedwin Hacker* (2002), in which she merges electronic engagement with a politics of sexual orientation. With *Ouled Lenin* (2008), she revisits the narrative of the Tunisian Communist Party's fight for independence and lays the ground for her concern with secularism, which, it turns out, would become one of the defining fault lines of the postrevolutionary Tunisia.

Seeking to track the symptoms of anti-secularist tendencies in the society, El Fani directed *Neither Allah, nor Master* (2011) to make a case for Muslim Tunisians ostracized for breaking the fast or for not fasting during the month of Ramadan in a predominantly Muslim country. The film was started before the collapse of Ben Ali and completed after it. On the day of the film's premiere, Salafist militants mobbed the theater and prevented its screening. In its aftermath, El Fani was accused of desecrating Islam in

23 For another look at the work of Sissako in terms of engagement, this time, primarily through the lens of expatriation, please see Akin Adesokan "Abderrahmane Sissako and the Poetics of Engaged Expatriation." *Screen*, 51:2, Summer 2010. It is important to note however (for future analysis) that Sissako has recently relocated to Nouakchott, the capital city of Mauritania.

24 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001); Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2010).

25 Kamau Mbote, "Buni TV Releases Cameroon's Banned Film 'The President,'" *##humanipo: Home to African Tech*, October 7, 2013, <http://www.humanipo.com/news/33676/buni-tv-releases-camerouns-banned-film-the-president/>.

her film and received death threats. Three separate lawsuits were also filed against her.²⁶

It might not be too presumptuous to postulate a symbolic passing of the baton between two generations of filmmakers in African cinema, that of the founders of discursivity and that of the *Guilde*, and in this particular case, between Sembene and El Fani (two self-declared atheists and critics of religious intolerance and its political instrumentalization). Indeed, a history-inflected retrospective reading of Ousmane Sembene's *Borom sarret* (1963) might posit it as announcing the igniting event of the Tunisian revolution. Indeed, it ought not to be lost on analysts of both African politics and African cinema that Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation set off the events of the revolution, was in effect a *borom sarret*, who, like Sembene's character, had his cart (his only livelihood) taken away from him by the police after endless harassment. Going further than Sembene's cart man, Bouazizi chose to put an end to systematic and relentless humiliation by electing to commit a very public and spectacular suicide in front of the Sidi Bouzid governorate, thereby setting off the igniting moment of the Tunisian revolution.

It is in such contexts and readings that the concept of prospective engagement as deployed in time (through five decades, between the release of *Borom sarret* in 1963 and the advent of the Tunisian Revolution in 2011) finds some of its fullest resonances, as it highlights the desirability and indispensability of a critical auteurist tradition of the cinema in Africa, distinguished by its vanguardist anticipatory function. It is also this clear-sighted and globally ambitious auteurist tradition that is being renewed in projects like *Africa First*, sparing no efforts to call for and work toward long-lasting and viable enabling institutions in Africa and abroad, which would allow it to participate in setting the terms of the debates in world cinema, so that the ambient economism overdetermining contemporary film practice does not become, to paraphrase Wanuri Kahiu, a "dream suppressant." *

26 Interview with the director during a visit in April 2012 to Carleton University, in Ottawa.

Contributors

Moradewun Adejunmobi is a professor in the African American and African Studies Program at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Vernacular Palaver: Imaginations of the Local and Non-Native Languages in West Africa* (2004) and has published widely on popular film in Nigeria.

Jude Akudinobi earned his PhD in cinema-television from the University of Southern California, and teaches in the Department of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His works on African cinema have appeared in various journals, anthologies, and other publications.

Lindiwe Dovey, originally from South Africa, is a scholar, film festival director, curator, and filmmaker. She is senior lecturer in African film at SOAS, University of London, and cofounder of Film Africa and the Cambridge African Film Festival. Her book *African Film and Literature* (2009) won a Choice Outstanding Award; her new book *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.

Aboubakar Sanogo is an Assistant professor in Film Studies at Carleton University. His research interests include African cinema, documentary, world cinema, colonial cinema, cinephilia and the relationship between film form, history and theory. His writings have appeared in academic journals, anthologies and journalistic outlets. He is currently preparing a monograph on the cinema of Med Hondo.