

LAGOS NEVER SPOILS: THE AESTHETICS, AFFECT, AND POLITICS OF THE CITY IN  
NIGERIAN SCREEN MEDIA

By

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## ABSTRACT

### LAGOS NEVER SPOILS: THE AESTHETICS, AFFECT, AND POLITICS OF THE CITY IN NIGERIAN SCREEN MEDIA

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Studies of cinema and urban modernity in Europe and America typically foreground movement, vision, and sensation as the categories of correlation between cinema and the city. *Lagos Never Spoils: The Aesthetics, Affect, and Politics of the City in Nigerian Cinema*, argues that in postcolonial African cities, often marked by physical disjuncture and material breakdown, urbanism itself is constituted to a greater degree by kinetic mediascapes. It contends that Nollywood does not simply reflect conditions of life in Lagos, but actively shapes the conditions for various urban subjectivities to emerge and transform. Urban crime films adopt melodramatic conventions to depict a city of extreme disparities, while comedies position the rural migrant as the object of metropolitan laughter, and sophisticated blockbusters acclimate viewers to “cool” lifestyle consumerism. Conversely, by bringing attention to the material circuits underlying the production of film and related media in Lagos, this study joins analysis of material culture with that of subjectivity and embodiment. This approach illuminates the various ways that Nollywood exists owing, in large part, to the urban milieu of Lagos and, conversely, that the city's image springs from the imagination of its popular cinema.

*Lagos Never Spoils* sets itself within critical discussions of the importance of African art and culture at a time when the continent is viewed by outsiders as increasingly superfluous to contemporary notions of the global. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe's ambitious efforts to uncover the worldliness of contemporary African cities subtend my argument that Nollywood is one of many everyday practices through which Lagosians situate themselves within the world at

large, and shape the image of the world from a popular, urban, and uniquely Nigerian vantage point. To this end, my research responds to recent critical studies of postcolonial cities, including Filip de Boeck's theorization of the visible and invisible realms of Kinshasa, Sasha Newell's study of performativity and street style in Abidjan, and Ravi Sundaram's notion of media urbanism in Delhi. This dissertation contributes by identifying the way film images, genres, and tropes shape the popular urban imaginary, and demand a recognition of the aesthetic, affective and political function of cinema in postcolonial African cities.

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## Introduction:

### Nigerian Screen Media: An Archive of the City of Lagos

This dissertation examines Nigeria's film industry against the backdrop of Lagos, the region's largest metropolis, and interrogates the aesthetic, affective and political implications of globalization for Nigerian urbanism. Studies of cinema and urban modernity in Europe and America have typically examined the correlation of movement, vision and sensation. I argue that in postcolonial African cities, often marked by physical disjuncture and material breakdown, urbanism itself is experienced to a large degree through the city's kinetic mediascapes. I contend that Nollywood, Nigeria's commercial film industry, does not simply reflect conditions of life in Lagos, but actively shapes the conditions for various urban subjectivities to emerge and transform. Urban crime films adopt melodramatic conventions to depict a city of extreme disparities, while comedies position the rural migrant as the object of metropolitan laughter, and a new brand of sophisticated blockbusters accustom viewers to "cool" lifestyle consumerism. Nollywood's power to shape urban life in Nigeria stems in part from its ability, unmatched by any other popular cultural form, to produce images of the city that, in turn, form the basis of an collective urban imaginary. It also stems from the industry's physical presence within Lagos, its embeddedness within the city's material circuits of cultural production and popular economic activity. By bringing attention to the material circuits underlying the production of film and related media in Lagos, my inquiry joins analysis of material culture with that of aesthetics and subjectivity.

*Lagos Never Spoils* sets itself within critical discussions of the importance of African art and culture at a time when the continent is viewed by outsiders as increasingly extraneous to contemporary notions of the global. In international entertainment and news media Africa is

evoked as a sign of perennial and unmitigated poverty, crisis, and violence. This must be distinguished from Africa's historical role in Western discourse as a placeholder for alterity, cultural difference, and mysterious otherness. In a globalized world constructed by dominant, often Western, representations of worldliness, to be African no longer means being other, it is to be nothing, to not be at all (Mbembe 2001, p. 4). We might say that if the global social order is structured so that each part has its place, then many Africans, including a growing mass of urban poor, know what it means to live as the part with no part, those with no clear “place-in-the-world,” to borrow Ferguson’s phrase (2008). This ideological erasure of Africa is belied by the films and videos through which Africans actively set out “to write the world from Africa [and] to write Africa into the world, or as a fragment thereof” (Nuttall and Mbembe 2004, p. 348). This is especially true of popular Nigerian screen media, which attests to the embeddedness of African selves in the world while also re-envisioning the world from an African vantage point.

Since the earliest studies of video film, critics have noted the mutual entanglement of Nollywood and Lagos. They reveal video films to be a historically urban development, one that arose from the social milieu of the city and reflects the city in their narratives and images (Adesokan 2004, Haynes 2007, Oha 2000, Okome 1997; 2003). Jonathan Haynes’s seminal essay “Nollywood in Lagos, Lagos in Nollywood Films” is most notable for the degree to which it illustrates, in both material and textual terms, how the city and the industry are mutually constitutive. The faces of iconic actors adorn film posters, billboards, public transportation, newspapers, and soft-sell magazines. The city's airwaves buzz with news of the latest movie premiers just as the city's cyberspaces—Twitter, Facebook, and especially Blackberry Messenger—offer fans intimate and instantaneous social interaction with other fans and some of their favorite Nollywood celebrities. Every neighborhood has a shop with an offering of

Nollywood movies. One finds these videos sold on almost every side street where the majority of daily commerce takes place. The movies play on TV screens in waiting rooms, fast food restaurants, bus stops and viewing parlors throughout Lagos. The business of financing, reproducing, packaging, and distributing video films has taken root in Idumota and Alaba markets, two of the city's main economic hubs. The offices of producers, postproduction facilities, and acting schools that crowd Surulere give the neighborhood the feel of being at the center of the film industry. It is not unusual to come across a crew shooting on location in Lekki, where ultramodern resident developments provide the mise-en-scene for narratives about the good life in the big city. In short, we must see Nollywood as historically and materially situated within the city of Lagos.

Conversely speaking, video films conjure dimensions of urban life not immediately perceptible on the surface of things. We might say that Nollywood mediates the city in the sense that it produces a whole repertory of images, stories, styles and sentiments with which audiences can construct a collective imaginary of urban modernity. As Jonathan Haynes writes, "the films are a means for Nigerians to come to terms--visually, dramatically, emotionally, morally, socially, politically, and spiritually--with the city and everything it embodies" ("Nollywood in Lagos" 133). This urban imaginary exists at the intersection of the city's physical spaces, social relations and aesthetic dimensions.

### The City as an Aesthetic Field

Many of the fundamental premises of this dissertation draw upon Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe's important collection of essays on Johannesburg as the premier modern African metropolis. I note above that the study of Nollywood emphasizes the associations

between the popular and the everyday, following the consensus formed by Karin Barber, Stephanie Newell, Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome. In each chapter of this dissertation, I put pressure on this relationship between media, the city, and urban “reality.” What Nuttall and Mbembe add is a reminder that this relationship is not nearly as direct as to say that popular screen media simply provides an aestheticized reflection of real life conditions. After all, what we often call “everyday life” is itself always experienced aesthetically. It consists of one’s physical sense of the city, and emotions like exhaustion, shock, fear, and laughter. It consists of rumors, popular stories, styles of self-presentation, and slogans like *Èkó ò ní bàjé* (“Lagos Will Never Spoil”), the city's motto which one finds emblazoned on public spaces everywhere. As Nuttall and Mbembe assert, “To a large extent, metropolitan existence is less about the city as such or how the latter is made and by whom than how it is exhibited, displayed, and represented, its colorfulness, its aura, and its aesthetics” (17). In the chapters that follow I move beyond conventional functionalist descriptions of the city as a sum of its infrastructure, geography, economic activities, legal regimes, and social relations and to underscore the fact that “it is also comprised of bodies, images, forms, footprints, and memories” (Nuttall and Mbembe, 8).

Our received understandings of urban modernity often come from classic urban theorists like Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin, for whom the modern European city represented the site of unprecedented change in art, media technology, and individual and collective organization of sensory perception under the conditions of industrial capitalism. By contrast, African cities oblige us to rethink the primacy of the surface and the visible. Cities like Lagos are animated by unseen orders, invisibility, the supersensible, and the degradation of infrastructure and social order that imposes itself at the city’s margins and edges. As Nuttall and Mbembe argue, “beneath the visible landscape and the surface of the metropolis, its objects and

social relations, are concealed or embedded other orders of visibility, other scripts that are not reducible to the built form." (22). If Benjamin, the great philosopher of European city life, favored the figures of the *flaneur*, the gambler, and the prostitute as avatars of urban modernity, we might ask for whom Lagos is a modern city of surfaces? Video film narratives explore the glamor of the city, but they also plumb the cracks and margins of society. One finds that in Nollywood's representation of Lagos, fidelity to the spatial reality of the city, its public surfaces, is not important. More important are intimate spaces, not the street, but the domestic interior, and the family. This dissertation focuses on the way screen media construct an urban imagination by combining the rare glimpses of the city's surface that we do get, with the interiors, edges, underworlds and otherworlds of Lagos.

Video film has a unique ability to capture these multiple facets of urban life. It accommodates both the urban world of things, commodities and ephemera, as well as their distortion by rumor, magic, and moral discourse. Occult films and the depiction of blood money rituals stand as quintessential examples of this marriage of urban legend and popular discourse surrounding the questionable acquisition of wealth in an era of "fast" capitalism. Video films imbue displays of consumer culture with a moralist hesitation in an effort to comprehend—in the broadest sense—the movements of wealth in a time when the operations of global capital have become eminently opaque, abstract, and mysterious. Carmela Garritano has pointed to the link between the popularity of genres that demonize money and its acquisition and films that turn on the glamorous display of wealth. Depictions of occult power, money rituals, and Internet scams "represent the materiality denied by [the glamor film's] shiny surfaces and commodity aesthetics" (*Global Desire* 186). The same holds true for Nollywood's depiction of Lagos as the space of capitalist modernity *par excellence*. The abundant visibility of flashy possessions in video film

and in "real" life corresponds with other orders of visibility that are privileged by genres dramatizing the evil side of money and the invisible creation of wealth.

### Nigerian Screen Media

Since its initial boom of video film production in the 1990s, Nollywood video films have become one of the most widely circulated forms of African popular culture. Nigerian filmmakers and producers have rewritten the rules of filmmaking in Africa and irreversibly changed the landscape of African cinema by expanding the kinds of stories and images that get produced and circulated and reinventing the way Africa consumes screen media more generally. Today, even as festivals like FESPACO, Durban Film Festival and Carthage Film Festival continue to sustain cinema in Africa, alternative vetting institutions, such as the Africa Movie Academy Awards, have emerged and can be understood as symbolizing a new generation of cultural institutions. This shift reflects the momentous growth of popular screen media not just in Nigeria but across Africa. Nollywood's meteoric rise has inspired an array of film practices in Senegal, Ghana, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Barbados, and the global African diaspora. Everywhere popular screen media thrives we find the same formula that combines digital video recording technology, small-scale financing, and distribution platforms embedded within a preexisting popular economy (Krings and Okome 2013; Garritano 2012; Saul and Austen 2010; Ajibade 2007). Therefore, it is no exaggeration to state that Nollywood and its sibling industries represent a new aesthetic frontier for filmmaking on the continent. Moradewun Adejunmobi calls this aesthetic revolution the "televisual turn" in the history of African cinema. This dissertation acknowledges and expounds on this "televisual turn" by examining how Nollywood has engendered an aesthetic characterized by topicality, episodic narration, genre

conformity and genre mixing, thematic repetition, and interrupted viewing habits, all of which fall under, but do not exhaust, Adejunmobi's notion of the televisual (2015 120-25).

Furthermore, given the diversity of film practices addressed in this dissertation, I follow Lindiwe Dovey in using the term popular "screen media" as a broad category encompassing fictional narratives filmed or recorded on celluloid film, videocassette, and digital video (2010). I will attend to the specificity of each format and employ the terms film or video film to note the difference when such distinctions are appropriate.

The study of new African screen media has been guided by important body of scholarly surveys, including Jonathan Haynes and Onokome Okome's *Nigerian Video Films* (2000), Foluke Ogunleye's *African Video Film Today* (2003), Saul and Austen's *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (2010), Carmela Garritano's *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (2013) and Mathias Krings and Onokome Okome's *Global Nollywood: Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (2013). Taken together, these studies sketch a portrait of grassroots filmmaking that is unabashedly commercial and largely independent of financial support from both local governments and foreign funding for the arts. Nollywood nevertheless manages to produce over 1000 video films every year on relatively minute capital investment and without the direct support of large media outlets like television networks or a heavily capitalized film studio system. The economic agents and practices propelling Nollywood are constantly realigning themselves in the sense that marketers and producers continually, opportunistically seek out novel ways of drawing together different local, regional and transnational networks. As a result, we find today more investment from formal financiers and increased participation from Nigerian and South African media houses as Nollywood evolves from its initial mode of production and distribution. Nevertheless, it is as true

as ever that these videos circulate most successfully through informal distribution to an immensely broad audience.

Video films are produced to meet, stylistically and thematically, generic categories that are repeated until exhausted. The genres that appeal to audiences change with time, but video producers find numerous variations on the occult thriller, the palace romance, or the campus drama before the genre is deemed unmarketable. In scholarship on video film, as Garritano observes, a loose consensus has emerged that reads these texts as reflecting an image of everyday life seen from the vantage of the video's consumers and producers. Their images and stories reflect a certain propinquity with the fantasies, anxieties and tastes of popular African audiences precisely because Nollywood emerges from the milieu of daily life in Africa. Even as Nollywood's audience begins to extend beyond Nigeria to the rest of the continent and to Africans living abroad, video films still offer viewers an immediacy with their own lives and experiences, what Adejunmobi terms a "phenomenological proximity" ("Nollywood's Appeal" 2010). It follows that video films reflect anxieties about the place of women in society, commodity desires in real conditions of scarcity, faith in the efficaciousness of religion in mundane life, and local adaptations on global styles and popular culture, among other experiences of West African life.

From the very beginning, scholarship on Nollywood has underscored the importance of this close connection between the films and their popular audience. They permit intended audiences to see their own lives, or how they dream of seeing their own lives reflected in film. We must be careful, however, not to overstate the association of "the popular" with "the people," and to acknowledge the difference between a cultural form and its audience's collective imagination. For instance, many have noted the inherently fluid and contingent character of

Nigerian popular audiences (Jeyifo 1984, Barber 2003, Haynes and Okome 2000). Likewise, analysis of video films must attend to the ways video production is also shaped by linguistic and cultural traditions. The pedigree of video film connects directly to the televisual practices of the Nigerian Television Authority, the institution that, in the absence of a functioning national film corporation, was responsible for producing a generation of media professionals. Its genealogy can also be traced to the Yoruba traveling theater, whose impact can still be seen in Yoruba videos, just as the popularity of Indian melodramas marks the aesthetic of Hausa-language productions in the North. Furthermore, we cannot omit the fact that Nigerian video films are in continual dialogue (and competition) with the pirated Bollywood and Hollywood fare alongside which they are sold and viewed.

The unlikely rise of Nollywood can today be understood as an indispensable chapter of the history of African cinema thanks to the scholarship cited above. What is needed now are new ways of theorizing the connections between popular culture, the collective imagination, and everyday life and new terms for describing the significance of popular screen media for our understanding of the place of Africa in the world today.

#### Lagos: The Fringe or the New Frontier of Global Capitalism?

The emergence of celluloid filmmaking in Nigeria corresponded, historically speaking, with the nation's initiation into global capitalism as a major oil producer, and as a rentier State that relied on a steady flow of imports for anything from consumer goods and production technology, to foreign films and filmmaking technology. Those early filmmakers and their body of films would evolve into a full-blown video film industry at precisely the moment Nigeria enters more than a decade of economic austerity governed by a structural adjustment program

that would lead the nation down a path shared by other African states in a new age of neoliberal global capitalism. Today, as Lagos emerges like the crown jewel in a multinational corporate neocolonialism, the film industry is experiencing its own integration with novel forms of marketing, branding, financing and distribution, which has created the conditions for the advent of a “New Nollywood.” As this broad sketch suggests, screen media in Nigeria has profound historical entanglements with the nation’s economic fate from the 1970s to the present. With this in mind, an examination of the relationship between Nollywood and the city of Lagos must inevitably address how both screen media and the city itself are bound up with the course of contemporary global capitalism. This dissertation characterizes Lagos as a crossroads of cultural flows that provide the city’s film industry with an array of commodities, tropes, sentiments, aesthetics and concepts with which to apprehend historical shifts in city life. I argue that to explore this circulation of goods, ideas, and media is to explore the history of Nigerian urban modernity and the place that screen media occupies in it.

Jonathan Haynes observes a trend in writing about the hardship of life in Lagos whereby writers confront the city’s dysfunction as some sort of apocalyptic political failure endemic to cities of the global South, or they celebrate the anarchy as proof of the resilience of the city’s residents whose coping mechanisms bespeak the efficiency of self-organization in spite of failed planning and governance. These two genres of urban writing persist even though Lagos seems largely to have moved beyond the limited scope of both models. Once notorious for widespread armed robbery, Lagos has seen a significant reduction in crime in recent years. Area boys still operate to some degree in every neighborhood, but residents and motorists no longer fear intimidation or extortion on main streets. An unpredictable “go-slow” or “no-go” can still make for a hellacious commute, but always eventually traffic moves. Whereas Oshodi was once the

epitome of intense urban friction, the result of compressing together a multitude of people and commercial activities, today, with the market and the bus stops contained along the shoulder of the highways, traffic and trade moves more or less smoothly. The aura of exceptionalism that once surrounded Lagos has given way to a greater degree of normalcy as the city begins to resemble other global megacities.

Jankara market is a telling example that illustrates my point. Located near the highway interchange where Third Mainland Bridge connects to Lagos Island, the site is one of many important crossroads in the city, and yet the land on which the space of the market was built did not exist when Lagos was a British colony. In the early eighteenth century when Portuguese sailors first encountered the Yoruba settlement called *Eko*, the island and its surroundings were covered by swamps and very little arable land. In the nineteenth century the city, which was then known to Europeans by its Portuguese name Lagos, became the epicenter of the slave trade in the region. In 1861, the British unilaterally annexed Lagos, an action that “marked the beginning of Lagos as the premier commercial, administrative, and political centre of the country that would later in 1914 be known as ‘Nigeria’” (Olaniyan, 131). This development of Lagos as a colonial administrative city and entrepot for British commercial interests continued through to the mid-twentieth century and the run up to formal independence. The fifteen years before independence witnessed a boom in modernist urban development as tall office buildings shot up to house new governmental entities, local and foreign banks, communications companies, and the headquarters of British Petroleum, Shell Petroleum, and other oil companies. The push for urban modernization entailed two important strategies, namely the “reclamation” by sand dredging of immense swaths of marshy land and the first major slum clearance along the divide between the city’s colonial and indigenous districts (Akinsemoyin and Vaughan-Richards 1973,

p. 59). These two practices—sand dredging and slum clearing—continue to today in a manner that profoundly shapes the physical and political space of the city. The oil boom of the 1970s brought about the financial means for another boom of modernist urban development, especially the construction of an expansive concrete freeway system that encircled the island and connected it to the rapidly growing districts on the Mainland. This freeway system and the six-mile-long Third Mainland Bridge still stand as symbols of a historical vision of Nigerian urban modernity, an aspiration for “development” and “modernization” that would meet significant obstacles and require many detours as it was implemented in actuality. During the evening commute home, the bridge acts as a bottleneck causing chronic traffic jams, and while drivers sit stalled in traffic their headlights illuminate the patchwork sails of fishermen’s canoes as they pass underneath the bridge on their way back to Makoko, the so-called “floating slum” built atop the lagoon. Such scenes of colliding wealth and poverty, modernity and its opposite, speak to the antagonisms that inspire the imagination of the city’s film industry and continue to grip the city in its ongoing transformation.

Jankara Market abuts one of the immense concrete interchanges where Third Mainland Bridge and Ring Road highway meet, connecting the historic Lagos Island to the northern reaches of the Mainland. Marketplaces themselves are significant through out West Africa, both as representations and the commercial engines of vernacular modernity in the region. The nature of the marketplace, with its flow of goods, services, and cultures from elsewhere, inherently orients merchants and customers toward other locales and regions and makes the market a key transnational space. In fact, Jankara Market connects seamlessly to Idumota Market, the headquarters for Nollywood’s marketers, and the principal point of distribution. These markets demonstrate another way in which popular screen media participate in everyday forms of urban

modernity. Nollywood's style, content, and circulation, as Moradewu Adejunmobi asserts, "owe a lot to the culture of the West African market place, to a historic practice of buying, selling, and investing, both locally and regionally" (2007, p. 7). As Manthia Diawara asserts, the particular positioning within the world that the West African marketplace engenders effectively decenters the global/local dichotomy and its underlying ideology. Like the film industry it sustains, the marketplace is a space that fosters an African "regional imaginary," in his words, which cuts across borders and cultural barriers (1998).

In keeping with this unbounded characterization, Jankara Market has expanded, metamorphosized, and even appropriated the space of the freeway which it adjoins. The location appears in Rem Koolhaas's account of Lagos, in which it serves as a symptom of the city. At the time of Koolhaas's visit, the mid- and late-1990s, Jankara's spaces for recycled and refurbished metal wares had come to occupy the vacant land inside the huge looping cloverleaves of the expressway interchange. "The market has adapted the new highway infrastructure to its highest potential," Koolhaas writes, adding that "from scrap collection to sorting to design to assembly to re-sale, the entire chain of commodity production occurs within the highway interchange" (674). Observing this "buildingless factory," Koolhaas concluded that the urban spatialization of capital, paired with the self-organizing initiative of the labor market, demonstrated a more efficient logic than the redundant and inefficient formal planning which the highway construction embodied. In other words, for Koolhaas, Jankara Market stood for an advanced form of urban organization that did not lag behind urban planning of the West's postmodern metropolises, but rather pointed toward the sort of decenter urbanism that we could expect more of in the neoliberal age of decenter capital and deregulated modes of governance.

Today the very same land has been cleared by the Lagos State Government under the

leadership of Governor Raji Babatunde Fashola. The cleared land has been converted to parks in keeping with the state's effort to increase green space and livability in the megacity. The Lagos state flag flies over manicured green lawns, flower beds and clean park benches and, in perhaps the most telling sign of the times, a two-story electric billboard towers above the park and overlooks the traffic hurling down Third Mainland Bridge. It advertises various brands of beer, electronic devices, jewelry and banking services, all illuminated in vivid colors. At night the billboard, which runs on a generator the size of a shipping container, casts its light across the highway onto the blighted houses that otherwise sit in complete darkness during the city's daily power outages. The compression of inequalities is characteristic of Lagos where sights of extreme wealth and poverty often sit cheek by jowl. Jump cut to Bar Beach, two miles south on the Atlantic coastline of Victoria Island, the public beach where ordinary Lagosians find a rare space for leisure by the sea. There one finds the same processes of selective urban development at work as construction begins on the Dubai-style reclamation project called Eko Atlantic City. The word gentrification fails to capture the ambitions of this project. Though, as I have said, Africa is represented as increasingly disconnected from the rest of the globe with Lagos as an example of an urban dysfunction endemic to the global South, in real terms, standing within the city, one senses that for better or worse Lagos has never stopped picturing itself as the center of cosmopolitan activity in Nigeria, the country's link to the rest of the region and the world.

### Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter One, "Oil Wealth and Urban Modernity in Early Nigerian Cinema," adapts Brian Larkin's notion of "signal" and "noise," terms referring to the processual shift of media between official, intended forms (signal) and unsanctioned, unanticipated forms (noise). It situates early

Nigerian cinema between the signal of state sponsored discourse, initiatives and infrastructure, and the noise of popular cinema as it actually unfolded in the cinema halls, improvised screenings, and unofficial spheres where the majority of the public engaged visual media. The state film industry existed principally as a placeholder and empty signifier for Nigerian sovereignty, shared national identity, cultural decolonization and technological modernization, whereas popular cinema culture thrived outside the controlling ideological frame of the state, exposed Nigeria to the global circulation of dominant film traditions, and paved the way for indigenous commercial film production. My analysis of Moses Olaiya Adejunmo's *Orun Mooru* (Heaven is Hot [1982]) and Ola Balogun's *Money Power* brings into focus the contradiction between popular misgivings about fast capitalism and the nation's growing petroleum wealth, and popular celebrations of the social and cultural modernization, including the rise of local cinema, that oil money made possible.

Chapter Two, “Crime Dramas, Urban Crisis and Nollywood's Melodramatic Imagination,” focuses on the 1990s home video boom and subsequent rise of Nollywood, which coincided with a period of insecurity in Lagos that drove residents out of the public sphere and into the relative safety of the home. Nollywood crime dramas of this period heavily relied on melodramatic codes that, I argue, structured popular anxieties about the intensification of violent crime and tremendous inequalities, and recast urban crisis in moral terms as a struggle between virtue and vice. In my analysis of Amaka Igwe's *Rattlesnake* (1995), Tade Ogidan's *Owo Blow* (1996) and *Hostages* (1997), and Tecu Benson's *Terror* (1997) I demonstrate, in contrast to Peter Brooks's thesis, that the presence of the Sacred, in the form of pentecostal Christian convictions, actually intensifies with the unraveling of social order in Lagos.

Chapter Three, “Globalization as a Comedy of Incongruity,” extends my theorization of

Nollywood genres by analyzing the way city comedies function as a “body genre,” a term Linda Williams (1991) famously deploys to examine genres animated by physical affect, such as shocking bodily sensations. Responding to studies of genre by Carmela Garritano (2012), Brian Larkin (2008), and Jonathan Haynes (2013), I argue that, whereas melodrama and occult films depict moral transgression in order to produce jolts of outrage, comedies transgress similar moral codes with the effect of eliciting a pleasurable provocation. These transgressions often take the form of clashes between characters representing incongruous cultural, social, economic and gender subjectivities, or what I refer to as Nollywood's comedy of incongruity. Though on the face of it this brand of humor might seem to distract audiences with senseless play, I insist that these comedies in fact probe the cultural fault lines that arise with Lagos's rapid urbanization.

Chapter Four, “The Rise of Nollywood’s Metropolitan New Style,” examines a new wave of sophisticated Nollywood films shot with an upscale metropolitan audience in mind. While Nollywood once relied solely on video markets and networks of petty commerce to carry films across West Africa, several notable producers like Kunle Afolayan, Obi Emelonye, and Mildred Okwo now premiere their films at elite multiplex cinemas located in swank shopping centers in Lagos. Their films inhabit what could be called, for lack of a better term, a metropolitan vantage point that orients its vision toward the world at large and naturalizes metropolitan phenomena such as airline travel, consumer culture, global pop/MTV culture, high fashion, lifestyle brands, and luxury goods. Such films are only possible with big budgets and corporate sponsorship and, I argue, must be interpreted in relation to the slick advertisement images that crop up across Lagos today. I unsettle this parallel gentrification of Lagos and Nollywood, by arguing that the new city sensorium solicits one to embrace one's desires even as the means of fulfilling desire grows more tenuous for average Nigerians.

Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe's ambitious efforts to uncover the worldliness of contemporary African cities subtend my argument that Nollywood is one of many everyday practices through which Lagosians situate themselves within the world. My project also responds to recent critical studies of African urbanism, including Filip de Boeck's theorization of the visible and invisible realms of Kinshasa, Sasha Newell's study of performativity and street style in Abidjan, and AbdouMaliq Simone's investigation of the remaking of social relations and order in cities across Africa. My project contributes by identifying the way film images, genres, and tropes shape the popular urban imaginary, and asserting that we recognize the aesthetic, affective and political implications of screen media in our understanding of African urbanism. This project expands the city's archive by examining what popular screen media tells us about Africa's urban past and future. As the continent becomes increasingly urbanized, popular screen media will be in dialogue with the new directions that popular art, culture, and life will take.

## Chapter 1:

### Oil Wealth and Urban Modernity in Early Nigerian Cinema

To speak of Nigerian cinema as a single film tradition overlooks the specific historical development of indigenous film production, caught as it was between initiatives by the state designed to sponsor and shape a national cinema and the endeavors of individual filmmakers working independently toward the realization in actual practice of a national cinema. In the case of the former, cinema was conceived in the narrow sense as a technology for the perpetuation of national culture, and thus anything less than a full-blown industry with all the trappings of the centralized mass production of consumer goods would not adequately serve the needs of the nation. In the latter instance, cinema consisted of the cumulative output of many individual filmmakers striving, often in an *ad hoc* fashion, to make films in the absence of the integral structural attributes that define a film industry: structures of finance, production, distribution and exhibition. In fact, the disconnect between initiatives by the state and those of independent filmmakers was at times so egregious that it is hard not to see the state's role as almost wholly guided by self-interested political calculations by the ruling class. Surveys of Nigerian cinema have typically discounted the influence of the collection of parastatals that represent the state-sponsored film industry on the premise that ineffectual bureaucracy and systemic corruption nullified the government's ability to produce any results, and indeed, it is fair to say that, having produced a mere two feature films in their entire history (*Shehu Umar* [1976] and *Kulba na Barna* [1992]), the state's film institutions operated as an empty placeholder for the idea of a national film industry. It is nonetheless essential to grasp the state's efforts to dictate the discursive terms with which cultural and political meanings were ascribed to cinema, such that the *idea* of the nation's cinema became interchangeable with other prescient ideas, among them

Nigerian sovereignty, the nation's shared identity, its standing as a regional power-broker, its role in cultural decolonization and its status as the oil-wealthy wet nurse of African modernity.

The real living and breathing cinema culture that came to be realized outside the purview of state-sponsored production was motivated by the same ideals but, as I argue, those ideals were always refracted through a complex milieu of popular media forms – both of Nigerian and non-Nigerian provenance – unique to the city of Lagos with its continual traffic of material goods and cultural forms. In this regard, it is productive to view the history of Nigerian cinema in light of Larkin's notions of “signal” and “noise,” where those terms refer to the processual evolution of media between their official, intended forms and their unsanctioned, unanticipated forms. As Larkin explains, the distinction to him primarily denotes “the capacity of technologies to carry messages (signals) and on the technical interference and breakdown that clouds and even prevents that signal's transmission (noise).” However, he also interprets noise as referring to “the interference produced by religious and cultural values, the historic configurations in which technologies and cultural forms are made manifest.” (We might also consider whether the introduction of new “technologies and cultural forms” cannot also generate noise in the background of an otherwise stable signal of hegemonic cultural values.) Finally and perhaps most relevant to the question at hand, that of the historical formation of an indigenous cinema in Nigeria, signal and noise refers to “the connection between media and modes of rule (signal) while keeping in mind the unstable consequences media bring about (noise)” (Larkin 2008, p. 10). In light of Larkin's thesis, it is possible to situate early Nigerian cinema between the signal of state sponsored discourse and infrastructure, and the noise of popular cinema as it actual unfolded in the cinema halls, improvised screenings, and unofficial spheres where the majority of the public engaged visual media.

The advantage of this line of argument is that it serves to direct our focus beyond the official institutions and initiatives aimed at bringing to fruition a narrow vision of the nation's cinema, and to underscore the fact that indigenous film emerged in a much more haphazard, contingent and messy fashion than the state's planned development of full-scale, modern, and efficient infrastructures and institutions. The relatively small cohort of filmmakers who produced over a hundred celluloid films in the 1970s and 1980s, did so against the backdrop of a complex social and cultural field. The country's film culture, in both North and South, centered around single-screen, often open-air, cinema halls fed by a steady stream of imported films acquired through licit and illicit networks that connected cities across the region and world, and largely ignored or sidestepped national borders, customs houses, and censors boards. As newspaper reviews suggest, the types of films screened at these cinema halls offered popular audiences their first point of comparison against which indigenous productions were later compared.<sup>1</sup> In the South, film production drew together various media infrastructures, both technological, as with the procurement of film stock, cameras, light and sound equipment and the personnel to operate them, and cultural, as with the dramatists of the popular theater who adapted, or perhaps we should say remediated, their performance across stage, photoplay, television and film. In this chapter, I wish to identify some of those inputs to illustrate that early Nigerian cinema was a fundamentally urban phenomenon in the sense that it was shaped by the circuits of media and cultural production that converged in the country's major metropolises, but principally Lagos,

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<sup>1</sup> Ekwuazi expressed concern that economic constraints would place limits on the creativity of Nigerian filmmakers, coercing them to adopt the themes, characters and aesthetic of foreign films under the assumption that "foreign films become *the* films. They become the standard measurement from which the indigenous filmmaker must take his bearings. The more closely his work/s approximate/s to the foreign, the more successful, it is presumed, such work/s are adjudged" (1987, p. 34). The way Ekwuazi words his statement removes the audience from this scene of the assessment of the film against "the standard measure" of foreign films and, in truth, there exists very little information to evaluate the diversity of reception among Nigerian cinema's heterogeneous audiences.

and connected the city to wider movements of cultural goods, aesthetics, and influences. To write of those flows of goods and ideas and those circuits of media is to write the history of urban modernity in Lagos and the place film occupied in it.

The structure of this argument is indebted to Brian Larkin's study of media, urban culture and the material underpinnings of each. To understand why cities serve as the location of rapid cultural adaptation and production, we must look to the ways cities comprise of multiple layers of technological and cultural infrastructures superimposed atop one another in the same manner that they configure overlapping networks of cultural exchange and media flows. As Larkin states, "much of what we experience as urban reality is mediated by how infrastructural networks connect urban areas into wider cultural, religious, and economic network.... When we think of the urban experience, partly what we are referring to is the particular assemblage of networks that forms the unique configuration of a city and the preconditions that allow for the emergence of cultural... ideas" (2008, p. 6). In this light, understanding indigenous film as a particularly urban form should take into consideration not only the outward signs of urbanity depicted on screen, but also the specific preconditions for the emergence of film culture that the city of Lagos provided. In Larkin's words, "if the city is an event, as George Simmel has argued, and urban experience the outcome of a ceaseless series of encounters, then those encounters in Kano are constituted within the limits of the networks that bump up against each other there" (p. 251). This chapter approaches the history of Nigerian cinema as the outcome of the "networks of social relations built over time" through experimentation and collaboration between independent professional filmmakers, dramatists from the popular theater, technicians and talent from the national television network, and other less commonly recognized creators of visual and print media. It also underscores the material conditions of cultural production, circulation and

consumption by seeking in the city milieu answers to questions of cultural and artistic change over time. This chapter characterizes Lagos as a location of robust cultural mediation, both for its diversity of artistic and cultural practices, and for its host of technologies, institutions and infrastructures – in short, the material conditions that “mediate and shape the nature of economic and cultural flows and the fabric of urban life” (Larkin 2008, p. 6).

### The State and Political Cinema

In *Signal and Noise*, Brian Larkin contends that cinema in Nigeria defies one fundamental assumption made by most historians of film, namely that cinema has always existed in relation to modernity's most basic form, the commodity form, and that by contrast, during colonial rule, cinema in Nigeria developed along two distinct institutional practices. By his account, this dual history developed along the lines of commercial cinema and political cinema, the former situated in an economic exchange and the latter marked by the dominance of a political exchange. Commercial cinema, including the entertainment films acquired through the CFU and exhibited by private distribution companies, could be found in theater halls where urban viewers paid to enter the space of film's reception.<sup>2</sup> This type of cinema was available in the cinema halls of Lagos, where the nation's largest body of waged and salaried workers could pay to be entertained during their leisure time. It is important to note that these were not films produced to be consumed by Nigerian audiences. They were imported from Europe and America where local audiences encountered them primarily as commodities that displayed new fashions

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<sup>2</sup> Ekwuazi notes that during colonial rule, all films entering Nigeria were acquired through the colonial government before passing on to their distributor, whether that be a regional government agency, commercial establishment, church or missionary group, school or social society, or private film distributor. “In effect, the relationship of the commercial distribution exhibition house to the government was a kind of censorship” (Ekwuazi 1987, p. 3). The colonial government first established a Board of Censors in 1933 to address the growing influx of films into Nigeria.

and consumer goods, and stimulated the viewer's affect and fantasies. Under these circumstances, the historical and social significance of the film inhered in its status as a commodity. As Larkin contends, this “commercial cinema in Nigeria [was] part of the history of the rise of urban modernity and the new forms of leisure and spectacle that accompanied that rise” (2008, p. 80).

Larkin's interest lies in the second institutional practice of cinema in Nigeria, colonial film. This included documentary, newsreel and pedagogical dramas that circulated chiefly by mobile film units and were designed to address an ideal colonial subject – “progressive, mutable and politically quiescent” – in a primarily political exchange rather than an economic one. Colonial film, or what Larkin regards as cinema in its political form, was produced by the British Colonial Film Unit and screened by mobile cinema units that traveled to rural audiences across Nigeria. But even before the establishment of the CFU and its mobile cinema project, audiences in Lagos – then a Crown Colony – had long been exposed to a similar type of political orchestration of the cinematic apparatus. The earliest documented film exhibition in Lagos in 1903 was organized to imbue the event with political import. Held at Glover Memorial Hall, a central institution in the cultural and artistic life of Lagos at the time, and condoned by the colonial authorities, the screening included a short scene of a steamer sailing through water and newsreel footage of the coronation of King Edward VII at Westminster Abbey (Opubor, et. al. 1979, p. 2), which played to an audience that notably included the Eleko of Eko (Okome 1995, p. 45).<sup>3</sup> The next year, at the same venue, the audience glimpsed a newsreel report depicting the

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Leonard argues in her Masters Thesis that the building was constructed to be “the first architectural display in West Africa” and that it was criticized for reflecting the political and social contexts of its conception (qtd. in Adedeji 1978/9, p. 28). In practical terms the building was a public hall, but it bore all the symbolic marks of colonialism, built as it was at the site of the Old Customs House on the marina and dedicated in honor of Sir John Hawley Glover, a respected colonial administrator of Lagos (Adedeji 1978/9, p. 28).

Alake of Abeokuta on a visit he made to England (Opubor, et. al., p. 2). These conditions of exhibition were intended to align the modern technology of film with the colonial authority and the sets of alliances it had fostered with indigenous leadership, and thus pressed cinema into the service of a political exchange with an audience of colonial subjects.

Under these conditions, film served an instrumentalist function within the political project of colonial rule, which is to say it assumed a political form distinguishable from the commodity form of entertainment film. Notably, colonial film did not lack any of the spectacle and affective power that marked commercial film. To the contrary, Larkin demonstrates that British civil servants with Colonial Film Unit made every effort to channel cinematic spectacle to create a desired affective response among viewers. These spectacles typically depicted great works of infrastructure and technological advancements and were calculated to astonish viewers and thereby viscerally reinforce the relations of power between colonial authority and colonial subjects. Although colonial cinema mobilized the same aesthetic spectacles and direct address of early cinema of attractions (*a la* Gunning 1986), the meaning ascribed to those affective jolts and wonders was circumscribed by the context of exhibition, namely the political relations between African spectators, the propaganda film and its colonialist producers. As such, Larkin concludes that “in this mode of exchange between audience, film, and film producer, the political achieved suzerainty over the economic” (81). The distinction between these two modes of cinema provide a useful model for taking account of the way the encounter between Nigerian spectators and foreign films was constructed so as to produce markedly different experiences, or exchanges in Larkin's words, motivated by the specific social relations surrounding the event of cinema. As we will see, this hard and fast line between categories of films and their mode of exchange with spectators was, at least partially, effaced by the advent of independent Nigerian film production,

which turned out commercial films that also engaged spectators in a political exchange by virtue of their value in fostering national and cultural identity.

In the years following Independence, the federal government's attitude toward film remained lukewarm, its only investment in film production, the Federal Film Unit (FFU), was a holdover of colonial cinema. The unit inherited a modest inventory of equipment from the Colonial Film Unit that it supplanted, and employed a number of filmmakers who had fulfilled the professional requirements for CFU personnel, including the completion of a nine-month training program at the film school in Achimota College, Ghana. Originally conceived as an extension of the federal government's public relations arm, the FFU was tasked with showcasing the nation's resources and promoting national growth through the production of newsreels and documentaries for public cinemas, television broadcast and the mobile cinema vans that continued to tour the country (Okome 1995, p. 57; Opubor, et. al. 1979, p. 5). As a consequence, feature fiction film production fell outside the purview of the state and, for a time, it seemed that the cinematic heritage of colonialism would continue to endure under a new name. For years after Independence, for example, the only document guiding the state's policy on film was the Cinematograph Act of 1963, a relic of the colonial era exclusively concerned with the regulation of film importation and the censorship of film exhibition and advertisements. The document does not entertain the possibility that an indigenous commercial film industry could arise, nor did the federal government demonstrated any appetite for involvement in the independent, fledgling feature film productions that began to materialize at the time.

The scale of productivity for the Federal Film Unit is a matter of mystery since there does not exist a full catalogue of the unit's films. However, Hyginus Ekwuazi provides records of nearly a hundred documentary films produced by state and regional sub-divisions of the film

unit, and the film historian counts eight feature-length documentaries by the Federal Film Unit among his list of indigenous feature films. (Ekwuazi 1987, p. 11-15). The actual inventory of films is likely larger since one report cited by Francoise Balogun suggests that in three years (1979-83) the FFU produced 25 documentaries, 65 news magazines and 390 news items on a range of subjects (Balogun 1987, p. 22-3). The unit's most noteworthy productions include one fiction film, *Shehu Umar* (1976) based on the novel by Tafawa Balewa and directed by Adamu Halilu (later to become head of the Nigerian Film Corporation) and two documentaries by Bayo Imeovbere: *Lagos* (1965) and *Nigeria* (1968). The latter documentary takes the viewer across Nigeria to witness cultural displays, like the Argungu festival and the Ife Bronzes exhibition in Ile-Ife, and to political and religious centers, such as the palace of the Oba of Benin and the central mosque of Kano. The majority of the documentaries, however, record the political pageantry of the country's ruling class. For example, *Transition* (1979) tries to highlight the links between the out-going military regime of Olusegun Obasanjo and the incoming civilian administration of the Second Republic. Similarly, *Nigeria's First Executive President* (1979) showcases the presidential inauguration of Shehu Shagari. *Framework for Survival* (1981) depicts the federal government's "Green Revolution" campaign to improve the nation's agricultural production, while *New Federal Capital* (1982) lays out the case for the relocation of the seat of government to Abuja. As these examples suggest, productions by the postcolonial state reproduced the same discursive parameters that circumscribed the functions of cinema under colonialism. The films were sponsored as a political technology, the same form film assumed when it circulated in colonial mobile cinema vans across Nigeria as an instrument of rule.

The relegation of Nigerian film production to state-sponsored documentary and newsreel

pictures means that the audience's encounter with their national cinema remained, necessarily, an encounter with the state, its narrow set of interests, and its mode of address, which positioned spectators as citizens and thus as political subjects primed to recognize the signs of official authority and to consent by “small tokens of fealty” (Mbembe 2001, p. 128). However, in terms of measurable impact on the nation's cinematic heritage, this body of films had a limited effect. Although intended to circulate by mobile cinema van and over television broadcast, Françoise Balogun claims that exhibition of these films was “often limited to embassies and a few schools” (22). It is significant, nevertheless, to recognize that since the first appearance of film in Nigeria and for a decade after Independence, films produced for Nigerian audiences were sponsored to achieve a particular social effect and to reinforce particular subject positions, and that these effects and subjectivities were conjured within the ideological context of a political exchange.

### The Spectacle of the State and the State-Sponsored Film Industry

In the 1970s, as Nigerians witnessed their nation's rise to prominence as an oil-producer amidst a global economic recession, the state directed the unprecedented growth in national wealth, at least ostensibly, toward tremendous, costly projects aimed at building modern structures of nationhood. The state also increased investments in cultural industries in its ambition to transform itself economically and politically into a strong regional power and to project a unified national identity that could attenuate various ethnic and class divisions within the country. Cinema fell within the ambit of cultural instruments with which the state, and a vocal cohort of bureaucrats, scholars, cultural functionaries and artists, endeavored to raise national consciousness and projecting national culture, culminating most notably in the federal government's protracted bid to convene the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts

and Culture (Festac '77). The enormous international cultural exhibition, a month-long multimedia event (January 15 and February 12, 1977) held in Lagos, would have both a discursive and material impact on the development of the film industry. Its organizers – the festival's Grand Patron and then Head of State, Lieutenant-General Obasanjo, his top military advisors and various federal commissioners – promoted the event as a profound historic convergence of people and ideas from every corner of the Black and African world, and designed the event to stage the black world's entrance into modern industrial capitalism. They proclaimed that the festival aimed to “restore the link between culture, creativity, and mastery of modern technology and industrialism... to endow the Black Peoples all over the world with a new society, deeply rooted in our cultural identity, and ready for the great scientific and technological task of conquering the future” (Iwara and Mveng qtd in Apter 1996, p. 446). In short, the event sought to recount the past so as to better face the future. A glimpse at the festival program suggests how the organizers aimed to achieve this. Cultural displays included traditional sculpture, traditional musical performances, an architectural exhibition, reenactments of ancestral ceremonies, and “progressed” to “contemporary dance theater”, ballet, “modern African music,” modern art works, poetry and literature recitals, and film screenings, all of which was diligently documented by an array of mass media – photography, radio, television and film – that was integral to the performance of crossing a threshold into scientific, capitalistic African modernity.

By Andrew Apter's account, Festac '77 represented a spectacle of culture, and perhaps ultimately an ideological stunt by the state, which had the effect of neutralizing the ethnic conflict and class contradictions that had ensued from rapid transformation of society under an oil boom economy. Skeptical of the official narrative spun around the event, Apter argues that Festac is most striking for having significantly reframed the nation's ideological edifice. First, the

event promoted the abstraction of identity away from ethnic diversity and, second, it inserted that abstracted – or one might say ecumenical – idea of Black identity into a logic of commodification.<sup>4</sup> His critique implies that the organizers' evocation of black identity was disingenuous and ideologically motivated, a proposition that should not discredit the considerable popular support that Festac enjoyed and the widely held sympathy for the event's fundamental precepts of racial solidarity, a common origin, a shared colonial history and cultural experience. It does, however, illuminate the fact that even as serious obstacles, to which those in the film industry surely could have testified, stood in the way of the growth of national cultural production, the state's extravagant expenditure of oil wealth managed to conjure the simulation of development that “[masked] the *absence* of indigenous production through the production of Indigenous Culture” (Apter 1996, p. 454).

In a second point, Apter argues that the festival, devised around the marriage of traditional culture and modern “fast” capitalism, effected the conversion of “old black culture” into “new mass culture” (pp. 454, 455). The investment of (“traditional”) cultural with commodity value resulted from the festival's particular modes of exhibition and display and embodied in its purest form by the edifice of the National Arts Theatre, as I will discuss shortly. Apter takes the official Festac '77 emblem—a Benin ivory mask<sup>5</sup>—as an allegory of this

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<sup>4</sup> In Apter's words, “the road built by Festac from tradition to modernity was thus forged through a series of commutative reductions; first, by assimilating cultural diversity to a singular Black Civilization, and second, by commodifying culture itself, measuring its value in U.S. Dollars and selling it to international consumers” (Apter 1996, p. 452).

<sup>5</sup> One publication by the International Festival Committee recounts the history and significance of the mask in this way: “This 16<sup>th</sup>-century Ivory Mask from Benin has emerged through the years as one of the finest examples of known African and black art. It was worn as a pectoral by Benin Kings on royal ancestral ceremonial occasions; was last worn by King Ovoramwen who was dethroned at the fall of the Benin Empire in 1897. The same year, it fell into the hands of the Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, Sir Ralph Moor, and now rests in the British Museum. The tiara formation at the crest of the mask is made of ten stylized heads and symbolizes the King's divine supremacy and suzerainty. The two incisions on the forehead which

production of culture as commodity.<sup>6</sup> Speaking of the figure, which also appears fixed above the entrance to the National Theatre and serves as a sort of MacGuffin that Eddie Ugbomah's character sets out to recover from a British museum in the film *The Mask*, Apter remarks that “No other image was so mass-produced and commodified, both in souvenir replicas and on fliers and broadsheets which sold the idea of Festac under the sign of African sovereignty” (1996, p. 450-1). In light of the festival and its ambition to reflect on the cultural traditions of the past as the nation built a path to a modernist future, film appeared a powerful tool to raise national consciousness and foster the nation's cultural identity.

In terms of the event's impact on cinema in Nigeria, what is important to draw from Apter's account is the idea that Festac blurred the line between culture and commodity which, as we will discover in the discourse surrounding indigenous film production, created a slippage between the politics of cultural identity and the politics of consumption, especially the consumption of mass media.<sup>7</sup> The distinction Larkin erects between film encountered under the conditions of a political exchange as opposed to a commercial exchange does not hold for early

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were originally filled with iron strips are royal tattoo marks. Round the neck, the artist has carved the coral bead collar which is a common feature of the King's paraphernalia” (*Festac '77 1977*, p. 137).

<sup>6</sup> In a telling example of the festival's tendency to reproduce “ethnic identities as commensurable icons and simulacra for mass consumption” (Apter 1996, p. 450), the ivory Benin mask that featured at festival events was a replica commissioned by the organizing committee after the British Museum refused to return the original mask.

<sup>7</sup> As the Commissioner of Internal Affairs, Mr. M.D. Yussuf, commented at the launch of a committee tasked with evaluating the direction of the nation's film industry, “No government can afford to ignore the tremendous impact and penetrative capacity of the mass media in our age, or fail to take steps to ensure that society is not exposed to negative influences as a result of negligent exposure to the power of the mass media. The government of a developing country like Nigeria has a particular responsibility in this respect in view of the present overwhelming preponderance of mass media products from the so-called more advanced countries of the world, whose political, ideological and social orientation may be completely at variance with our own national values and national aspirations” (qtd in F. Balogun 1987, p. 17-18). The preponderance of mass media productions the commissioner references would have been most evident in cities like Lagos where the circulation of such cultural goods and media was most concentrated transformations in forms of cultural production and consumption took place rapidly.

Nigerian films. Commercial films produced for entertainment and edification of Nigerian culture became inevitably embroiled in a political exchange insofar as avidly attending indigenous films showed one's support for the cultural vibrancy of the nation. Cinema came to be scrutinized from this perspective, namely that local commercial films represented an important political form with the political now defined under the rubric of nationalist rather than colonialist ideology. Under these circumstances, the distinction between cinema's political form and its economic (commodity) form collapsed as the former became invested in the latter. In other words, the relation between audience, film and film producer came to represent both an economic and political exchange without necessarily erasing the distinction.

A glance at the festival program suggests how this blurring of distinctions unfolded. Beginning at four o'clock each afternoon, visitors chose from an array of performances held at venues across Lagos. Stage plays, literature recitals and an academic colloquium took place in the four halls of the National Arts Theatre. Visitors could also take in music and dance at the National Stadium some miles away, or attend a fashion show described only as "Popular Dressing" held in the evenings at the magisterial City Hall in the heart of the city's old colonial district. Black and African cinema from around the world figured integrally in the artistic and cultural mosaic that the event placed on display. Films screened in Cinema Hall I and II of the National Arts Theatre from 4 p.m. until midnight every day of the festival. Notable titles include Sembene Ousmane's *Xala* (1974), Daniel Kamwa's *Pousse-Pousse* (1976) and Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat Behind the Door* (dir. Ivan Dixon, 1973), one of a disproportionately large number of American films on the program. By contrast, on the opening night of the festival, Nigeria had but two documentary films to offer audiences, which one could presume included a majority of viewers from the host country itself: *2000 Years of Nigerian Arts* (dir. unknown,

n.d.) and *T.B. Can Be Cured* (dir. unknown, n.d.). Fortunately, the following evening featured *Shehu Umar*, the only only fiction film ever produced by the state's production company the Federal Film Unit and Nigeria's official submission to the festival's film exhibition (Adesanya 1991, p. 12). No fiction films by independent Nigerian filmmakers appears on Festac's month-long schedule, although the FFU's productions were screened repeatedly. In a fitting bookend to the festival, organizers scheduled an encore presentation of *Shehu Umar* during the grand finale, an evening that, in exemplary fashion, aimed to rouse visitors with poetry recitals from Liberia, Senegal, Nigeria, USA, and Cuba on the theme of "Liberation Movements," and awed audiences with musical performances by Sun Ra, Stevie Wonder and Miriam Makeba.

It is a telling fact that the country's rising independent filmmakers were denied the chance to represent their country at the event. At a press conference, the Nigerian Film Producers Association publicly petitioned against the idea that the FFU, whose film practice appeared increasingly anachronistic, bureaucratic and "unrealistic," should represent Nigeria in the film programs at Festac, in spite its status as the nation's official agency for film production.<sup>8</sup> The omission of independent filmmakers from the state's initiative to foster the nation's cultural production presaged the fate of the nation's film industry, split between state-sponsored corporation and independent filmmakers.

Festac '77 passed with few notable accomplishments for local film production, but the public discussion it instigated continued to unfold in a series of workshops, seminars, conferences and other official venues aimed at developing a concerted policy for film in Nigeria.

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<sup>8</sup> In a public announcement, independent filmmaker and spokesman for the Nigerian Film Producers Association Sanya Dosunmu petitioned that Nigeria not be represented by the official agencies for film production, but also by independent producers. As one *Daily Times* article states, "He said his association believed that healthy competition should be encouraged to get good film production instead of the unrealistic dependence of Nigerian authorities on civil servants or Ministry of Information productions only for the festival" (*Daily Times* July 2, 1975).

In June 1977, for instance, in a clear reverberation of the academic colloquium held during Festac, communications scholars Alfred Opubor and Onuora Nwuneli organized a workshop titled *The Nigerian Film Industry and National Cultural Identity* with the sponsorship of the National Council for Arts and Culture, a subdivision of the Ministry of Information and one of the few tangible outcome of Festac. At this seminar, billed as “the first serious forum for dialogue among a broadly representative group of persons committed to the film industry” (Opubor 1977), the discourse surrounding the establishment and growth of a national film industry was inflected by a complex set of expectations.<sup>9</sup>

The recommendations of the 1977 workshop prompted a robust response by the state, then under the military regime of General Obasanjo, namely the promulgation of the National Film Corporation Decree (Number 61 - 1979) which established, on paper, the Nigerian Film Corporation and charged the body with the consolidation and development of a national film industry. The corporation's board of directors includes representatives from three separate ministries, a representative of Nigerian filmmakers, as well as a chairman and general manager, positions historically held by filmmakers (Adamu Halilu, Brendan Shehu, Eddie Ugboma, Afolabi Adesanya). Its functions include the production of films for domestic consumption and export; the establishment and maintenance of production facilities, including a dubbing studio, color processing lab and film village that has yet to materialize; the encourage local productions with financial assistance and material support; the acquisition and distribution of films; the

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<sup>9</sup> Even as parallels were drawn between the film industry and other national programs for industrialization, the film industry had the additional directive, atop the expectation that it produce indigenous cinema as the nation grew into its future modernity, to stem the erosion of cultural heritage as society transformed. In the report by Alfred Opubor on the 1977 *Nigerian Film Industry and National Cultural Identity* workshop the author cites one speaker, Benjamin Adekolawole Idowu as arguing that “at a time when Nigeria is in the midst of massive industrial development, it is a contradiction of the worst kind, to bemoan the loss of antiquities, yet make no effort to preserve, through film, the past and the present for posterity” (Opubor 1977, p. 12).

development of cinema halls by financial and material assistance; the creation of a national film archive and a film institute. The decree received legislative consent from the new civilian government in 1982 but, even then, the NFC lacked the resources and leadership to execute its stated objectives, especially considering the glacial bureaucratic realignment of the production arm (Federal Film Unit), and its counterpart in distribution and exhibition (Nigerian Film Distribution Company). The full consolidation of these government branches concluded in 1988 when the Ministry of Information's film division and the NFDC, with its film catalogue, were folded into the NFC, a restructuring that, in principle, finally empowered the parastatal to oversee the national film industry. But as the NFC's own account of its creation states, the parastatal “had literally remained dormant since its inception in 1982” (NFC 1994, p. 12). In the years that followed, the NFC relocated its facilities and headquarters from Lagos to Jos in a much-criticized move, and constructed a state-of-the-art color film processing lab intended to end the Federal Film Unit and independent filmmakers' dependence on the Overseas Film and Television Centre in London for post-production processing. Ironically, by the time the lab opened in 1994, virtually all producers in both television and film had already transitioned from shooting on celluloid film stock to using early video recording technology! The NFC's achievement of the simulation of development, its acquisition of all the trappings and its outward presentation of all the signs of development without its substance could not be better conveyed than by the number of feature films to its credit: *Shehu Umar* and *Kulba na Barna*.

Ultimately, the film industry came to be imagined as one among the nation's many public corporations with material and financial demands and material and cultural dividends analogous to any other parastatal overseeing, say, steel, agriculture, or aviation. As Akin Adesokan astutely observes, this codified film as a technology of cultural reproduction, bound to economic and

material forces, and deserving of the same level of attention as other national industries (2012). Under these circumstances, the economic advantages of local film production intersected with the ideological advantages of a robust national culture industry. As the oil boom ebbed and efforts at economic development shifted to stem the nation's crippling dependence on imports, the same logic of import substitution extended to the cultural industry.<sup>10</sup> Development of a robust national film industry stood, at least in principle, to curb the importation of foreign media. Despite the paltry record of the country's state-sponsored film production, bureaucrats and cultural functionaries continued to make the case for a parastatal-administered film industry by citing fears over “the tremendous impact and penetrative capacity of the mass media in our age,” and imploring the proper government agencies to take steps to “ensure that society is not exposed to negative influences as a result of negligent exposure to the power of the mass media.” Inevitably, commercial cinema would take its place in the development of the nation insofar as film could be harnessed to project national culture at home and abroad.

### The Idea of Nigerian Cinema

If the official discourse of bureaucrats, government functionaries and scholars held that mass media technology possessed the power to reproduce cultural identities<sup>11</sup>—“as

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<sup>10</sup> The logic of official discourse on cultural policy, which conflated cultural and economic development, can be seen in the remarks of Sule Bello, the Director of The National Council for Arts and Culture, speaking at the National Festival of Arts and Culture. In the Director's view, “the very notion and effort at economic development, either in the form of quantitative growth or qualitative change, is always, as in all cases of self-development, both *culturally anchored and sourced*” (emphasis added, Bello and Nasidi 1991, p. 12).

<sup>11</sup> As Nigeria became further entangled in the circulation of global consumer goods and cultural commodities, which is to say as the nation began to register the effects of what we would today call the initial stages of globalization, it became increasingly difficult for cultural administrators to even locate the cultural when the everyday practices of consumption, entertainment and communication could be termed cultural. As Sule Bello bemoaned in the same speech as above, “most cultural promotion activities in Third World countries tend to be superficial (concentrating

commensurable icons and simulacra” (Apter 1996)—for mass circulation and consumption, it followed that the national film industry, to be capable of projecting the image of Nigerian national culture, would necessarily take the form of a commercial cinema. Nigerian film would thus produce and reproduce the nation through the material production of cultural identity. It is worth noting that when the nation's cinema culture came under scrutiny by intellectuals and filmmakers, they took issue with the denigration of Africans in foreign films and the distressing cultural alienation that they believed films instilled in local audiences. However, the basic economic relations of commercial filmmaking were rarely called into question as such, and the expectation that Nigeria's filmmakers confront Hollywood's global cultural hegemony through the same mechanisms of production and distribution was actively advocated. As Akin Adesokan has argued, the ideal of Nigerian cinema that arose envisaged “an industrial form that, given the right economic climate, was guaranteed to lead to a formidable cultural form on the order of Hollywood” (2012, pp. 89-90). Those who espoused such a vision overlooked the fact that, just as much as their foreign counterparts, indigenous films fell “inside” ideology, or in other words, that despite their effort to authentically represent Nigerian culture, indigenous film did not escape cinema's ideological operations. Nevertheless, cultural functionaries spoke with complete sincerity of the country's industry as a Black Hollywood, however implausible the comparison was given the realities filmmakers faced. At least in public forums, the same functionaries earnestly anticipated that the exportation of the nation's films would both bring financial returns (in precious foreign currency) and project the image of Nigerian life and culture upon the global

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on artifacts and other forms of social exhibitionism) divorced from the actual activity of the continuous creation and recreation of society in all its ramifications. In short, the general applicability of culture to anything and everything at times tend to make it a very elusive concept and its promotion also an elusive enterprise” (Bello and Nasidi 1991, p. 1). Speaking as the top cultural functionary of the nation, Bello's comments point to the anxiety of policymakers and artists over the consumption practices of Nigerians which subtended much of the discourse on culture and national identity.

imagination. This was an idea that independent filmmakers had long professed, that cinema held the power to reproduce national culture on the scale of a mass cultural industry.

In 1970, Nigerians witness the release of *Kongi's Harvest*, the first feature film produced by Nigerians for commercial distribution within the country. The following decade saw a precipitous increase in the number of films and film producers on the scene, which quickly grew to include nearly a dozen filmmakers and some 20 feature films. Producer Francis Oladele, with his production company Calpenny Films, is often credited as the pioneer of indigenous cinema, having produced *Kongi's Harvest* alongside African American director Ossie Davies and with cooperation from Wole Soyinka, whose stage play provided the film's source text. The following year, Oladele's Calpenny Films released the nation's second feature film, *Bullfrog in the Sun* (1971), an adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At Ease*. Other filmmakers like Sanya Dosunmu and Jab Adu soon entered the field, but the most productive companies were Ola Balogun's Afrocult Foundation and Eddie Ugbomah's Edifosa Film Enterprises. The latter debuted *Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* in 1977 and continued to release a film nearly every year until 1984. While Balogun has numerous original productions to his credit, these mask his full influence in early Nigerian cinema as a vocal advocate of film as artistic expression and cultural instrument for the nation and as the director of the first films produced by Yoruba traveling theater companies. These theater companies, including Hurbert Ogunde's Ogunde Pictures Company, Ade Afolayan's Friendship Motion Pictures, and Moses Olaiya Adejumo's Alawada Film Company, only began their venture into film production after the medium had established a notable cohort of directors and producers dedicated strictly to feature film. Although some film adaptations of popular plays were criticized – most notably by Soyinka himself – as static and failing to attend to the specificity of stage and screen

performance, the Yoruba theater companies would come to dominant film production in the 1980s and, after the transition from celluloid film to video recording technology, would continue their prolific output in early video film.

The principal challenge producers faced was that of film finance and distribution, as there existed no financial or material support from the federal government. Some filmmakers obtained support from state governments, as Ola Balogun did for his first film, *Amadi* (1974), but from the outset, Nigerian cinema was an endeavor held together by informal and personal economic relationships between producers, personnel, private investors and cinema operators, and did not appear to add up to an industry fully formed but rather “artisanal, informal, and sporadic” (Haynes 1995, p. 2). The downwardly fluctuating value of the naira in years following the oil boom greatly hindered the procurement of equipment and materials and made the cost of processing film prints overseas, a necessity given the lack of facilities at home, devastatingly expensive. Given that producers lacked a counterpart company or agency that would buy distribution rights, they were compelled to personally manage the distribution and exhibition of their films, “not out of choice or because he likes it, but in order to get his money back more rapidly and be able to start another film project” (Balogun 1987, p. 40). Only a handful of filmmakers ever enjoyed the opportunity to shoot a second film.

Rather than reproduce a survey of the corpus of films from this era, terrain already well mapped out by others (Haynes 1995, pp. 6-12; Ukadike 1994, pp. 144-65; Balogun 1987, pp. 50-83; Ekwuazi 1987, pp. 17-23), I will highlight a few trends that came to characterize indigenous film. What makes this cinema unique from Francophone African cinema is its populist aesthetic, supported as it was by a wide economic base for mass media. The array of aesthetic strategies that filmmakers' deployed to draw in Nigerian audiences – often without mind for any other

market for their films – included putting a Nigerian twist on popular foreign genres, addressing audiences in Nigerian languages, tapping into talent from popular theater and music, and serving up stories chock full of action, dance, romance and political scandal. In his bid to attract a mass audience, Eddie Ugbomah focused his films on urban scenarios, crafted their narratives around crime and political intrigue and poured on generous servings of spectacle, violence and action so that, as others have noted, his films draw clear comparisons with American Blaxploitation films (Haynes 1995, p. 7; Balogun 1987, p. 51). His first film, *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* (1976), grew from the urban legend of the armed robber Dr. Oyenusi, played by Ugbomah himself, and his gang who terrorized Lagos in the early 1970s. The film takes the infamous bandit as its hero and follows as his misadventures lead to his arrest and his brave death by public execution. Ugbomah's *The Mask* (1979), one of the few films to be shot on 35 mm, tells the story of a Nigerian plot to infiltrate a British museum and steal back a Benin Bronze mask pilfered during the British sacking of Benin City. The mask in question had also served as the emblem of Festac '77, an event still fresh in the public's memory and to which the program handout from the film's premiere makes reference, “In 1977 when it was used as Festac symbol, Nigeria tried once more to even this time [sic] pay anything to have the mask. But no! ...Well this film is how we as a nation could have got the mask back. Also you will see that in our society there are still traitors, heroes, peaceful people and all these make the nation.” The back of the program reads with a flare particular to Ugbomah, “You Love Nigeria or Leave It.” The filmmaker is perhaps best known for *Death of a Black President* (1983), which chronicles a tangle of political plots and conspiracies unfolding behind the scenes in the days leading up to the assassination of head of state General Murtala Muhammad. In spite of the historical and political weight of the topic, popular audiences needed not worry since Ugbomah managed to

slip in “the occasional mix of 'kinky' sex and gun-toting” (Ukadike 1994, p. 164).

Ola Balogun, who trained at the Institut des Haute Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris, produced both Nigeria's first Igbo-language feature film with *Amadi* (1975) and, given the film's successful popular reception, followed up with the first Yoruba-language feature, *Ajani Ogun* (1976), which Balogun produced in collaboration with veteran dramatist Duro Ladipo, who also starred in the film alongside Ade Afolayan (Ade Love), also of the Yoruba theater. The film centers on a young hunter, Ajani-Ogun, who challenges the authority of a corrupt politician and, as a consequence, loses his family's land to a group of crooked civil servants under the influence of the politician. The narrative transforms to a love story when the politician falls for Ajoke, the young beloved of Ajani-Ogun, forcing the hero to confront the politician and recover both land and lady. Soon after Ladipo's foray into cinema, a host of theater professionals seeking to imitate his success would become the country's most prolific producers of film, this even as Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, Jab Adu, Ladi Ladipo and other continued to produce non-theatrical films. These theater professionals would come to significantly shape the film industry's aesthetic conventions and modes of production and distribution for years to come.

Early Nigerian cinema stabilized around two veins of film that grew directly from the Yoruba theater tradition: films steeped in Yoruba metaphysics and concerned with cultural themes of a bygone era and those focused upon a contemporary, often urban scenario that served up satire of everyday life. According to Onookome Okome, Ogunde's *Aiye* and *Ayanmo* offer quintessential examples of the metaphysical film, whereas Baba Sala's *Orun Mooru* typifies the latter group of films, which Okome terms “loose comic films” (1995, p. 165). Among Yoruba scholars at least, this comic genre has also been called *ere igbalode*, a Yoruba term that connotes a film or play focused on the present-day, but which also carries (in the word *igbalode*) wider

associations to that which is fashionable, modern, or in vogue at the time. In contrast with the former genre, which grew from the theater's repertoire of mythological storytelling, *ere igbalode* center on relatively superficial themes such as love, conspiracy, and the pursuit of material wealth. Furthermore, as Wale Oyedele argues, "the ever-growing concern for middle-class and jet-set preoccupations and the ubiquitous metropolitan setting, seems to have been largely motivated by the desire to stay within the horizon of a largely urban audience" (2000, p. 346). The idea attaches itself to that of the urban and suggests the degree to which urban life became the focus of early film at the same time it was shaped by cinema culture, in the sense that urban experience was conjured by the anticipation that surrounded the object of cinema.

#### Space of Exhibition, Location of Culture.

Although these filmmakers and their works have come to represent Nigerian cinema in film studies and historical accounts, cinema as it actually took place in open-air cinema halls in Lagos existed as very different cultural institution, one that existed outside the controlling ideological frame of official state-sponsored cinema and exposed Nigeria to the global circulation of dominant film traditions, confronting audiences with cinema in its typical commodity form. Lagos alone hosted 28 licensed cinemas and a rumored 40 "pirate" cinemas (Ekwuazi 1987, p. 82). Cinemas served up a mediocre offering of Hollywood B films that, well into the 1970s, reached Nigeria by way of the American Motion Picture Exportation Corporation of Africa (AMPECA), a distributor long decried by filmmakers for stifling the national cinema in service of the major Hollywood studios like MGM, Columbia, United Artists, Twentieth Century Fox. Chinese and Indian films arrived from the parallel economy of illicit import networks that channeled Bombay and Hong Kong films to Nigerian cinemas through intermediary pirate

distributors in Dubai, Cairo, Abu Dahbi and Singapore. Subtitling of films into English occurred in Cairo at Anis Ebeid Films, a company that, by virtue of its specialization in subtitling, had become an important node in the worldwide circulation of films. As N.K. Murthy, the manager of Rainbow Cinema in Mushin from 1975 to 1985, explained to me, this elaborate flow of films succeeded largely owing to the personal relationships of the Indian and Lebanese Nigerians who owned a handful of the distribution and exhibition companies in Nigeria (personal communication, also Larkin 2008, p. 222-24). Murthy also points out that although American, Chinese and Indian films predominated, cinema operators continually faced the challenge of keeping a full schedule of fresh films, given the absence of a regularized distribution system, and would opportunistically screen Nigerian films when approached by the filmmakers. From his perspective, even after negotiating how to share the film's revenue with the filmmakers, for distributor/exhibitors it would prove cheaper to screen the occasional local film than to import foreign fare which carried attendant fees and taxes.<sup>12</sup> Still, the limited number of local films made them insufficient to support the cinema halls. By 1980, for instance, the number of indigenous films available were insufficient to support a one-week run during an indigenous film festival held at the University of Ife (Ekwuazi 1987, pp. 16-7).

A faint sketch of the film culture that came out the cinema halls survives in *The Daily Times* newspaper where visual advertisements and film listings for nearly every theater in Lagos appeared every day. A glance at the newspapers entertainment section gives a sense of the type

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<sup>12</sup> The economic motivation for screening indigenous films is hardly as simple as this and remains inconclusive. Ali Chami, the owner of the largest cinema chain in Nigeria, Plateau Cinemas, and its distribution arm, Universal Films Distribution and Exhibition, put the cost of importing one film during the late 1980s at N 250,000. However, Jonathan Haynes reports that “imported films cost the exhibitor around a fifth to a tenth of the daily rental Nigerian films must demand.” On the other hand, two different distributor/exhibitors that I spoke with emphasized their near constant struggle to source new films that would put viewers in seats. By all accounts, the Nigerian films did just that, attracting far more cinema-goers and selling more tickets, even if at a higher price.

of films the existing distribution circuit supported: “Pen – Agege: 'Stranger from Canton' (U) Breathtaking Judo and Karate film,” “Super – Surulere: Three shows: 3, 6 and 9 p.m. 'Balram Shri Krishna' (U) New Indian Movie with Action and Magic, Fun and Music in Colour,” “Oregie – Ajegunle: 12 noon & 6 p.m. 'No Gold for Dead Diver' An espionage story full of thrills. Exciting and action drama” (*Daily Times* July 13, 1975 p. 16). The average cinema audience in Lagos was as heterogeneous as the city itself and appealed in unpredictable ways across distinctions of income and education (Opubor, et. al. 1979, p. 11). With the price of admission ranging between ₦ 1-2.50 (at a time the naira held parity with the US dollar), the majority of the urban working class could afford to partake in the type of leisure that cinema represented, bearing in mind, of course, that the nation's class relations were, and remain, especially fluid or amorphous. When he worked as manager of Casino Cinema in the Yaba neighborhood during the early 1990s, Afolabi Adesanya observed that the clientele consisted of "traders, commercial vehicle owners and drivers, mechanics, junior clerical workers, laborers, artisans, butchers, farmers," and included men and women alike (Adesanya 2012, p. 56). According to Ola Balogun and Eddie Ugbomah, in separate conversations on the exhibition of their films, Lagos hosted many theaters catering to the whole spectrum of social classes (personal communication). Only a select number of theaters featured luxurious amenities like air conditioning, cushioned seating, and state-of-the-art projection and sound technology. The rest, which is to say the majority of theaters, were open-air venues with benches and projectors liable to break down at a film's moment of greatest suspense.

What is unmistakable is that cinema halls, with names that echoed names of cinemas around the world like Odeon, Paramount, Rex and Metro, announced themselves as the type of space that Larkin has termed a translocal threshold (2008, pp. 132-38). According to Murthy, it

became customary at his movie theater, Rainbow Cinema, to show films from different regions according to different days of the week, such that audiences came to expect an American film on Mondays, a classic Indian film on Thursdays, a Chinese film on Saturday and a new Indian release on Sundays: “I can tell you that on Sunday an Indian film, a brand new Indian film is a must!” (personal communication). Hardly a credulous audience though, the Lagos intellectual class spurned these films as the dregs of global cinema, pointing to their poor quality and lack of relevance to daily life. In one newspaper editorial, Ola Balogun denounced low-grade imported films as “among the worst that can be found in any part of the world” and repudiated them as “an insult to the intelligence of our people” (Balogun 1987, p. 106). As Afolabi Adesanya, the former manager of West African Pictures distribution company (and later the Managing Director of the NFC), recalled to me in a conversation, “the quality was behind, the releases were behind time, you could tell, as compared to other parts of the world” (Adesanya, personal communication). But such were the material conditions in which cinema took place in Lagos, from the degraded sound quality of pirated films, the warped image produced by projecting cinemascope film on an outdated 35 mm projector, and the time required to dub a blockbuster Indian release in Cairo and to smuggle it into the Nigeria, to the boredom that ensues from endlessly rescreening the same American action movie.<sup>13</sup> That is to say nothing of the objections many voiced for the diluted narratives of little relevance in the social and cultural life of Lagos. Taken together these aspects of the country's cinema culture lent real substance to the imagined sense of being positioned at the margins of the global circulation of film, which, as Adesanya's comment reveals, was also experienced as being “behind the times.” Thus, although these spaces embodied a link with the world at large, the experience of encountering films from distant places

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<sup>13</sup> Larkin makes a similar argument with regard to audio and video cassette culture in northern Nigeria (2008, pp. 233-39).

was inevitably marked by the sense of disparity with that imagined elsewhere.

This fact did not seem to attenuate film's power to provoke cultural noise, and considered from a particular vantage, this location at the edge or rather the overlap of two or more cultural orders may have made the inevitable interference, distortion and deterritorialization even more productive for those who adopted the array of foreign films for use in the crafting of fantasies and the embodiment of alternative subjectivities. In histories of film in Nigeria, stories abound of young cinema-goers who adopt ostentatious modes of dress and comportment to reflect the different ideas, styles and imaginaries that cinema carries with it. One example suffices to illustrate this point:

Today gangster films constitute about eighty per cent of what we see on our cinema screens. In the late fifties, Ekotodo, a cinema house in Ibadan was infested with young men dressed in jeans and hats with scarves tied round their necks like the cowboys in American Western films, like the John Wayne type or the *Wild, Wild West* series on television. How did these men come about their dresses and occasional pranks? It was through the influence of films shown in theatres in Lagos and Ibadan. In fact, Ekotodo soon became a den of robbers, street fighters and rascals. (Arulogun in Opubor, et. al. 1979, p. 29)

For the intellectual class who, if they attended the cinema, would frequent the sophisticated, air conditioned theaters like Plaza in downtown Lagos, the cinema-goers at the dilapidated neighborhood theaters such as Casino—"the crowd" as Murthy put it to me<sup>14</sup>—were a source of

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<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly various cinema halls catered to various segments of the local audience, although exactly how each cinema hall stood out in the popular imaginary is unclear. What is clear is that Lagosians observed the divide between the high- and low-end theaters. As Mr. Murthy explained to me, "Metro cinema is an air conditioned cinema, so all the English films used to be shown in Metro cinema and Plaza cinema, which was also an air conditioned cinema, along with Roxy cinema in Apapa... Then [by contrast] there was Rivoli. It used to show for the crowd, which

anxiety. With their modes dress, speech, comportment and disorderly consumption, these popular audiences flouted social expectations of modest personal character and marked the cinemas as a dangerous locale. Anecdotes of this sort that appeared in print expressed, above all else, alarm for what appeared to be clear signs of the colonization of African minds by the culture industry of the West and the perpetuation of colonial racial and cultural hierarchy. But noise of this type, as James Ferguson reminds us, brings with it its own social logic and that the great cultural heterogeneity of African urban reality owes a great deal to “a social process of construal of signifying practices that might themselves have no clear 'meaning'” (1999, p. 210). Cinemas were not simply spaces of leisure and relaxation. By virtue of existing at the overlap between (following the anecdote above) the social order that guides life in Lagos and Ibadan and the parallel worlds that foreign films offer, cinemas offered mediating spaces where spectators might view themselves and their social surroundings through the prisms of possible alternative lives.

If audiences that frequented cinema halls of Lagos viewed cinema as a point of connection to the world at large, the introduction of Nigerian films transformed the cinema halls into symbolically charged spaces where images of a home-grown cinema vied with other global cinemas. When Ola Balogun premiered his third film he selected Glover Memorial Hall as the location of the premiere, the same monument where the first recorded film exhibition took place in 1903.<sup>15</sup> Whereas that historic first exhibition mobilized modern technologies to performed the

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used to like Indian films.... At one particular stage, there were a lot of Indian community coming. They don't have any entertainment, so when we used to bring in the Indian films, we would to go to Roxy. We would have a ten o'clock showing for the Indian community, around the late 1970s or early 1980s. Those Indian films were only showing for the Indian community but some Nigerians did come. Still, it was an air conditioned cinema so the admission fee was very expensive.”

<sup>15</sup> The original Glover Memorial Hall where the Eleko of Eko attended a colonial screening of a newsreel about the Alake of Abeokuta was destroyed by fire, but rebuilt in a nearby location in

relations of power between colonial authorities, indigenous leaders and colonial subjects, the premiere of *Ajani Ogun* (1976) revised the political context of exhibition, placing the cinematic apparatus in the service of the artist's ambition for autonomous Nigerian cultural production and a direct connection with Nigerian audiences. The event was attended by notable cultural figures, including television stars, musicians, dramatists, and other filmmakers. In the opinion of the newspaper journalist reporting the event, the appeal of the event lay in the fact that it represented “the first authentic attempt to make films in the dialect of the people” (Willy Bozimo, *Daily Times* June 17, 1976 p. 8). The premiere featured the original Yoruba version, unaltered by English subtitles, a deliberate choice we can surmise from advertisements for *Ajani Ogun* that indicate a version with English subtitles was screened simultaneously at Plaza Cinema, within walking distance of Glover Hall (*Daily Times* June 15, 1976 p. 17). In a similar fashion, the screening of other Nigerian films such as *Aiye* (1979), *The Mask* (1979) or *Dinner with the Devil* (1975) in theaters around the city represented a complex exchange that cannot be reduced to either its political significance or its commercial arrangement.

Nigerian filmmakers took to the National Arts Theatre as the preeminent exhibition space in which to premiere indigenous films owing both to the Theatre's unmatched seating capacity and modern amenities, and its symbolic value as, ostensibly, the paramount center of arts and culture. The sheer magnitude of Festac '77 called for a exhibition hall of equal proportion that would not only provide the stage for this multimedia display of culture and creativity, but would also embody the festival's principal aim, a Black cultural renaissance grounded in tradition and oriented toward an African modernity. The National Arts Theatre served this purpose. Its design

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1962. Therefore, the physical space of the theater hall was different, although its symbolic significance as a monument to the colonialist John Hawley Glover was still relevant. By the time Balogun premiered *Ajani Ogun*, Glover Memorial Hall had become for Lagos something akin to what Carnegie Hall is for New York City.

provided space to accommodate the nation's full gamut of arts and culture, linking the “traditional” (dance, sculpture and folk art) and the “modern” (photography, contemporary dance, and film) all under one roof (Enem 1978/9). Furthermore, the gigantic venue housed two cinema halls with the capacity to seat nearly 700 viewers each, and a main exhibition hall that could host as many as 5000 visitors. Each hall featured 16 mm, 35 mm, and 70 mm projectors, an array of specialized lights, central air conditioning, plush seating and, outside the hall, lounges, a large foyer, snack bars and VIP rooms, all powered, of course, by a high-powered dedicated generator (Cultural New Bulletin 1983, p. 11). In short, the Theatre stood to become the epicenter of the nation's cinema culture. In fact, one could think of the National Arts Theatre in comparison with the architecture of entertainment of European and American urban modernity, especially given that the Theatre borrows its architectural design directly from the Palace of Culture and Sports in Varna, Bulgaria. The elaborate cinema palaces in European metropolises at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, adopted exuberant architectural techniques and a grand scale intended to exteriorize the spectacle of cinema itself and to evoke an affective or sensory-perceptual response for the passerby (Ward 2001, p. 173).<sup>16</sup> In that place and time, the strong consonance between architectural principles and the spaces of cinema palaces came to characterize one's fundamental experience of urban modernity (Friedberg 1993, Hansen 2012). Lagos's modernity was also legible on the surface of urban spaces, like that National Theatre, although one must be careful not to overstate the case here, since the meanings that accrue around a material structure or form remain contingent upon the historical

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<sup>16</sup> Taking Weimar as her guide, Janet Ward argues that, in European metropolises at the turn of the twentieth century, capitalism turned the streets of the city into a showcase of spectacular surfaces. Thus, urban modernity could only be experience perceptually in the specific physical site of the streets, "it demanded one's physical presence on the city street" to experience the “four topoi” of modern surface culture: architecture, advertising, film and fashion (Ward 2001, pp. 14-16).

configuration of cultural and representational values in which it is embedded. What is called the experience of urban modernity has material underpinnings that must be apprehended in their particularity.

Along the Lagos mainland skyline, dominated as it is by low-rise construction, the National Theatre towers over its surroundings and offers a landmark visible for miles, including from across the lagoon on Lagos Island. It remains to this day a point of reference with which one can orient oneself in the city. Symbolically inscribed across the surface of the National Arts Theatre, situated as it is amid the soaring flyovers and interchanges of the city's new highways, is a modernist architectural vision of this restorative link between the nation's cultural roots and its future place in global modernity. Its circular structure resembles “a cosmographic wheel radiating out through architectural 'spokes' and superhighways to embrace the modern world. Viewed from the outside, the Theatre's facade looked like a giant crown rising out of the earth, as if linking the wealth of the land – its chthonic traditions and subterranean oil – with national territory and sovereignty” (Apter 1996, p. 444). The national coat-of-arms that perches fixed above the Theatre's main entrance combines with the swooping curve of the roof and the circular base of the structure to create an architectural design resembling the military cap of Nigeria's Head of State, General Obasanjo, and its coat-of-arms.<sup>17</sup> Below the coat-of-arms, sculpted black figures populate the ring encircling the base of the Theatre's vertical concrete “spokes” and converge at the carved image of the globe cut in half, split along the axis of the Atlantic Ocean with North and South America and the Caribbean on one side and Africa on the other. Situated between the split, doubled image of the world rests the trademark Benin ivory mask, the historic icon of the event and a symbol, in Apter's view, Festac's logic of cultural commodification. What

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<sup>17</sup> Apter notes that Festac '77 organizers acknowledged this correspondence, first jokingly referring to the theater as General Gowon's “cap,” although the same metaphor was applied to the cap of General Obasanjo, the Grand Patron of Festac (Apter 1996, p. 445).

makes these markings and designs striking is not their embodiment of an authentic architectural or aesthetic practice but their embodiment of a modernist notion of spectacle that characterizes the Theatre's architectural assemblage insofar as it seeks an affective engagement with the visitor's sense-perception. As Festac promotional materials proclaim, the National Theatre was carefully designed to “form the functional and artistic environment of man and influence his aesthetic view. The external and internal architecture of the Theatre strive to respond to the spiritual and cultural requirements of the Nigerian people reflected through the prism of its national heritage, culture and arts.” (“Utilization” Brochure qtd. in Adedeji 1978/9, p. 32).

On the face of things, the National Theatre offered filmmakers an ideal exhibition space, one that could amplify the cultural connotations and modernist spectacle that indigenous cinema evoked. N.K. Murty remembers the theater as the best of any cinema hall in the city, with modern amenities and a reputation for drawing a large audience during the premieres of Nigerian films (personal communication). For instance, the 1979 debut of Hubert Ogunde's first film, *Aiye* (dir. Ola Balogun), is legendary among filmmakers, cinema operators, and those few surviving Lagosians who witnessed the event firsthand. The film screened at the National Theatre from December 17<sup>th</sup> until the 26<sup>th</sup>, three times a day as was customary during public holidays, and attracted audiences of unprecedented size and enthusiasm, by some reports. As one film reviewer with the *Daily Times* wrote, “A crowd of mammoth proportion besieged the National Theatre during the recent screening of 'Aiye.' In fact, damages done to the Theatre by the last day's crowd will take quite some time to repair” (Agiobu-Kemmer *Daily Times* January 10, 1980 p. 12). It quickly became apparent to Ministry of Culture officials, the custodians of the National Theatre, that indigenous cinema attracted immense popular presence and large box office revenues, and the events thereby became important highlights in the Theatre's quarterly report to the public.

These reports document with a tone of pride and in great detail the number of screenings, the size of audiences, and brief film reviews. In 1982, the Theatre saw three indigenous screenings, Baba Sala's *Orun Mooru* (dir. Ola Balogun), *Money Power* by Ola Balogun, and *Love Brewed in an African Pot* (1981) by Ghanaian Kwaw Ansah, although still an indigenous film in the report's estimation. The National Theatre screened 62 films that year, but fully one third of their box office revenue came from just three indigenous films. Revenue from the indigenous films totaled N 124,993.50 as compared to the N 172,092.50 that the NFDC generated screening 42 films from the archive of American action flicks and spaghetti westerns that it acquired when it bought AMPECA. In short, the three indigenous films drew audiences of staggering proportions. For two weeks, more than 800 viewers entered the cinema halls of the National Theatre each day to see *Money Power*, while *Orun Mooru* turned out some 1500 viewers a day for seven straight days. The report concludes by gently exhorting Nigerian audiences to continue to patronize local cinema and thus demonstrate their favor for “any good African film” over “its foreign counterpart” (Cultural Bulletin 1983, p. 15).

However, before long filmmakers discovered that the National Arts Theatre fell short of its intended role as a platform from which to erect a thriving national cinema. Filmmakers had to battle with an ineffective bureaucracy to access the theater and made considerable financial sacrifices to secure a premiere there, paying as much as 35 percent of the gate to the management and another 30 percent in taxes (Haynes 1995, p. 175-76, n. 4). As Francoise Balogun explains, “National Theatre has got the best and the largest halls, the gate intake is usually higher than in any other hall. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to obtain access to the Theatre and the use of the National Theatre is thus a privilege that can only be obtained after long negotiations rather than a right” (1987, p. 42). The fact that filmmakers battled through the bureaucracy to ensure the

premiere of their films at the National Theatre should indicate the level of prestige a film stood to gain from such a premiere. However, even this prestige faded as bureaucratic mismanagement of the Theatre began to erode the institution's symbolic value as the edifice of national culture.

In the years following Festac '77, the National Theatre served as the distribution-cum-exhibition branch of the state-sponsored film industry. Before the enactment of the 1972 Indigenization Decree, AMPECA distributed the usual Hollywood fare on behalf of major studios like MGM, Columbia, United Artists, 20th Century Fox, as well as Hong Kong, Italian and Indian film (Ekwuazi 1987, p. 122). During this time AMPECA leased office space from the management at the Theatre and ran its operations from within the venue. The relationship between the distributor and the exhibitor was so successful that when the Indigenization Decree came to pass, the Ministry of Culture saw fit to purchase AMPECA and nationalize it. The distributor was renamed the Nigerian Film Distribution Company even though, as Afolabi Adesanya pointed out to me, the NFDC inherited the imported film stock from AMPECA and had little choice but to screen the films on hand. The resulting arrangement, in which the nation's finest cinema halls would every week publicize and screen American B films like “Jaguar Lives,” was an embarrassment to proud Nigerians (See image: *Daily Times* January 11, 1980 p. 19), and even “injurious to Nigerians” generally (Mgbejume *Daily Times* December 8, 1979, p. 21). One of the more egregious B-film screenings prompted one anonymous Lagosian to declare in an editorial titled “Theatre of Insults” that appears in the “Grape Vine” section of the *Daily Times* that “something strange is going on these days at the National Theatre.”

Right now there is an offensive film called “Mandingo” being shown at the Theatre. If there was ever any film that deliberately set out to denigrate and malign black culture, this film is it. And yet it is being shown, apparently with the blessing of government

functionaries.... A serpent's colours may be “beautiful,” but you do not therefore know why the National Theatre, which is supposed to be the bastion of black pride, should be converted into a place where black people maybe insulted with the blessing of government officials. (“Theatre of Insults” *Daily Times* January 20, 1980 p. 5)

The contradiction, that the nation's greatest cinema hall would screen imported films, outraged Nigeria's filmmakers as well. It gave the impression that NFDC was not interested in Nigerian filmmaker's films at all. However, Uche Enem notes in defense of the management of the National Arts Theater that many filmmakers had the opportunity to premiere their films at the National Theater. Adesanya also makes the important distinction between the theater's role as an exhibitor and the NFDC's purview as distributor. Neither institution took it upon itself to buy the rights to Nigerian films, which severely limited the role of the theater and distributor in the marketing of Nigerian film. Distributors simply did not wish to buy Nigerian films from producers.<sup>18</sup> With time the cinemas faded from popular memory, even though their physical structures remain as landmarks. Like the Brazillian architecture erected by the community of former slaves returned to Lagos Island, or the colonial administrative buildings along Broad Street, or the Central Mosque along Nnamdi Azikiwe Avenue, the cinema halls are still immediately recognizable to the eye and indelibly linked to the city's history as the nexus of the movements of people and ideas from around the world.

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, Hyginus Ekwuazi discovered no Nigerian film anywhere within the stock of the NFDC and two smaller independent distributors (1987, p. 124). Consequently, the likes of Balogun, Ugbomah, Ogunde, and Afolayan had to rent the facilities at National Arts Theatre and privately screen their films. Ugbomah claims he had coerced Ashiwaju to screen his films without paying the rental fee, and Balogun said that with his films the share of the ticket sales going to the theater precluded their needing to charge a rental fee. Still, filmmakers received no special assistance from the NFDC or the NAT. Interestingly, the NFDC came under the control of the newly created NFC, but never managed to facilitate the nation-wide distribution of Nigerian films, although the NFDC and the NFC did provide "soft loans" in amounts no larger than N100,000 to some filmmakers as Adesanya is careful to point out (2012 pp. 58-9, 79).

## Oil Wealth and the Fantasy of Urban Modernity

Nigerian cinema was a fundamentally urban phenomenon insofar as the city provided the backdrop for the experience of cinema. It is for this same reason that Lagos came to occupy a central place in Nigerian cinema's emerging imaginary. Films of this time bear the imprint of the flows of media and cultural production that converged in the nation's largest and wealthiest metropolis. When indigenous films attempted to portray the urban realities of Lagos they did so using the very same flows of popular culture that characterized the experience of modernity in the city. In a certain sense, the city provided a vast repository of popular cultural forms while these same cultural forms provided an array of tropes, themes, genres and aesthetics for making sense of the changing city.

In the section that follows, I want to pursue this argument as it pertains to two films that I believe are representative of early Nigerian cinema and its fascination with Lagos. These films are also significant insofar as, from two distinct vantage points, they picture the city at a historical juncture, namely the post-civil war oil boom and the rapid modernization it heralded. The immense windfall of oil wealth that the country enjoyed during the 1970s had the effect of accelerating Lagos full-throttle into an era of social and cultural modernity. The oil boom brought immense concentrations of money to Lagos as the political and financial capital of the nation. The signs of this newfound wealth were visible throughout the city, but most notably in the modernist freeways, skyscrapers and airport, as well as the changing fashions, consumer goods and forms of leisure that flourished with the influx of oil wealth.

In her essay, "Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira," Karin Barber argues that this oil wealth left an inevitable mark on the imagination of ordinary people who witnessed signs of easy

money that they themselves could not obtain. It was not only the size of the nation's new wealth that fascinated the popular imagination, but also its inexplicable source. Unlike previous conceptions of wealth which placed high value on shrewd trading practices or physical labor given that money was always the product of such work, oil wealth did not appear to be produced by work; instead, its origins were located elsewhere. As Barber writes, “gigantic sums of cash seem to have appeared as if from nowhere, being appropriated by those who contributed virtually nothing to its production, and in the process personally enriching a few Nigerians on a colossal scale” (93). Under these circumstances, local popular culture – principally theater, for Barber, but we might include urban folktales, photoplay magazines, television, music and film – became a site for staging the public's reactions to changing ideas about wealth, poverty, work and the power of money. Popular culture provided imaginary explanations that “captur[ed] the violent and mysterious aspects of the new wealth,” but it also circumscribed the limit of popular scrutiny of the effects wrought by oil wealth insofar as it “translat[ed] them into a set of terms which [made] further questions about the nature and origins of this wealth pointless and, indeed, unaskable” (94).

As the ruling class rushed to enrich themselves and erect vast political alliances, the government contract became the premier technology for distributing money from the central source of wealth to the nation's margins. People came to speak euphemistically of this distribution of wealth as the “national cake” from which each sought their own slice.

The intense competitiveness of this economy – with foreign firms competing for contracts, government officials competing for the power to award them, and middlemen competing for access to both foreign firms and government officials – has led to the formation of cliques and cartels, squeezing out small operators and concentrating the

really big money in a very few hands. But... the spectacle of easy commercial profit, has lead to urban drift, rural impoverishment, and a growing population of small business people struggling to get a foothold in the petro-naira economy. There is frustration is the background to the high incidence of armed robbery in Nigeria – especially Lagos where the contrast between rich and poor is at its most stark. (Barber [1982] 1997, p. 93)

The drama of corruption and contestation amongst the powerful during the oil boom was matched by the small dramas of day-to-day life under growing social disparity. The city became a stage of spectacular pageantries of wealth as well as mundane tragedies of longing and survival.

We can perceive in Moses Olaiya Adejunmo's *Orun Mooru* and Ola Balogun's *Money Power* the popular imagination endeavoring to take account of the social transformations brought about by the oil boom. It is the natural drama of the city's oil-boom modernity that subtends the films in question. We must understand these films as symptomatic of the 1970s oil-boom and its impact on the social fabric of the city. I argue these films critique the seductive power of oil wealth and society's integration with global fast capitalism even as, paradoxically, they partake in this seduction and bring into existence a popular cinema grounded in film's commodity form.

*Orun Mooru* narrates the fortunes and misfortunes of a once-wealthy electronics dealer, Lamidi (Baba Sala), who loses everything in a fraudulent get-rich-quick scheme and struggles through several hapless schemes to get back on his feet and renew his toehold in the new oil economy selling television sets, radios and electric fans. The film opens on a village at the semi-urban outskirts of Lagos where Lamidi works as a lowly, unsuccessful basket weaver. We do not yet know the cause of his poverty, but we do know he pines for his bygone days when life was filled with simple pleasures: wine, music, women, and so on. The opening sequences have a

characteristically theatrical feel owing to conventions it borrows from the Yoruba popular theater. Baba Sala himself, bearing the reputation of the Nigerian king of comedy, showcases his comic theatrical talents in a stylized rather than naturalistic performance and, thus, the film's humor is rich in verbal play and punctuated by Baba Sala's slapstick gags. Lamidi bears all the characteristics with which Baba Sala costumed his stage persona, notoriously cheap, lecherous and lazy; he sings absurd love ballads to a woman, who unbeknownst to him, is deaf and, later in their amusing living arrangement, he suffers both her dull wits and fistfuls of her thumps and jabs to comedic effect. The action of the narrative unfolds in front of rudimentary huts – indicating perhaps that filming took place at a constructed film village – and along paths under groves of palm trees and is captured by a stationary camera that fluctuates between medium-long and long shots. The relationship between the camera, actors and backdrop feels stilted and gives the sequence the feel of a stage drama. When Lamidi joins his friends at the palmwine seller's to enjoy the modest pleasures of simple life the group breaks into song, which was typical of the musical tradition of the early theater performances in which expository song sequences interspersed and paralleled the action of the play.<sup>19</sup> However the care given to mise-en-scene and the spatial proportions of the medium and close up shots, as well as the slow tracking motion lend the scene a cinematic aura.

The plot lingers in this world of village life until the gags and situational humor are exhausted. At this point, the film breaks from the world of the village in a jump cut to the sight of a passenger jet taxiing into Lagos's Murtala Muhammad Airport, followed by the image of two female ticket agents behind a computer console, one reaching to the phone to announce the arrival of Nigerian Airways flight from Accra, Ghana. The camera details the arrival, focusing

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<sup>19</sup> In many of the earliest Yoruba plays, lines were sung much like an opera rather than spoken as later became the custom. However, songs and music continued to accompany the performances even after theater companies discarded the old operatic delivery (Barber 2003).

on the passengers alighting from the plane, offering a panoramic view of the airport's interior and the voice of airline agents on the PA, and finally framing the passengers as they exit the airport and are greeted by taxi drivers awaiting their arrival. The camera offers a final glimpse of the taxi speeding toward the camera and the big city beyond but it is the monumental skyline of the airport with its shining white concrete and glass and jutting control tower that captivates the eye. In his review of the film, Niyi Osundare called this specific shot “a tendentiously selective shooting which keeps the airport's true denizens – beggars, touts, 'arrangees,' and other layabouts – dishonestly out of sight” (“King” 1982, p.d 1821). However, within the frame of the film's fantasy, this is the terrain of Nigeria's oil boom nouveaux riches, a jet set class of contractors and savvy businessmen, like Adisa, who we soon learn is a dear friend of Lamidi whose fortunes seem to mirror Lamidi's descent into destitution.

What we know about Adisa is essentially what we see. He arrives in this fashion from a successful business trip to Ghana and heads directly home to his two children and his wife, Emily, who supervises a half-dozen young seamstresses as a side business to augment the family's nouveau riche lifestyle. The reunion between friends is the result of a chance encounter on the road when Adisa's Volkswagen breaks down and Lamidi, not at first recognizing this wealthy city slicker as his friend, assists him to start the car. Adisa as well does not recognize Lamidi, whom he knew to be an electronics dealer making a good living from his trade. By way of explaining his current hardship, Lamidi describes a cartel of fraudsters who duped him into surrendering all his property in a money ritual meant to unlock tremendous sums of money. After hearing the tale of Lamidi's ensnarement by fraudsters, Adisa takes pity and loans him one thousand naira to rebuild his life. The rich man's departure is peppered with references to his imminent trip back to Ghana (although he just arrived home) and how the next time he returns he

will find Lamidi enjoying the same prosperity once again.

Adisa's character introduces the figure of the good rich man, the *nouveau riche* whose hard work, a fact witnessed to by his business connections to Ghana and tangentially by his wife's labor running her own tailor shop, legitimates his individual self-aggrandizement through the accumulation of wealth. His character stands for the fulfillment of the dream that drew many to Lagos, to build one's fortune on honest work in an economy full of opportunities and to enjoy the modern amenities, goods and forms of leisure that that prosperity made possible. Barber identifies the figure of the good rich man as integral to Yoruba plays that deal with oil wealth in which he stood for well-founded prosperity and thus established the distinction between honest and false riches, the latter achieved by spurious or ill-founded means, often money magic or robbery (1997, p. 97). Rather than train our suspicions on a character of ill-begotten riches in the moralizing fashion of the theater, the film displaces this role onto Lamidi himself, as one whose ambitions for wealth outstripped his willingness to work for them. Indeed, the tale Lamidi tells his friend about how he lost his livelihood seems to spring directly from urban folktales about various types of money magic to which Barber refers.

Lamidi hires a clerk to assist at his electronics shop but after working for only a short time the young man disappears without notice. Lamidi though little of it until, a month later, the young man returns driving a new automobile, wearing finely tailored lace and bearing gifts for his former employer. Lamidi must know the young man's source of wealth since how could one amass such riches in such a short time? And as Lamidi admonishes, speaking to himself, "those who do not know the source of wealth of others will always run in circles." The young man offers to introduce Lamidi to the man who showed him the way to make money. The action, which takes place in a flashback, turns to the demimonde hangout of the scammers where the

young man returns to inform his “boss,” Adigun (Twin Seven Seven), that he has “hooked” a “good catch.” Adigun instructs Lamidi to bring him N 100,000 so he might magically multiply it a hundred fold, and Lamidi sets straight to selling his shop, his wife's shop and all his worldly possessions to come up with the required sum. Adigun then instructs Lamidi to place the money inside six empty oil drums and to set the drums apart in an empty room, along with a hen, a snail, a bolt of cloth and a duck, a request that Lamidi happily fulfills. Adigun explains that he will stay in the room for seven days – as Lamidi feeds him lavish meals, of course – to work the magic ritual that will multiply the money. When Lamidi returns the barrels are covered in a white cloth and the trickster warns him not to unveil them before first performing some specious ritual tasks to magically unlock the money contained within so as to ready it for spending. Adigun departs and Lamidi performs the prescribed gestures. When he lifts the cloth from the oil drums he discovers them filled to the brim with cash, each drum containing larger denominations from 50 kobo (cents) to 20 naira notes. Believing that Adigun has miraculously produced great riches from nothing but empty oil drums, he goes to plunge his hands into the barrels of money and immediately discovers the rouse. The barrels have been overturned and a small spattering of cash notes were spread to cover the bottom and give the illusion of a barrel full of money. Realizing his disastrous misstep, Lamidi collapses, comically upending the empty barrels in one of Baba Sala's typical slapstick gags to punctuate the tale of money magic.

With the money obtained from Adisa in his pocket and a determination to reestablish his once thriving market in electronics, Lamidi sets out for the marketplace in Lagos. He lasts only a short time in the big city before a band of pickpockets relieve the foolish man of his cash. Psychologically crushed by the loss, Lamidi turns to suicide, comically failing several attempts before flinging himself off a bridge. As he plunges into the lagoon, Lamidi is carried to another

metaphysical realm of spirits and magic and the film itself takes a metaphysical turn characteristic of Yoruba theater and cinema.

In understanding the turn the film takes, it is helpful to consider Barber's work, which positions us on the side of the theater-cum-film professionals, such as Oyin Adejobi and Alhaji Karimu Adepoju who belonged to a theater troupe that was a contemporary of that of Baba Sala. As they insisted to Barber, the appeal of electronic media was fundamentally visual, its capacity to show what cannot be shown on stage, and thus to engender an imaginary world that nevertheless “will look as reality.” The visual vocabulary of things that could be shown greatly expanded with film as we find in *Orun Mooru* with its long takes of the airport, its preoccupation with showing the train speeding toward the suicidal protagonist, and its lingering glimpses of cars, but also in its lively depiction of the money ritual which lends a visual image to an imagined scenario which pervaded urban rumor. Specifically it was film's ability to stitch together these imagined things and spaces: “for instance, if you have any play in which you have a part to be played in the forest or in water, or any other location which could not be easily brought on the stage” (Adejobi qtd in Barber, p. 247). In *Orun Mooru*, it is the supernatural metaphysical realm of Yoruba cosmology, or rather a “vernacular” rendering of that cosmology, that film brings to life. He encounters a female spirit in the *ilé ayò* (the house of joy) who offers two magic eggs and the instruction that Lamidi should break the first egg to release an unearthly amount of wealth and break the second egg when he finishes spending that money.

The benevolent spirit transports Lamidi back to the world of humans, sending with him two spirit maidens who are to become his wives. Lamidi discovers that the spirits have worked miracles for him, providing him a gigantic compound with “Lamidi's Lodge” scrolled across its ornate front gate. Within he discovers a luxurious white villa with a spacious parlor, bar and

barman, as well as a small fleet of Mercedes-Benzs and his own chauffeur, or in other words, all the trappings of the nouveaux riches, the commodities and modern amenities that served as the principal signs of the nation's newfound oil wealth. Uncertain whether he is still dead or indeed alive, Lamidi comes to accept that his grandest fantasies of wealth and prestige have become reality, and decides to throw himself a house warming party to celebrate his newfound wealth. We find Lamidi's foolishness, which blinds him to the illusion, humorous at the same time that we remain subtly aware of our own pleasure in beholding the illusion. However, the camera switches from classical narrative continuity, which would encourage us to withhold our own better judgement that none of this can be "for real," to an exhibitionist mode in which the spectacle no longer needs to adhere to narrative sense but rather stands suspended in a sequence of non-narrative exhibitionism. The final scenes of the film depict the resplendent party that Lamidi hosts with his magic money and the camera works deliberately. A mansion, luxury cars, fine clothing, a feast, and a live jùjú band headed by celebrity musician Sunny Ade. Just as cinema had the ability to construct illusions, to stitch together the metaphysical realm and the other spaces of the filmic world such that it "will look as reality," it also permitted filmmakers to orchestrate spectacular scenes that would be unimaginable to represent. Such scenes did not rely on the reality effect of narrative film but rather allowed audiences to witness firsthand spectacles of wealth, celebrity, consumption, technology or modern infrastructure, in short, the astonishing material manifestations of oil wealth. As Niyi Osundare comments that the scene falls ambivalently between "chastising crass materialism and encouraging it," and that "the vulgar opulence of Lamidi Lodge, his glossy Mercedes, lavish furnished rooms, etc. look at times like veritable advertisement of debauched appetites" (1982, p. 1821).

Lamidi having attained the status and wealth of which he had always dreamed, the

narrative reintroduces the figure of the good rich man, Adisa, who appears at the party, we presume after having returned once again from Ghana. As is his prerogative in the structure of the film, he cautions Lamidi against spending wealth too lavishly, but Lamidi explains that his money springs from a supernatural source. To prove the baselessness of his friend's concerns, Lamidi goes to break the second egg and redouble the expenditure of wealth, but no money appears, only Death in the form of a grotesque ogre. The two physically struggle and just when it seems Lamidi's time has run out, a final twist, he wakes from a dream inside his own hut back in the village. He learns that when he attempted suicide on the bridge he was, in reality, rescued and prevented from dying, that he never crossed to the realm of spirits and never brought back the worldly riches or their otherworldly curse. The critical turn recalls the conventions of dominant global cinema, specifically Hollywood cinema, "when the action reaches its catastrophic peak, a radical change of perspective is introduced that refigures the entire catastrophic course of events as merely a bad dream of the hero" (Zizek 1992, p. 16). The significance of this sudden about face convention, as Slavoj Zizek argues, is not that the film acquiesces to Hollywood codes since:

this kind of retroactive displacement of 'real' events into fiction (dreaming) appears as a "compromise," an act of ideological conformism, only if we hold to the naïve ideological opposition between "hard reality" and the "world of dreaming." As soon as we take into account that it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire, the whole accent radically shifts: our common everyday reality, the reality of the social universe in which we assume our usual roles of kind-hearted, decent people, turns out to be an illusion that rests on a certain "repression," on overlooking the real of our desire. (1992, p. 17)

The question thus becomes whether the intense fantasy scenarios of the film reveal an ideological inconsistency with the overt moral message about the distinction between hard-earned, legitimate wealth and the oil riches of fast capitalism. Barber puts a similar question to Yoruba plays that deal with oil wealth and concludes that:

the spectacle of boundless, baseless fortunes calls up in the people who have no access to them, and who do not understand them, a reaction of passionate rejection. But at the same time the enduring, deep-rooted drive of self-aggrandizement through the acquisition of wealth, which has so long been a fundamental dynamic of Yoruba society, means that the people continue to fix their eyes on the image of great wealth and aspire to attain it. What happens then is that it is impossible to acknowledge that in modern Nigerian society *all* great wealth is baseless and unearned, acquired by more or less dubious means. Instead, the criticism of the baseless fortune is *displaced* sideways onto armed robbery and magical money. (1997, p. 97)

We find this sideways displacement of the anxiety that the petro-wealth fueling Lagos's rapid modernization in the scenes of fantastic metaphysical phenomenon. When Lamidi confronts the monstrous figure of death in a world beyond the living realm of humans he explains that his poverty has driven him to seek death. Ironically, Death doesn't have the potent poison that Lamidi seeks, and so he refers Lamidi to *ilé áyò*: "Go to the abode of joy. That is where you find instant death." In contrast to Death's hellish, cavernous lair, Lamidi discovers a beautiful grove of young, attractive sirens at *ilé áyò*. It is the female head of the house of joy who produces the eggs that magically afford Lamidi a taste of immense wealth just before his inevitable downfall. Osundare takes the social message of the film to be a warning against "the perils of sudden, unearned wealth (*owo ojiji* in Yoruba) rampant in contemporary Nigeria, the menace of the pot-

bellied, damasked (or laced) millionaires who 'spray' wads of naira like used tickets” (1982, p. 1821). As the narrative comes to a close, we leave Lamidi where we first found him, down and out in a small village. As one observant critic noted the roles that Baba Sala performed on stage and screen changed with the actor’s own rising fortunes. The comedian went from playing everyman figures (a laborer, houseboy, but always an underdog) to performing less “dramatically and ideologically crucial roles,” such as the managing director, police boss, or been-to (Lakoju 1984, p. 37).

The press statement for *Money Power* released by Ola Balogun's Afrocult Foundation prior to the film's premiere explains that the film takes aim at “the overpowering role of the almighty naira in contemporary Nigerian society,” and goes on to ask rhetorically, “Can money buy everything in Nigeria today? Can it buy love? Almost certainly. Can it buy respectability? Perfectly. Can it buy popularity? No difficulty. Can it buy election votes? Very interesting question!” (Afrocult Foundation qtd in Bentsi-Enchill 1982, p. 2093).

The film opens on a tenement compound in crowded Lagos, the Olabode family's modest household, where Yemi (Clarion Chukwurah) lives with her hardworking mother and lazy father, Ogbeni Olabode (Moses Olaiya Adejumo, alias Baba Sala). Yemi's father, a useless man who does not work but rather lolls about the house as his debts accrue, believes that work is less profitable than good connections with powerful men, such as his *oga*, Chief B.C. Ade (Ola Omonitan, alias Ajamisan), known to his lackeys and subordinates simply as “Money Power.” Rather than search for an honest job to support his household, Olabode appeals to his patron to help find employment for Yemi. The negotiation between the men over the terms of her employment is swift and, as Chief Ade presses a few naira notes into Olabode's hand as gratitude for his loyalty, we sense that Yemi has become the object of exchange between her father, a

remorseless debtor we later discover, and the infamous “Money Power,” an exceedingly corpulent and repellant old man.

Meanwhile, at the offices of the Daily News newspaper, star reporter Jide (Shina Peters) is removed from his current assignment, a droll report on the state of public transportation in the city, and handed the task of covering the approaching general election. The editor underscores the importance of the election and instructs Jide to thoroughly investigate the political programs of the leading candidates of the two political parties contesting: Chief B.C. Ade of the African People's Party and Mr. Akinwale (Funso Adeolu) of the Youth Action Party. When Jide seeks an interview with Chief Ade at his business offices he discovers Yemi, now Ade's secretary, and the two share an instant attraction. Jide and Yemi begin courting but their love is threatened by Chief Ade's designs to make Yemi his second wife and his willingness to use the power of his wealth to coerce her to his will. When Yemi rejects his sexual advances and his offers of money and cars, the chief calls on her father to persuade the young woman to acquiesce and marry him. The father, with his own debts coming overdue and the threat of jail lingering, jumps at the prospect of wedding his daughter to wealth, but Yemi flouts Olabode's decision to marry her off to the chief.

At the same time this romantic narrative is unfolding, the political contest mounts between Chief Ade and Akinwale and the distinction between the parties and their politics grows fully apparent. The chief keeps in his employ a thuggish street tough named Captain Tarzan who he orders to silence the opposition candidate with a show of intimidation. Tarzan pays Akinwale an unexpected visit, demands the candidate drop from the race and pulls a switchblade, the tool of this trade, to emphasize his message: “Elections are not meant to change governments.” Akinwale is not deterred and goes on to hold a political rally where he offers a rousing stump

speech that outlines his party's populist stand against the current misrule by selfish leaders who enrich themselves even as the government fails to provide basic measures of national development such as clean drinking water. In response, Chief Ade devises a plot to murder Akinwale and lure Jide to the scene of the crime just as the police arrive, thus ridding himself of both his political and romantic rivals. Tarzan carries out the murder and Jide is framed for the crime.

To free her true love, Yemi must ensnare the corrupt politician using her powers of attraction and so feigns a hidden desire for the old man. She seduces a candid confession from Chief Ade which she records on Jide's audio tape recorder, the tool of a journalist—and by extension the symbol of a mass-mediated free press. She alerts the police who, upon hearing the recorded confession, promptly arrest the chief and Tarzan for the murder of Akinwale. In the last shots of the film, Jide and Yemi reunite along the shore of the lagoon and romantically glide away in a canoe, the sentimental image that fades to black.

*Money Power* presents itself as a light social commentary on the growing power that money commands in Nigerian society, and although wealth is never explicitly associated with oil in the way the money ritual in *Orun Mooru* figures the oil drum as the symbolic source of illusory riches, the social antagonisms of *Money Power* all bear witness to a society wrought by its oil economy. The film's narrative is structured around confrontations that pit the corrupt status quo against enlightened political reformation, greed against love, and the old repressive hierarchies against a young independent generation. It is animated by the villainous business mogul Chief B.C. Ade for whom anything can be obtained at a price: government contracts, election results, loyalty and love. His insatiable appetite for power, status and worldly pleasures comes to dominate the lives of the film's other characters such that their own actions are defined

by the struggle to evade, contest, or appease B.C. Ade's unmatched money power. On the political front he is challenged by the opposition party, Youth Action Party, and their charismatic leader, Akinwale, who would bring an end to venal politics and beginning to real democracy in the nation. In the parallel romantic entanglement, B.C. Ade pits his will against Jide, a young idealist, as the two vie for, Yemi, the heroine of the film. The figure of oil wealth here is not as much a counterbalance to that of the good rich man found in *Orun Mooru* and the plays Barber describes, but rather the grotesque image of the political class – a civilian regime at the time the film was released – whose source wealth is unquestionably illegitimate, begotten by criminal activity that filled the headlines of party newspapers at the time.<sup>20</sup>

The general election provides the narrative conflict between contesting political parties and their competing agendas which represent, in short, a choice between business as usual and the promise of a fresh start. The political import of the film would seem to be couched in the explicit ideological opposition between the establishment candidate, Chief Ade, whose moral corruption ensures his wealth and power, and the opposition candidate Akinwale's populist platform, guided by the idealistic aim of creating equality between the rich and poor, especially by providing decent jobs and basic amenities to the poor. It is more accurate to say that Akinwale is the only one in the film with a clearly articulated ideological vision whereas Chief Ade, who practices a politics based on cash payments and violent intimidation tactics by hired thugs, seems to lack any official agenda beyond emptying the government coffers to line his own pockets. It may not come as a surprise that Ola Balogun, as he expressed to me in conversation, personally identified with the figure of the opposition politician and, insofar as the film imagines the media

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<sup>20</sup> Ajimajasan's character is likely influenced by the heightened publicity that the nation's oil-rich elites received after transition from the military government. As Barber writes, "Party political newspapers in a civilian regime publish a lot more about the shady financial deals and excessive expenditure of their opponents than did the heavily controlled organs of the military Government" (1997, p. 93).

as contributing to the political project of building the nation, we might read the film's vision of the nation – rid of corrupt leaders and accommodating of the masses – as corresponding to the political discourse that embroiled cinema at the time. That is to say that indigenous film was heralded as the means of projecting Nigeria's cultural and national integrity and was legitimated by the appeal to the grand narrative of the modern nation-state that passes through the threshold of decolonization and overcomes neocolonial domination by the elite comprador class.

In other words, when Nigerian films of the 1970s adhered to a populist vision of the nation, or the body politic generally, they “acted as imaginative correctives to the wanton corruption and social malaise that characterized that decade” (Adesokan 2012, p. 89). Unlike the intellectual critique of the ideological structures and operations that characterizes the mode of address in so-called serious African cinema, Akin Adesokan argues, Nigerian cinema posits its imaginative corrective to real political dilemmas in terms of a direct exhortatory address to an intended audience. This aesthetic of exhortation, as Adesokan terms it, in effect stages “the strong West African tradition of aesthetic populism that sees politics (or any thematics) as a subcategory of morality” (2011, p. 82). In other words, the film works to exhort the viewer to emulate moral principles for which the figures of the narrative act as conduits. What Adesokan brilliantly posits, and what is in the context of *Money Power* important to bear in mind, is that “the success of a moral injunction depends as much on its philosophical ring as on the personality of the actor who dramatizes it” (2011, p. 96). Akinwale champions ideals that carry great moral weight but demand a courage of convictions that the political class, including some of the leaders of his own party, fails to demonstrate when faced with the corrupting influence of the ubiquitous peddlers of money power. At the executive committee meeting of the Youth Action Party, we witness the party teetering on the brink of collapsing as one advisor insists that

Akinwale must agree to disburse some token sums to voters to buy their loyalty, while another declares in an outburst that their leader lacks adequate power and that, instead, he himself should stand as the party's candidate. Even Akinwale's wife encourages him to give up his fight, cajoling him with life is comfortable; he has a fine house and an automobile parked in the driveway, so why not give up this unnecessary venture into politics. But Akinwale rejects all attempts to dissuade him from his objective and, in a manner that exemplifies that exhortatory address that alerts the viewer to take heed of the political message about to be conveyed, insists that “we are fighting for ideals: we should be helping the masses!” The following sequence allows us to bear witness to the candidate's commitment to and natural rapport with the urban masses as he stages a political rally in a poor neighborhood of Lagos. The speech he delivers elaborates in detail the moral truths that ground Akinwale's politics and depicts him as the figure of virtue to be venerated as a moral force for good.

We might ask, as Adesanya does in his review of the film, why then the populist politician must die and why no mention of the opposition party's fate arises once the film takes its romantic turn. The campaign rally is not only the clearest instance of an aesthetic of exhortation in the film, it also feels something like a stump speech and an opportunity created to air an explicitly political agenda. The narrative does not seek the methodical realization of these political ideals but rather gradually displaces the viewer's interest onto the romantic intrigue in which Jide assumes the role of the hero. Thus, the film substitutes a young lovesick reporter for the oppositional politician Akinwale, a transition that is contingent upon the practical interchangeability of the two characters who are depicted throughout as closely linked. After all, Akinwale's style of political action, grounded upon rational debate among various political interests within a public sphere, depends on a member of the free press, in the figure of Jide, to

disseminate his party's message. Thus, at the moment the politician at his stump speech raises the party's battle cry "let us unite and build the nation!" the camera cuts from a close up to a long shot that captures Jide at his side arduously noting the details of the campaign rally for his newspaper report. And ultimately, is it not Jide's tape recorder, the film's technological symbol of the power of the press, that Yemi wields as a weapon to expose Chief Ade and, we presume, thereby undermine all within his corrupt cabal. But after the rally, the question of elections and political change fades entirely from the story and Akinwale only resurfaces when Chief Ade seeks to assassinate him, an act meant as much to silence his political rival as to eliminate Jide, his rival for Yemi. Interest in the political contest gradually wanes as the romantic attraction between Jide and Yemi comes to the foreground and increasingly directs the course of the narrative. Whereas the narrative conflict revolved around a battle of political ideals, it begins to turn on the David and Goliath battle between Jide and Chief Ade for Yemi's hand in marriage. If the film initially undertakes a social critique of the corrupting influence of money in the political and social life of the nation, it stalls at its midpoint and struggles to imagine a tenable resolution.

The film drifts from its political investments back to the romantic drama that provides the fantastical backdrop. This raises the question of the the role of fantasy in early Nigerian cinema and in the ideological edifice the nation's oil-boom modernity. Here we might recall Ola Balogun's repeated justification as to why he paired a political message to a romantic plot in which he emphasizes that the film's politics, its ideology in the conventional sense of a political agenda, demands an entertaining supplement to have its full affect for audiences. This is almost a fundamental tenet of the popular aesthetic that characterizes early Nigerian cinema.

The love affair between Yemi and Jide is strongly associated with the libidinal space of the nightclub. The two first meet at Yemi's place of employment, but when she quits in protest of

Chief Ade's sexual advances, the two have no way of reconnecting and it is a fortuitous coincidence that brings them together again in the nightclub. As the film works to develop intimacy between the two, it repeatedly references back to the nightclub so that the space takes on the aura of a dreamworld. It is a space strongly associated with desire and its fulfillment. Its representation within the film underscores the manifold pleasures of Lagos night life: tables overloaded with bottles of beer and soda, the dance floor crowded with the gyrating bodies of revelers, the bright lights casting colorful beams across the room, and the visual and musical performance of the live band. The nightclub's aura is inseparable from its stylishness, an ineffable but unmistakable presence evident from the stylized bodies of young clubbers, the stylish music of the highlife band, and the various styles of dance of those on the dance floor, for instance. We should understand the nightclub as a fantasy space that, in its representation in the film, delineates a break in continuity with the rest of the city overdetermined by the political wrangling, familial disputes and class conflict. It is in this space that the film locates what Žižek calls the real of one's desire, in other words an elusive something, a surplus, that imbues the fantasy space. The identification that this scene of fantasy inspires is not "identification at the level of symbolic and/or imaginary features" but rather "a 'real' identification [that] requires 'something more,' some ineffable *je ne sais quoi* that transpires only through the distance toward the 'official' symbolic features" (1999, p. 99).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In *Looking Awry* Žižek speaks in interchangeable terms of "the real of desire," the "psychic reality" of one's desire and the "truth of our desire," but in each case he has in mind the Lacanian notion of *objet petit a*, an idea that Žižek explains by reference to an anecdote from Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*. "Sam Spade narrates the story of his being hired to find a man who had suddenly left his settled job and family and vanished. Spade is unable to track him down, but a few years later the man is spotted in another city, where he lives under an assumed name and leads a life remarkably similar to the one he had fled.... In spite of the fact that his 'new' life so closely resembles the old, he is firmly convinced that his beginning again was not in vain, i.e., that it was well worth the trouble to cut his ties and begin a new life. Here we see the function of the *objet petit a* at its purest.... Where do we find the *objet petit a*? The *objet a* is precisely that

How do we know we are in the film's space of fantasy? In *Orun Mooru* the break is obviously punctuated by Lamidi's plunge into the river, his transition to the world of spirits and his crossing back as Death seems to have him in his grips, but it is really his friends dragging him sputtering from the river. In *Money Power*, we pass more freely between "reality" and fantasy spaces but always the fantasy is marked by non-diegetic music. The film features several musical numbers in which the nightclub's fantasy-world exceed space of the nightclub itself as the music, now non-diegetic, spills out into the streets, the palm grove and the lagoon. These non-narrative sequences border on spectacle in their mobilization of the visual and musical and were recognized by critics at the time as a direct adaptation of the song and dance routines of Indian melodramas that were so popular in Nigeria. The musical interludes center specifically on Yemi and Jide, often depicting the two characters exclusively, and should be understood as an appurtenance of their romantic subplot. One scene, for instance, breaks with the narrative action, in which Olabode asserts his paternal authority to marry Yemi off to his wealthy friend, to plunge us into a fantasy space in which Yemi and Jide, adorned in sumptuous lace garments, dance together in a small palm grove along the lagoon. Non-diegetic highlife music (written and performed by Shina Peters who plays Jide) accompanies the image of the two lovers dancing as Yemi sings: "Jide, I'm so much in love that... / I can't eat or sleep in peace. / I'm thinking of you all the time. / My mind is filled with thoughts of you." Here the camera works to enhance visually the scene's romantic aura. The use of tracking shots and long takes at angles that seem to encircle the dancing lovers allows the viewer to take in this spectacle from disembodied vantage points. The camera moves in response to the gestures and motion of the dancers, drawing the spectator into the action, which then breaks into a montage of previous scenes including the

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surpluse, that elusive make-believe that drove the man to change his existence. In 'reality,' it is nothing at all, just an empty surface (his life after the break is the same as before), but because of it the break is nonetheless well worth the trouble" (Zizek 1992, p. 8).

moment of their first encounter and their rendezvous at the nightclub. There is no doubt now that we are in the grips of a lovesick fantasy.

The film also concludes on a musical number that, fittingly, unfolds on the shore of the lagoon, the reference point that the film again and again returns to as both a signature feature of the Lagos landscape but also a symbol of what we might call the city's vernacular modernity. With Chief Ade's nefarious scheme exposed, and him and Tarzan placed in police custody, the non-diegetic music fades in, an uptempo number, and we cut to a small dugout canoe jetty beneath the city's (then) brand new and ever-iconic Third Mainland Bridge. A spontaneous parade has formed and the people have hoisted Yemi and Jide atop their shoulders as Jide (Shina Peters) sings and gestures dramatically. They parade the protagonists down to the waterfront and lower them into a dugout canoe, at which point the camera flips the line of sight and we watch the two glide out into the lagoon. The camera is repositioned once more in close up of the gondolier who bobs his head to the music with the shoreline disappearing in the background. The final shot of the film frames Yemi and Jide in a standing embrace with the tremendous swooping concrete flyovers of Third Mainland Bridge not far away in background.

The final scene of *Money Power* seems to function in the role typical ascribed to cinematic fantasy which “is that of the fantasy-scenario that obfuscates the true horror of a situation” (Zizek 1999, p. 91). If the romantic fantasy space that Jide and Yemi enter is understood as a fantasy-scenario, it would seem to provide an imaginary resolution where no tenable conclusion exists for the film. Following this reading, the film's conclusion settles on the triumph of romantic love because the narrative demands some imaginary resolution to the intractable political dilemma in which it has found itself trapped. With the opposition party fractured and the main opposition candidate assassinated, and with the power of Chief Ade's oil

wealth left unchecked, there would appear in “reality” – which is to say in the realist conventions to which the film adheres – to be no happy ending to the story. Therefore, the scene functions like a fantasmatic consummation of both the romantic and the political dream that the film envisions: the two lovers are brought together and the people are portrayed as citizens liberated of their corrupt rulers even if not fully conscientized political agents. Žižek argues, however, that such a notion of the ideological role of fantasy comes short of acknowledging that, indeed, “fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference” (1999, p. 92). As in the film's simultaneous denunciation of the corrupting influence of petro-naira on society while cinema at the time also participated in the urban modernity wrought by Nigeria's oil boom.

However, Žižek suggests another interpretation is possible, that there is a better reason that Jide, rather than Akinwale, emerges as the heroic champion of the poor as we surmise from the final scene in which he is paraded on the shoulders of the urban masses to the humble canoe that awaits. The answer, Žižek argues, is that “in every ideological edifice, there is a kind of 'trans-ideological' kernel, since, if an ideology is to become operative and effectively 'seize' individuals, it has to parasitize on and manipulate some kind of 'trans-ideological' vision.” In other words, what is at stake is something more than politics, a certain charismatic aestheticized experience (1999, p. 98). Insofar as the ideology of the film's “good” political party conformed to a fairly moderate agenda of modernization and nation-building through a more faithful, accountable populist democratic process, the vision that subtends these basic political principles is the ideal of the prosperous, modern nation in which all are relatively equally free to share and enjoy the trappings of that modernity. We get glimpses of this fantasmatic kernel in the nightclub scenes, in the musical numbers that break the narrative progression and allow us to linger in a

non-narrative moment within a fantasy space of the modern conjugal pair. In other words, fantasy here does not only conceal the “real” impact the nation's oil wealth has had on social life, but rather creates that which it conceals, It is a fantasy that teaches us how to desire. It is Žižek's position that “It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: *through fantasy, we learn how to desire*” (1992, p. 6). He rephrases the same argument elsewhere when he writes that “fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way, but rather constitutes our desire, provides its co-ordinates – i.e., it literally 'teaches us how to desire’” (1999, p. 100 n. 1).

But why does this ecstatic vision of oil-boom modernity remain just that, a fantastical vision that should not be properly realized within the film? Here we must acknowledge the contradiction that Barber identifies and that *Orun Mooru* exemplifies, namely that “What the texts *cannot speak of* is the real foundation of his [the good rich man's] 'honest' wealth: for in doing so, they would be forced to reveal that this foundation is hardly more solid than that of the illusory fortune of the robber and magician” (97). These popular works leave “room for the legitimate aspiration to wealth,” even though, “as such, honest wealth is in reality no longer attainable, and as the plays [and films] are topical and 'realistic' in mode, no image can be found to represent it” (1997, p. 97). The films' visions remains unattainable in the sense that, as Barber puts it, “aware of the limitations of the ideological position they tack up, they nevertheless have no choice but to reaffirm that it *is* so because it *ought* to be so” (Barber 1997, p. 98). The argument is not so much about the actual attainment of wealth or the actual implication of the livelihoods of many by the remarkably expansive, nearly totalizing, taint that oil wealth left on the Nigerian economy. It is instead the perception that such was the case, the popular suspicion that almost any source of wealth was somehow implicated and thereby rendered less than

“honest.” (This is perhaps the reason the film offers no explanations for the populist Akinwale's wealth.) It is about the social order that upholds the injunction on dubiously obtained wealth and the anxiety caused by the perception that such moral principles were waning or under threat. Barber cites a well-known proverb from one of the plays in question that states “*Isale oro legbin* / The root of riches are a shameful secret,” (Barber's translation). We might also look to *Orun Mooru* and the flippant joke that death utters when Lamidi asks to die, ““Go to the abode of joy. That is where you find instant death,” which plays on the linguistic slippage in the notion of death as the ultimate penalty and the ultimate experience of pleasure.<sup>22</sup> Such utterances exemplify the moral bar placed on the object of the “real” desire and the “real” identification of the fantasy of oil-boom modernity, rendering it in a particular sense unrealizable.

## Conclusion

Nigerian cinema was a fundamentally urban phenomenon insofar as the city provided the backdrop for the experience of cinema. Cinema existed at the threshold between the city and the wider world, the threshold through which passed diverse cultural goods, aesthetics, and influences. As I have argued, the economic and cultural activity of Lagos gave rise to the growing presence of television, magazines, theater, popular music and film. In this sense, early Nigerian filmmakers, whose social networks extended to include professionals from drama, music and television, produced works that bear the imprint of those flows of media and cultural production that converged in the nation's largest and wealthiest metropolis. Furthermore, state sponsored initiatives to develop a modern film industry, which relied on massive infrastructural projects in the city and the commissioning of top-down bureaucratic institutions, were one input

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<sup>22</sup> The allusion to death in this context suggest an ecstatic death by excessive enjoyment and immediately recalled to mind a proverb that I heard in a half-serious jest when enjoying myself in Lagos: *Aye l'oyinbo n je ku* / Whites enjoy life so thoroughly it can kill them. [My translation]

in this “common whirlpool” of elements from which indigenous productions drew. The city's monumental architecture, chiefly embodied by the National Theatre, presented a site where Nigerian culture and arts was pressed into service of African modernity, albeit in a complicated form of commodification and competition vis-a-vis global popular culture. In this regard, Lagos represented the nation's cultural as well as political capital, and the site of an African modernity that reflected the city's material embeddedness in global cultural and political processes. Many of the first indigenous films were inevitably marked by this fact.

It is in the film texts that we can relate these material conditions to questions of subjectivity and begin to examine the imbrication of urban space and psychic space. *Orun Mooru* and *Money Power* bring this relation to life with their fantastical depictions of oil-boom anxiety that revolve around urban scenarios. Kenneth Harrow has argued, following Zizek, that different modalities of desire in film have their corresponding subjectivities and also corresponding relation to different stages of capitalism. He situates Nigerian cinema within the subject/object/socio-economic cluster that Zizek associates with consumerist society, which together delineates a paradigm in which desire takes on monstrous proportions, subjects suffer diminished agency as if transfixed, and the coherence symbolic order is in crisis. The features of the well-ordered society governed by respected rules, disciplined visual images corresponding to the logos of the symbolic order, all are now in disarray. With the ultimate expression of pathological narcissism and consumerism out of control, the third stage serves as a gateway to the psychic dislocations and stylistic exuberance of the neobaroque” (Harrow 2013, p. 267-68). We must wait for the rise of Nollywood to witness the fullest expression of this signature exuberance and unbridled consumerism, but its features and psychic relations are already apparent in Nigerian cinema's celluloid era. My reading has underscored the fantasy that *Orun*

*Mooru* and *Money Power* present and convey to viewers, because ultimately that is the place the early Nigerian cinema occupied in the oil-boom years. Nigerian films explicitly censure the seductive power of oil wealth and, by extension, society's integration with global fast capitalism, at the same time they partake in this seduction, engendering a local popular cinema that embraced film in its commodity form.

## Chapter 2:

### Crime Dramas, Urban Crisis and Nollywood's Melodramatic Imagination

Afolabi Adesanya's *Vigilante* is the only crime film to survive from the twilight moment between celluloid and video film.<sup>23</sup> Shot on celluloid in 1989 in a self-described social realist mode, Adesanya's film was inspired by local experiences with the persistent menace of armed robbery. It is still around thanks to the filmmaker's decision to convert the film to videocassette and rerelease it as a video film in 1996.<sup>24</sup> In conversation with me, Adesanya explained the premise of *Vigilante* as similar to that of the American film *Death Wish* (1974). He insists that the film was not intended to resemble any such foreign film, but after its first release on celluloid, the audience drew the comparison, it stuck, and the film was thereafter dismissed by many at the time as "derivative" (Adesanya 2012, p. 75). In light of the video film boom that was to follow, the film gains renewed significance as a rare precursor of Nollywood.

The narrative centers on the middle-class Lagos neighborhood of Kajola Estate. Its residents, all upstanding men and their families, refuse to play helpless victim in the face of a rash of armed robberies that go unanswered by law enforcement agents. The robbers steadily strip each family of their property, dignity, and fundamental sense of security. Not only do the police turn a deaf ear to the neighborhood's pleas for help, they harass and arrest some of the men of Kajola Estate claiming they had collaborated in their own victimization. Social order appears on the verge of collapse, or so it would seem from the vantage point of the Lagos middle-class, the perspective inhabited by the film itself. The men of the neighborhood gradually

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<sup>23</sup> Eddie Ugboma built his early career on crime thrillers such as *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* and *Bolus 80*, however, none of Ugboma's celluloid films have survived save the filmmaker's personal copies which are today languishing in a storage unit at the filmmakers home in Badagary (personal communication).

<sup>24</sup> As Baba Sala's *Orun Mooru* (1982), the only reason a document of this era exists is because at some point the celluloid was transferred into video format, which permits greater ease of reproduction, circulation and storage.

come to understand that it is only through vigilante action that the injustice will be stopped. When a gang of armed robbers infiltrate the estate and post a letter instructing all the residents to gather their belongings and prepare to hand them over by the next raid, it proves to be the last straw. Pushed to the limit, the men organize a vigilante guard and fortify their estate, waiting for the impending shoot out with their tormentors.

As Adesanya's *Vigilante* demonstrates, the films that paved the way for Nollywood were already struggling with the growing precariousness of life in Lagos. In a way, the rise of home video was coterminous with the decline of order in Lagos. Economic strain and social insecurity combined with new technological developments to provide the conditions needed for the Nigerian film industry to transform from a small cohort of filmmakers who produced a steady trickle celluloid films each year to a full-blown, self-organized industry that flooded Lagos with video films (Haynes 2007 p. 132). It should, therefore, come as no surprise that early Nollywood was preoccupied with the crime and social strife that drove the public out of the public sphere.

The political and economic instability of the 1980s made the ordeal of everyday life exceedingly demanding and precarious for the average Nigerian. At nightfall, Lagos neighborhoods fell under siege by robbers and kidnappers who became figures of terror in the popular urban imaginary. At the same time it became shockingly apparent that the security forces and judicial authorities lacked the will or the means to protect the public. The public's longstanding misgivings about the venality and corruption of law enforcement authorities grew deeper and trust for the police, and the state more broadly conceived, crumbled. Lagosians appeared doubly victimized, on the one hand, by a criminal element rooted in the urban underworld and, on the other, by an authoritarian state that exercised its power with acts of violence in broad daylight. This chapter examines how, in this crucible, Nollywood's pioneering

producers came to forge video film's fundamental conventions, its signature aesthetic excesses, its extravagant and grotesque impulses, and its invariably melodramatic mode.

### Theorizing the Structural Adjustment of City Life

Nigeria's initiation into international capitalism principally as a petroleum producer left the country particularly susceptible to the rapid fluctuations in one commodity's value. When international oil prices plummeted in 1981 and Nigerian oil production dropped by two-thirds, it became evident that the era of effortless oil wealth and wild expenditure had come to an abrupt close. In July 1986, under the military leadership of Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria entered into a comprehensive Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), which permitted the country to reschedule its loans only after adopting austerity measures that inevitably confronted ordinary Nigerians with greater hardship in their daily lives.<sup>25</sup> As was true elsewhere in Africa during this period, economic "adjustments" implemented under pressure from foreign creditors had an unsettling ripple effect that was felt across society. During this period, the standard of living in major cities was devastated by the devaluation of the average person's effective purchasing power; unemployment resulting from retrenchments in the public sector; and escalating costs for food, rent, transportation, electricity, health care, education and other social services (Osaghae 1998, p. 205). As Eghosa Osaghae reports, the various strategies that urbanites adopted to cope with structural adjustment came to include "moonlighting and the creation of rent-seeking avenues by civil servants, withdrawal of children from school, a drastic reduction in food consumption,

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<sup>25</sup> Historians and political economists have criticized the execution of the SAP components as haphazard and pointed to the dubious rationale and marginal success of the austerity measures, given that the SAP "was pathologically fixated on the exchange rate of the naira rather than on building investor confidence, strengthening the local bourgeoisie, integrating the sectors of the economy, and promoting growth and development" (Ihonvbere 1996, p. 196). The government pursued policies designed to assuage external demands, but the effects of SAP on the domestic sphere, especially in major cities with growing unemployment and rural-urban migration, soon amounted to a political and economic crisis (Osaghae 1998, p. 207).

increased patronage of herbalists and ‘traditional’ or spiritual healing rather than hospitals and clinics, increased religiosity and the cultivation of fatalistic complexes which served to reduce the spirit of protest, crime, prostitution, drug use and so on” (p. 205). Such tactics defined a significant the restructuring of urban social fields in response to an economic and political crisis in which everyday life became unmoored from the social and cultural institutions that once ensured a degree of certainty.

Even as Nigeria experienced its initiation into the emerging power dynamics of neoliberal global capitalism, the postcolonial state, the seat of which was Lagos at the time, began slipping into a crisis of its own. Beginning in 1986, under the pretense of bringing about a timely transition to democracy, Babangida’s regime held on to power by engineering a protracted and intentionally winding path to elections and a transfer of power. Various student and labor unions and civil liberty organizations, unwilling to wait patiently, mobilized protests and strikes to voice their opposition to the state’s bid to delay transition. In response, the postcolonial state “continued to make the immediate future as uncertain as possible by introducing new rules, reinterpreting existing legislation, and manipulating the transition institutions” (Ihonvbere, p. 198). Under these new conditions of political power, the exceptional became the norm by design, and the country appeared to slip into a permanent interregnum, or a “transition without end” (Ihonvbere and Shaw; Olaniyan [2004] 2009, p. 4; Osaghea 1998, p. 208).<sup>26</sup>

Although the nation had to deal with corruption by the ruling elite almost continually

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<sup>26</sup> When elections finally came to pass in June 1993, the Interim National Government set up to oversee the transition annulled the voting results, despite public outcry, and ultimately provided Sani Abacha and his military accomplices with reason to seize power. As Ruth Marshall writes, “Throughout the 1990s the fundamental dynamics underlying this exercise of power did not change, but only grew increasingly predatory and violent. The ‘transition without end’ of the Babangida regime, continued through the ‘Big Scam’ of the annulled 1993 elections and the seizure of power by the military dictator Sani Abacha, reinforced the sense in which Nigerian government had become a permanent state of exception” (Marshall 102).

since the end of the Civil War, the idiom of corruption took on a new depth of meaning in the face of the pervasiveness of misconduct, which seemed to many to have taken hold in nearly every facet of life. As Ruth Marshall contends, the term corruption itself became, “overloaded with an excess of symbolic force, implying not a deviation from a certain model, but rather the death and decomposition of social worlds in their absences of a promise of renewal” (Marshall 2009, p. 106). The public sphere, including various soft sell magazines and newspapers, was flush with accusations and counter-accusations of corruption and stories suggesting that no part of society was immune to the creeping spread of moral rot.<sup>27</sup> Stories of the inexplicable, dramatic rise and fall of individual fates were not uncommon under military rule. Government workers went weeks without receiving their salaries, while well-connected clients of the state were awarded generous government contracts. The path to social and economic stability grew increasingly uncertain, as success appeared less a guaranteed outcome of diligence, performance or educational qualifications and more a benefit due to opaque political relationships, rank or status.

This widespread disruption of social order and governance corresponded with growing insecurity throughout the country, but especially in Lagos. The period after Nigeria adopted its structural adjustment program saw urban crime explode, as many sources suggest. “Not only is the incidence of violence becoming more frequent,” Tunde Agbola wrote in his study of crime in Lagos at the time, “the nature of the crimes, especially armed robbery and murder, have become

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<sup>27</sup> At this time, as Marshall also notes, a major strategy among vying factions within the state and opposition figures outside the state was to discredit opponents by exposing their greed and venality. Meanwhile, the state’s major strategy of silencing criticism was to co-opt oppositional figures and organizations by inviting them to take up favorable posts or responsibilities within the regime and thereby concede their credibility through complicity with the state (Ihonvbere and Shaw 147, Ihonvbere 198). This effectively extended the network of those implicated in corruption and, in Ihonvbere’s words, “provided new and unequalled opportunities for people with little or no education, expertise or experience to climb the social and political ladder and become prominent and affluent overnight” (Ihonvbere 1998, p. 139-47).

more heinous. There is daily news of bolder and more sophisticated crimes” (1997, p. 1). The worst of the spike in crime was felt in Lagos, a consequence of the city’s “enabling environment,” as one Chief Superintendent of police described it: “the frustrations, the hopes, a glimpse of what life could be, the people, the sophistication, the desire and the guns. Violence in Lagos has a distinctive [sic] brutal character” (qtd in Adisa 1994). Nigeria’s largest metropolis, in short, had become “the crime capital of the country” (Adisa 1994)

This portrait of Lagos in the wake of foreign-imposed structural adjustment resembles that of other major cities across Africa that were similarly ravaged by the neoliberal policies introduced at this historic juncture in global capitalism. African studies scholars focusing on this period have suggested that, following the economic and social hardship of the 1980s, instability and insecurity have become the norm of everyday life in urban Africa. The ramifications of structural adjustment programs have been so wide reaching in their effects that they cannot be addressed as simply some reorganization of African economies. “Adjustment” entailed remaking the conditions of urban embodiment and of subjectivity itself, or “the restructuring of the time and space of African lives,” in AbdouMaliq Simone’s words (2003, p. 28). Given this observation, Africanist scholars have sought to understand urban crisis as more than a pathological state of existence, or a tragic sign of a nation’s arrested development. Questions about the effects this neoliberal turn in the world economy had upon African cities inspired a great deal of discussion among urban anthropologists and political theorists, who examined Yaoundé (Mbembe and Roitman 1995), Abijan (Simone 1998), Lusaka (Ferguson 1999) and Kinshasa (DeBoeck 2005) as the frontline of social change in Africa.

These studies all make reference to a “crisis of representation” that characterized life lived under an endless state of emergency. Whether in Kinshasa, Abidjan, Yaoundé or Lagos,

social signs became delinked from their referents in the “real world,” casting into uncertainty the basic processes of making sense of everyday reality. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, for instance, speak of “the lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life (facticity) and the corpus of significations or meanings (ideality) available to explain and interpret what happens, [and] to act efficaciously...” (1995, p. 324). While Ruth Marshall, speaking of popular responses to urban crisis in Lagos and Ibadan, observes that “signs and their referents became increasingly unmoored, giving rise to a heightened sense of social insecurity, a growing quest for moral mastery and the ability to control what were seen as untrammelled and dangerous powers” (Marshall 2009, p. 107). Along a similar line, Simone places emphasis on the profound social contingency, opaque social relations, and shrinking opportunities for individuals to find a sustained and viable livelihood that, he argues, continue to make it tremendously difficult for those living in the city to discern a clear picture of what their future might hold. What relationships will prove lasting and productive? Will family bonds be upheld in the face of emotional and material hardship? Which avenues of work or education might lead to achieving particular goals? “The urban environment,” he writes, “is increasingly one where it is difficult to ascertain just what social practices, alliances, and knowledge can be mobilized sufficiently enough to produce probable outcomes conceived in advance” (Simone 2004, p. 3). These studies report that shifts in urban social fields confront city dwellers with greater uncertainty as relationships and paths leading to social mobility grow increasingly tenuous, and that survival demands more experimentation, as arrangements that previously ensured a certain level of order now prove contingent and provisional.

But these studies of urban crisis also point out that, far from undoing the city, such conditions make the city a more fluid environment and one more open to new social relations

and cultural productions. Simone draws attention, on the one hand, to ways this confusion can paralyze urban residents faced with an ever-shifting social field, but he also emphasizes that such fluidity and indeterminacy open up new lines of flight, new gaps in which others might insert themselves. The important contribution of these studies is not their charting of the decomposition of the very fabric of society, but the way they attend to the remaking of social order, the reconfiguration of each African city's "regime of subjectivity" in Mbembe and Roitman's words. That endeavor to establish anew the certitudes that ground social bonds and obligations, as well as authority and power, and by extension the constitution of the subject as Mbembe and Roitman argue, has entailed "recourse to other categories of reference, other systems of causality or, in brief, other regimes of intelligibility" (1995, p. 339).

#### "City Life" and Nollywood's Melodramatic Imagination

African studies' recent "urban turn" has sought a fuller understanding of the implications that structural adjustment programs, political insecurity, and rapid urbanization have had on the continent over the last several decades and what everyday city life on the continent is like today. But what is "city life" anyhow, and how does one qualify claims made about such an amorphous concept? If we take that term, "city life," to mean urban existence as it is lived and experienced by urbanites, then we have to contend with Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe claim that "to a large extent, metropolitan existence is less about the city as such or how the latter is made and by whom than how it is exhibited, displayed and represented, its colorfulness, its aura, its aesthetics" (17). The most innovative work on urbanism in Africa takes up this relationship between social modes of representation and the ordering of everyday city life. Along this line of thought, this section considers how we might flesh out recent anthropological and sociological

theorization of city life as a social field in a way that also emphasizes the city as an aesthetic field.

In a number of Simone's writings, including *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar* (2009), he draws on the metaphor of vision, and specifically the terms visible and invisible, to theorize unprecedented changes in time, space, and social relations taking place in cities across the Global South (see also Simone 2002, p. 28). Visibility works, for Simone, as a metaphor of insight and foresight. It names a particular type of vision that one adopts in order to navigate a city full of strangers and unfamiliar social practices. We might call it insight into the "true nature" of people and things, to be able to see through surface appearances to the "real" inner workings of things. Urban anthropologists in West and Central Africa would draw our attention to the popular belief, associated both with born-again Christianity and witchcraft discourses, that certain individuals possess precisely this sort of privileged vision, which grants them "other senses and sensations [that] are involved in receiving knowledge about the otherworldly" (Pype 2012, p. 42, see also Geschiere 1997, pp. 53-5; Meyer 2003, pp. 27-8). Another type of vision is called for in the cities that Simone describes, what we might call the foresight to accurately predict the future outcomes of present actions. A knowledge of how financial, social, physical and emotional investments in the here and now might open unforeseen opportunities at some precarious future moment represents one useful defense against the generalized condition of political and economic insecurity that concerns Simone. By contrast, invisibility suggests the ways in which the future is opaque and unpredictable, making foresight unreliable. One may pursue a course of action but discover it impossible to see a certain objective through to completion. Elsewhere, invisibility refers to the occult forces<sup>28</sup> and dual lives that are rumored to thrive in cities, making it "hard to

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<sup>28</sup> Jean and John Comaroff coin the term occult modernity to refer to popular anxieties over the place of Africa in contemporary economic shifts. Occult here functions on two registers. First it

tell the sheikhs from the fools, the witches from the Jehovah's Witnesses, the police from the thieves," in Simone's words (Simone 1998, p. 85). His notion of visibility and invisibility shifts the terrain of analysis from urban sociology back to questions of representation, visual signification, and aesthetics.

I argue that Nollywood provides viewers foresight and insight in social circumstances that often make city life opaque and unpredictable. Simone's examines "city life" as the fluid, volatile coexistence of many actors in the midst of uncertain historical change. Nollywood films reflect this in their narrative preoccupation with peripety, or quick reversals of identity or fate. It also captures the tenuous shape of time in the city with its common reliance on flashback, dramatic rising and falling emplotment, and especially coincidence as causality. In its depiction of Lagos, Nollywood constantly probes and penetrates deep into what Peter Brooks famously termed the domain of the "moral occult" (1976). To borrow from Brooks, we might say that Nollywood's melodramatic imagination puts us "in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things—just as descriptions of the surface of the modern metropolis pierce through to a mythological realm where the imagination can find a habitat for its play with large moral entities" (4-5). It is these large moral forces hidden under and within the surface of things that Nollywood conjures up as the stuff of urban existence, although ironically, as I argue below, the domestic sphere sets the scene for this imaginative working out of the public sphere's fault lines and antagonisms.

An urban setting provides something essential that melodrama needs to thrive and to thrill

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pertains to the invisible world and the way its operations remain opaque to the visible world of material existence, political action, moral debate. Secondly it pertains to power and its points of access and methods of deployment. The occult economy should be understood on both registers as describing the mystery surrounding the operations of neoliberal capitalism, its dissociation of means and ends, the way the cleavage between production and consumption has become distended to the point of abstraction, the conjuring of value from nothing.

us, making the city integral to melodrama's imagined world. The significance of melodrama turns on its oblique relationship to the condition of the individual subject in emergent circumstances of social and moral disarray. It speaks to the unmooring of old certitudes in a world dramatically upended by rapid historical change (Elsaesser 1973, Brooks 1976, Singer 2001). Furthermore, its agitation of one's inner sentiments, one's interiority, and the emotions it wrenches from the spectator participate in a socialized and habituated mode of experience particular to urban modernity with its heightened sensual stimulations, its unraveling of the social bonds of birth and kinship, its exacerbation of social disparities, and so on. The global migration of melodrama as a literary and cinematic mode of representation has prompted a great deal of discussion, but an urban context often provides the backdrop for such debate about the cultural translation of melodrama (Mishra 2002, Abu-Lughod 2005, Larkin 2008, Mazumdar 2008). The melodramatic imagination, although not specific to the city, certainly finds its most anguished expression there.

In the context of Africa, several media anthropologists have produced brilliant studies identifying the parallels between media aesthetics and the types of social change to which I am alluding. A pattern can be found across geographic and cultural borders that links the sensationalist, Manichean idiom of melodrama to social preoccupations with morality (Meyer 2003, Pype 2012). “Precisely because it is organized around morality,” Brian Larkin points out, “melodrama offers a means with which to speak about tensions in African society that mimics the idioms of Pentecostalism, Islamism, and witchcraft” (2008, p. 183). He goes on to identify and analyze what he terms Nollywood’s “aesthetics of outrage,” which mobilizes melodrama’s excessive and sensationalist formal conventions to make direct appeals to Nigeria audiences’ sense of morality. The “outrage” to which Larkin refers suggests his specific interest in

melodrama's unique power to scandalize viewers and thereby reinforce moral principles through intense affective experiences. "The negation of morality in the film is designed to stimulate it in the audience," Larking argues, "vivifying social norms and making them subject to public comment" (ibid. p. 186).

At the time early producers began their craft, Nigerian media circuits would have made imported television melodramas the most available reference point for an emerging popular video film aesthetic. Haynes hypothesizes that melodrama entered Nigerian screen media through a combination of foreign and domestic cultural forms. He identifies American soap operas, Latin American *telenovelas* and Indian films as three transnational media forms that were both widely available to Nigerian audiences and heavily structured by melodramatic conventions. In acknowledgement of the remarkable suppleness of melodrama, Haynes notes that imported media of this sort met with indigenous forms of popular culture, such as Yoruba traveling theater and Onitsha market literature, which, he reminds us, "were always full of melodramatic elements," even if they did not consciously seek to conform to well-defined generic contours (2000, p. 23). Haynes illustrates that Nigeria is but one node in the wider transnational migration of melodrama, which he finds significant for the "prominences of South-South cultural exchanges" that demonstrate that "no one culture 'owns' melodrama at this point in history" (ibid. p. 25).

The point in history in question is the beginning of contemporary processes of globalization. As noted above, these processes accompanied by neoliberal economics of deregulation, privatization, and "liberalization," which brought about the euphemistic "opening" of media markets around the world. In Nigeria it produced a period of significant structural change in the forms of media that Nigerians could produce and acquire. Moradewun Adejunmobi

has recently theorized this shift, calling it the “televisual turn” in African screen media, a turn away from celluloid film importation and production, toward local broadcast television, foreign satellite programming, and videocassette culture. She notes that, “the convergence between television and the emerging film industry existed at the points of both reception and production” (2015, p. 125). To build on Adejunmobi’s claim, we might add that the industry’s evident appropriation of melodrama, a genre of particularly low cultural value by academic criteria but made popular through imported and locally produced television programming, stands as a testament to Nollywood’s departure from the idea of a national film industry. Not only were audiences hungry for genre-based programming made familiar by television, the industry’s production personnel came largely from the Nigerian Television Authority—not the Nigerian Film Corporation or its training program in Jos—following massive retrenchments as the parastatal contracted in accordance with Babangida’s structural adjustment program (Haynes 1995). In short, the pedigree of the video film is much more clearly rooted in television and popular performance than the cinematic apparatus.

When Nollywood emerged as Nigeria’s most powerful means of generating an image of itself, it was first and foremost Lagos that, as Jonathan Haynes felicitously puts it, imposed its presence on the camera (2007, p. 133). In announcing the video film boom in his 2000 edited volume, Haynes could at that time still claim that “most are set in Nigeria’s cities, above all Lagos” (2000, p. 2). But these early video films reveal an urban landscape of claustrophobic spaces: overcrowded streets, motor parks, gated compounds and jail cells. A holistic image of the city eludes the camera.<sup>29</sup> Instead of depicting iconic Lagos landmarks or universally recognizable

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<sup>29</sup> Describing the Lagos evoked by Fela Kuti’s music, Tejumola Olaniyan describes Lagos as an aborted civis with its authoritarian state, epileptic power industry, overloaded waste disposal, go-slow and no-go traffic, planned and antiplanned spaces, heat, crowds, and grit. Fascinatingly, however, the dictator Sani Abacha sought to “imagineer” a portrait of Lagos undisrupted by any

city spaces, Nollywood provides compartmentalized fragments of urban space. Some films offer up aerial shots of Lagos Island skyline, the heart of the old city, its marina and the bustling ports across the waterway in Apapa. This sort of establishing shot is so common that Haynes wonders aloud whether it isn't the same stock footage recycled across films (2007, 142). These brief glimpses of Lagos from above work like generic establishing shots deployed almost in an expositional manner, rather than as evocative representations of urban existence grounded in the city's dramatic architecture, its complex built spaces, or its sedimentation of historical sites. In other words, Nollywood does not simply reproduce the visual idiom with which other cinemas around the world depict urban space on screen. Instead, a fungible series of mise-en-scenes work less as references to specific places than as scenes of symbolic and moral legibility.

Haynes' objective in his now famous essay is to situate the film industry within the physical space of Lagos, and to examine how the city is almost unavoidably situated within Nollywood's imaginary. The latter argument presents a number of useful observations for thinking about the city as an aesthetic field. I want to focus on how the space of urban modernity is refracted through Nollywood's melodramatic imagination. Unlike the cinema of Western metropolises, which film scholars have examined as a vernacular modernism concerned with space, motion, spectacle and the reorganization of human sense perception under urban modernity (Hansen 2012, Singer 2001, Ward 2001), Nigerian screen media depicts the city as a bewildering social field, a place of social vulnerability, moral indecision, ambivalent aspirations,

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chaos and unblemished by any squalor. As Olaniyan writes, "During the reign of the infamous dark-goggled tyrant General Sani Abacha (November 1993-June 1998), his propaganda machine produced a video, *Nigeria: World Citizen*, to burnish his image and the image of Nigeria he had dragged into the mud. The clips of Lagos that appeared in it were all high-angle shots of towering skyscrapers. The vertigo induced immediately tells you that something is amiss far before you are able to make sense of it: conventional eye-level shots that would have shown people on the streets are missing. Yes, the dirt on Lagos streets is so legendary that it subverts any attempt to perfume it over by propaganda" (2004 [2009], pp. 146-47).

and glaring economic disparities, where people and things are not what they appear to be. Video film's engagement with urban perception and affect is based less on the sensationalism of technology, speed, and the shock urban delirium, than it has to do with the forms of visibility and invisibility that Simone highlights and Nollywood's melodramatic imagination brings to life.

### Interrogating the Notion of the Cinematic City

Studies of cinema and the city have long noted "the curious and telling correlation between the mobility and visual and aural sensations of the city and the mobility and visual and aural sensations of the cinema" (Shiel 2001, p. 1). This unique relationship is also historically linked to the question of the experience of urban modernity in Europe and America with the advent of industrial-capitalism. In the Western metropolis at the turn of the twentieth century, mass-produced images and objects stood as the epitome of the aesthetic expression of modernity with film playing an especially timely role. Perhaps most famously, culture critics Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer developed powerful commentaries on modernity's unfolding in European cities through analysis of surface-level, ephemeral and often mass-produced images, buildings and objects.

However, the dominant conception of modernity and normative notions of the metropolis—modeled after the Euro-American city—often do not reflect the conditions that generally obtain in African cities. This fact demands that we clear a discursive space where something yet unknown might emerge particular to urbanism in Africa. We might begin, as Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe suggest, by calling into question the assumption that the key facets of "metropolitan life lie on the *surface*, in the ephemeral and the visible (shop fronts, shop windows, cafe terraces, street cars, automobiles), [or] in the display of the commodity with or without its aesthetic veil" (Nuttall and Mbembe 22). They argue that the visual surfaces of a

cityscape often obscure life lived at the edges and underneath the city.<sup>30</sup> Their objection to this limit of classic urban theory raise related questions about who we imagine to be the modern subject of the city. We might ask for whom the city exists primarily as a series of commodities, surfaces, and aesthetic displays, and if implicitly the *flaneur* represents the quintessential Western urban subject, what African urban figure would perform the same conceptual role and how does this subject experience the city? This is especially important in Lagos, “a city of creative impermanence, [and] fluid spatial use where special and group interests constitute the primary *tour de force* that drives the urban structures” as distinguished Nigerian architect David Aradeon explains (2004, “Ifa” Berlin).”

This presents a problem for understanding how video film renders metropolitan life in Lagos. The notion that surface culture in the Western metropolis pointed obliquely to the social and historical conditions of urban modernity places greater emphasis on the city in its most exemplary circumstances—when things function smoothly and provide legible examples of urban modernity. In African cities, by contrast, the terrain is never quite so clear. The same insecurity and infrastructural decay that make Lagos an inhospitable place for its residents, make it a daunting space to represent on screen.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, I argue the thesis that film has historically instrumental in rendering the city apprehensible to the spectator holds if we equally accept that material and social break down and the provisional nature of urban life—as described above—can be seen at the points where surface culture fails to signify or it's meaning becomes

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<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, "beneath the visible landscape and the surface of the metropolis, its objects and social relations, are concealed or embedded other orders of visibility, other scripts that are not reducible to the built form.... The world below (the underworld) is also made up of lower classes, the trash heap of the world above, and subterranean utopias" (22).

<sup>31</sup> In terms of Nollywood's mode of production, the tendency to shoot on location by necessity demonstrates a producer's response to the sort of provision social relations that Simone describes. Area boys, property owners, the police, anyone appearing in frame could object or demand compensation from a crew shooting out the open on the busy streets. As a result, Nollywood exhibits the carceral view, compartmentalized and trapped within tight spaces.

distorted (Larkin 2008). If the urban public sphere does not attract Nigerian filmmakers, for instance, it may be because the streetscapes of Lagos are the site where Nigerians are forced to live the contradictions of a city built according to the racial logic of colonialism, honed under decades of shifting autocratic rule, and later hardened into the sharp inequalities brought about by global neoliberal capitalism.<sup>32</sup>

In an exceptional instance, a film like Ogidan's *Owo Blow* captures the city brilliantly with its opening montage, which allows the spectator to traverse a heterotopic and dense cityscape.<sup>33</sup> The first shot takes us above the skyscrapers of Lagos Island for a panoramic of the city, and the camera proceeds shot-by-shot down into the streets, which are packed with traffic and pedestrians flitting across the frame. The camera directs our gaze to the hawkers dashing between cars to sell their wares, to some okada drivers buying herbal remedies, to commuters embarking and disembarking buses; in other words, we glimpse the banalities of urban existence. We are far from the action, and high up, but these long takes are cropped such that the entire frame is filled by the movement of bodies and vehicles. The built structures of the city disappear behind and underneath the throng of activities; they almost seem irrelevant as we watch buses hop the concrete median to cross into the oncoming lane of traffic, once a common tactic of *danfo* for circumventing "no go" traffic. The camera never tilts up since there is little curiosity for what is happening high up in the office buildings lining downtown Lagos Island. After all,

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<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the history of urban planning in Lagos see Matthew Gandy. 2006. "Planning, Anti-planning and the Infrastructure Crisis Facing Metropolitan Lagos." *Urban Studies* 43.2: 371-96. He argues that the city today is less a showcase of modernity than it is a space of "actually existing neoliberalism," shaped and scarred by political and economic instability, petro-capitalist development, and a severe contraction of the public sphere (2006, p. 388).

<sup>33</sup> Tade Ogidan and the cinematographer on *Owo Blow*, Jon Gbemuotor, are exceptional among video filmmakers for their astute use of the camera. Ogidan's films are known for their careful attention to image in contrast with the general tendency for video's to lean heavily on dialogue to move the narrative forward.

the people to whom the film is dedicated, "the struggling masses of this country" as the epigraph calls them, are here in the streets. Rather than evoking iconic Lagos landmarks or universally recognizable reference points, Nollywood provides compartmentalized fragments of urban space, fungible mise-en-scene that are less recognizable as any specific place than they are legible as morally, symbolically encoded space.

Shock and delirium, two terms that commonly arise in writing on the cinematic city, represent another set of tropes that must be revised with regard to urbanism in Africa. The notion of shock in this context typically refers to Benjamin's critique of the anesthetizing effects of what he called *phantasmagoria*, that is, spectacles such as the World's Fairs, panoramas and, on a smaller scale, commodity displays and motion pictures, all of which aimed at producing thrilling and sensational experiences. Confronted with such spectacular sensations, urban audiences were subject to "the deployment of ever more powerful aesthetic techniques... to pierce the protective shield of consciousness," and momentarily achieve "a kind of false sublime" (Hansen "Benjamin and Cinema" 312). Thus, the initial shock of spectacles—like those spectacles constructed in film—leads to an eventual acculturation or a numbing of the urban audience's collective consciousness. This same hermeneutic of shock and adaptation takes place in video films that construct highly stylized presentations of wealth intended to similarly stimulate the audience into a kind of "false sublime."

However, in these video films, the shock associated strictly with sense-perception has become consistently linked to cultural and moral shock. Or perhaps a better way of saying it is that with video film the shock of phantasmagoria can often be overshadowed by cultural and moral shock. In this regard, I tend to agree with Garritano who theorizes that this ambiguity situates itself in the gap between image and narrative. With Nollywood we might say that shock

and bodily "jerk" genres also draw on film's ability to shock audiences with spectacle (Williams 1991), however the shocks in Nollywood are consistently tied to subtly articulated moral and cultural dilemmas. With Nigerian screen media, shock accompanies the vernacular critique of capitalist consumer culture contained within volatile scenes in which aesthetics, affect, and cultural or moral anxiety intersect to produce dramatic fluctuations between outrage and desire.

Finally, the patterns I have outlined here typically turn on an enduring convention of Nollywood video films in which the peak of spectatorial gratification occurs at the moment in which heroes are revealed to be villains, charity is shown to be in fact predatory, the lowly and unassuming unmask themselves as powerful agents, and the ostensible cause of trouble turns out to be an effect of an even grander dilemma. While Larkin calls Nollywood's appetite for scandal an "aesthetic of outrage," Akin Adesokan argues that films can harness such outrage through an "aesthetic of exhortation" in order to posit a moral corrective (2011). But if outrage provokes pleasure in itself, just as it leads to a moral reaction that either adjusts or entrenches existing social ethics, then there seems to be something puzzlingly transformative *and* transfixing about video film's aesthetics and its signifying practices. It can be understood as ambivalence, or as an indecisiveness that the film must adopt to accommodate itself to the delirium of the megacity itself. Karin Barber argues that this puzzling ideological undecidability, which she identified in the Yoruba popular theater, "does not result in a judgment, it rather compels a suspension of judgment" (1986, p. 27). In other words, contradiction and paradox in video film serve to keep open a space that can opportunistically accommodate unpredictable change. This represents yet another way in which video films are both a symptom of and entangled within the fluid social relations in the postcolonial city, which the recent work of urban anthropologists tells us is itself a shocking, provisional, and incomplete space.

### Early Nollywood Crime Dramas

I will focus here on the emergence of urban crime as a central preoccupation of early Nigerian video films and will base my descriptions and claims on a comparative analysis of as many crime dramas produced between 1989 and the early 2000s as I could obtain, including *Vigilante* (1989), *Rattlesnake* (1995), *Silent Night* (1996), *Owo Blow* (1997), *Hostages* (1998), *Piccadilly* (n.d.), *Terror* (2001), *Most Wanted* (n.d.), and *Extreme Measure* (2003). Urban crisis provides the principal reference point for all of the films in question. They offer a despondent image of a city wracked by permanent crisis and endless emergency, a city in which the institutions that uphold society appear fully complicit in its crumbling. They cast Lagos as a hostile force that overwhelms the good intentions of those who come to the city to get ahead. Narratively and spatially, as I will argue, the films evoke what Mbembe and Roitman lyrically term “an imaginary of marvel and evil, bad luck and pain,” in reference to urban life in Cameroon (1995, p. 351). The topography of the films in question intimates a spatial disillusionment with the modern city. The image of Lagos as “the center of excellence,” as its motto proclaims, falls subject to confusion and disorder, and the desire for domesticity and peace is jeopardized and thereby transposed into an anxiety that pervades the city’s spaces: the home, the street, and the underworld. As I will argue below, this anxiety coalesces around the figure of the young man in the city so that, in the depiction of domestic strife, we find writ small the same social antagonisms that we find writ large within the city itself.

Nollywood’s early crime narratives typically center on an individual character’s initial encounter with hardship and reluctant entry into a life of crime. As such, there are no natural born criminals in early Nollywood since a criminal is made, not born. Many films, including

*Hostages*, *Most Wanted*, *Silent Night*, *Piccadilly*, and *Terror*, explicitly narrate the transformation of university graduates into hardened criminals, while others, like *Extreme Measure*, focus on young criminals aggrieved by a society that has no place for them. The crimes in question are invariably armed robbery and kidnapping, and rarely premeditated murder, although innocents may be killed in the course of a heist, and without much hesitation. In *Owo Blow*, for instance, Wole admonishes his gang against any killing since it is only the Lagos elite's money and property they wish to take, not their lives. His bemused accomplices see the wisdom in this because, as they jokingly reason, their victims will be inspired by their brush with death to strive even harder to regain their lost wealth in this lifetime, creating the chance that the robbers can strike their victim a second or third time. Unlike with cold-blooded murder, the films can still in good conscience frame armed robbery as a crime of necessity, a tendency that Wendy Griswold has also observed in popular Nigerian crime novels. As she contends, tales of armed robbery and vigilante retaliation do not compel us to condemn the young male perpetrators for breaking the law because, these stories suggest, it is the law, and the social order for which it stands, that is in fact broken. The factors that motivate one to commit a crime are no mystery to Nollywood. Crime dramas imagine widespread unemployment and the absence of opportunities for social mobility as the root cause of crime and almost unanimously depict urban crisis in Lagos as responsible for an environment that turns young educated men onto crime.

Film scholars of Hollywood and Bollywood cinema define generic crime films by the series of conflicts they stage, the most broad of which is the conflict between the outcast and society (Benyahia 2011, pp. 15-16; Mazumdar 2007, p. 152). The villain, mobster family, or criminal syndicate stand outside mainstream society, its laws, its moral codes, and its ideological frame, and therefore, the outcast figure reveals hidden truths about society by clearing an

exceptional space or a vantage point from which to view the contradictions of society. Early Nollywood crime dramas do not take for granted this conflict between mainstream society and its outliers. They complicate the typical expectation that crime provides a perspective from the edge of society looking in, especially given the recurring tendency in Nollywood to locate the causes and consequences of conflict within the domestic realm, a matter I discuss further below. These films, instead, cast doubt on the notion that moral order governs society. In typical Nollywoodian fashion, they turn this notion on its head and suggest that it is the extreme dysfunction of a place like Lagos, its permanent crisis, that makes outcasts of ordinary individuals. We might call this figure a “crimeless victim,” following Griswold who identifies the unlucky outcast as a longstanding trope within popular Nigerian novels. “This Nigerian Everyman-of-the-modern-sector is done in by institutions that fail him at every turn,” Griswold writes, “Far from securing order, the public institutions create disorder” (2000, p. 239). At a time when many in Lagos were subject to the arbitrary violence of the postcolonial state and the tenuousness of everyday life created by the ruling classes’ mismanagement of the nation, it is not hard to imagine that the sense of one’s fate being outside one’s control, or this “mutual vulnerability,” to borrow Simone’s term, could easily be transposed into a sense of victimization without a clearly identifiable cause.

Tade Ogidan’s *Hostages* (1997) perhaps best exemplifies this trope of the crimeless victim. The film’s opening images appear without soundtrack and depict in slow motion, as if through the lens of subjective memory, a young man stripped naked to the waist and surrounded by a detail of police who force him into their Black Maria carriage. The following montage details the incarceration as the voice of the film’s protagonist, Tony, implores the viewer in direct address: “If I stand a chance to live my life all over, I wouldn’t change a thing. For today I

stand on the stage of life in the glare of all, to share a tale I cannot help, a tale I cannot control, a tale of my fate. Now, I call on all people to share my story.” Rather than foreground a criminal act that the story would then pursue through an investigative emplotment, this testimonial frame reorients narrative around the subjectivity of the accused and sets the narrative on course to reveal the events leading to Tony’s persecution. The film is not preoccupied with the criminal act but rather concerns itself with the wrongs society commits against the individual. It also solicits the spectator’s identification with Tony by positioning the viewer in confrontation with the State’s repressive, violent excess.

We learn that Tony intends to marry Fatima, the daughter of a wealthy businessman named Camson, but cannot persuade Fatima to defy her father’s wishes and marry below her class. Tony instead coerces the young woman to runaway with him, locking her up in his modest apartment to buy time while he devises a plan to exact a ransom from Chief Camson and then flee with Fatima to Cote d’Ivoire where the young lovers could begin a new life together. Camson, however, marshals his influence over the law to rescue his daughter and apprehends her kidnapper in a massive display of authority, a scene that self-consciously showcases the assets of the Nigerian police force, including helicopters, motorcycle units, and state-of-the-art weaponry. Working through backchannels in the judicial system, the wealthy chief exacts his revenge on the poor boy by having him indicted on trumped up charges and pushing his case through the court of a corrupt judge. Meanwhile, Camson arranges for his daughter to be married off to his business partner’s repulsively ill-mannered son, Nasiru, in exchange for his partner’s help securing a foreign bank loan totaling some \$50 million. As Tony struggles to free himself from a penal system that can be bought off by the wealthy, he gradually becomes the man unhinged that he is accused of being. He escapes the dreaded Akanga Prison and, in a dubious scenario, breaks

into Chief Camson's mansion to take refuge in Fatima's bedroom, believing it to be the last place they would look for him. When Nasiru discovers his rival for Fatima's hand in marriage, a struggle ensues in which Nasiru gets the worst of it and ultimately dies after sustaining an unlikely fatal head injury. As Tony attempts his escape, he encounters Chief Camson in the courtyard and takes the chief hostage in order to make his way past the security guards and the estate's elaborate electronic security gates and alarms. The scene pauses in tableau-like moments that capture Tony as the figure of the unhinged man. Holding a weapon poised to cut Camson's throat, he confronts his tormentor, the man who has driven him to this madness: "Why can't you face me? Why can't you be a man, Camson?" He divulges his plan to turn himself back into the authorities, adding that now, "at least the judge will have a legitimate reason to hang me." Tony embodies the crimeless victim, a man who comes unhinged when he is failed by the institutions that were created to hold society together.

The narrative is driven by moral undecidability, or the inability to discern in good moral judgment between criminal and victim. In a similar fashion, *Silent Night*, *Terror*, and *Piccadilly* play with the reversal of identities in which, seen in a certain moral light, the ostensible victim appears hardly more innocent than the criminal. In *Piccadilly*, a notorious gang of armed robbers kidnaps the daughter of a wealthy family and demand ransom. We gradually learn that their true motive is not money. Years ago, almost beyond memory, the girl's father served as an accomplice to these criminals, but parted ways after cheating the others out of their share. The kidnappers exact their revenge not only by seizing the father's wealth, but by also exposing his past and true identity to his family, an astonishing revelation in which the spectator is invited to share. Teco Benson's *Terror*, also a story of kidnapping and revenge, is best summarized by the logline that appears on the video compact disc jacket: "Hurting her hurts you more!" The

kidnappers in this film abduct the rich Chief Adams's daughter as retribution for an altercation between the gang leader and the chief many years prior. Hurting Adams's daughter—his only surviving family member—hurts the chief more than any crime they could commit against his property. In Chico Ejiro's *Silent Night*, young Stanly finds himself caught between his father, a righteous High Court Judge, and his friend Black Arrow, an equally righteous criminal crusader against the wealthy. When Stanly's brother is accidentally targeted and killed by Black Arrow's gang, the anti-hero criminal declares, "the death of your brother, and the death of the people we murder every day, is the price that society must pay for making us so poor and for driving us into this kind of survival." In narratives of this sort, the supposed criminal emerges the victim, while the moral lapses of those who enjoy a comfortable position in society or the patriarch of some wealthy family are revealed for public scrutiny. Unlike *Hostages*, however, *Silent Night*, *Terror* and *Piccadilly* do not seek to redeem the criminal as much as they cast strong doubts on a society so deeply marked by pervasive lawlessness.

The idea that the period of post-SAP crisis has produced a generation of articulate criminals proves a favorite trope of Nollywood's early crime dramas. For instance, victims often describe their attacker as having articulate speech or some conduct betraying the perpetrator's university education. In *Terror*, for instance, when Stephanie Okereke's character comes face to face with her kidnapper, she remarks in astonishment, "you don't look like a criminal! You look too damn polished for this kind of business." As noted above, we later discover that, indeed, the attacker, named Manfred, was once an assistant to her wealthy father before the latter capriciously ejected Manfred from his service. The narrative implies that with this act of neglect toward his young servant, the father created a criminal. He brought this menace upon himself, just as any society that sows contempt for its youth will reap a bitter fruit.

In keeping with the melodrama's Manichean moral universe in which every figuration of virtue has its maleficent counterpart, the films in question draw the sphere of money into the same polarizing frame. The honest pursuit of wealth and individual self-reliance through legitimate business ventures, which generally represents a social good in Southern Nigeria, finds its shadowy double in the criminal underworld where we are made to see the evil side of money. If as the films considered here suggest, it is the absence of any means to establish their livelihood that drives young men in an economy of scarcity to turn to crime, then crime simply comes to stand for commerce, business, or a livelihood achieved without the sanction of officialdom.

This trope, which appears in a number of crime dramas, offers another manifestation of a crisis of representation resulting from the "structural adjustment" of lives in African cities, such that "things no longer exist without their parallel," as Mbembe and Roitman write, since "There is hardly a reality here without its double" (Mbembe and Roitman 1995, p. 340). This analogy between crime and "business," although amusing on the face of it, expresses a buried or oblique vernacular critique of the contradictions of official economic discourse. In some films, the criminals themselves deploy the comparison, asserting that nothing separates them from the businessmen. As Sam Loco Efe's character in *Piccadilly* advises his co-conspirators, "image is everything in this business, so dress like a banker." Their band of thieves adopts the title "Piccadilly, PLC," using the abbreviation under company law for a public limited company. They proceed to carry out intricate heists with the assistance of their so-called "shareholders," a doctor, pastor and barrister on the take. The films each have a different idea of what constitutes a ghastly large sum of money, and yet they all agree that serious sums come in foreign currency. The way the films belabor the details of currency exchange rates suggests their irrepressible preoccupation with the weakness of the naira after its devaluation as part of Nigeria's structural

adjustment program. By contrast, dollars, pounds, lira and yen enter the idiom of early video films as symbols of inviolable value, immune to the vicissitudes of global finance or sudden economic fallout. The intense anxiety over the volatility of value, including the inconstancy of hard currency, submits the popular imagination to the logic of the “hyperreal finance” of global capitalism under which, as Simone notes, “whatever a nation possesses—its material, human, and cultural resources—is consumed in a spectral conception of value—i.e., the values of virtual financial capital” (Simon 2004, p. 28).

Like any other business, criminals of this caliber demonstrate a high degree of professionalism, which the films convey by costuming characters in suits, providing news reports or aside remarks verifying their reputation, and sometimes depicting their physical training. In *Rattlesnake*, a training montage that follows the characters through an obstacle course leads into a long sentimental discussion amongst the exhausted young men about how they hope their newfound wealth will change their lives. The scene demonstrates that their bodily capabilities match their strength of will. In later films, such as *Terror*, *Piccadilly*, and *Extreme Measures*, the mobile phone suddenly appears as an indispensable technology for coordinating heists and negotiating ransoms. Later films also embrace the impulse to sensationalize rather than sentimentalize the life of crime, and perhaps signals the gradual transition of violent crime from the domain of melodrama to that of action films.

Nevertheless, the way these films hijack the idiom of commerce, the instruments and demeanor of businessmen, and the identity of a corporate organization implies a vernacular critique of the impersonal, extractive, compartmentalized and sometimes shadowy operations of global economics. The figure of the young criminal in early video films belongs to a larger, bipolar discourse of the dream and nightmare scenarios imaginable under neoliberal capitalism.

This figure of the “sinister caricature of the corporate mogul,” as Jean and John Comaroff characterize it, is the nightmare haunting the “genteel mainstream” with its “dramatic embodiment of the dark side of consumerism.” They go on to point out that youth cultures around the globe churn out the image of the “ironic, mutant citizens of a new world order” (2000, p. 309). Oblique references in early Nigerian crime dramas to international travel, money transfers, telecommunications systems and other markers of global economic flows, all hint that crime is just business by other means. As one kidnapper in *Terror* bluntly exclaims, “Some people steal with a gun. Some people steal with a pen!”

Dramatic dialogue of this sort, although intended to scandalize, also conveys a kernel of cynical truth, an insight into the machinations of the world of shadowy powers. Nollywood has always been a cinema of interiors, one that permits us a voyeuristic gaze into the palatial villas of the extravagantly wealthy, that leads us into the den of thieves hiding beneath the underbelly of the city, and brings us to the secret site of bloody money rituals performed on the alter of occult agents. It grants an image to the illicit or scandalous activities that take place away from the public eye where curiosity seeks to probe but finds only speculation, rumor and fantasy. In terms of narrative structure, as well, Nollywood has generated a tradition of films that, animated by a sequence of spectacular revelations and turns of events, rely on the voyeuristic excitement of exposing certain innermost secrets to public view and judgment. But where Nollywood excels at imagining these private spaces, it struggles to articulate one interior space with the next so that they might coalesce into a cohesive cinematic world, often leaving us with a series of carceral spaces instead.

Crime films demonstrate the urban imagination’s inability to come up with a corporate image of the city, the *imago* of Lagos, so to speak. In a sense, this reflects the crisis of

representation theorized by urban anthropologists. What we do see of Lagos in Nollywood is a city rendered in bits and pieces. The street, for instance, serves an important role in the imaginary of the criminal underworld that Nollywood constructs. By day the street is the scene of toil and hardship, the hustle to make money and to survive in an inhospitable city. In films depicting the making of a young criminal, including Amaka Igwe's *Rattlesnake* and Ogida's *Owo Blow*, we are made to see petty street crime, like snatching purses and picking pockets, as tactics of everyday survival. But desperate measures inevitably send the film's protagonist down a slippery slope into a world of genuine crime, the sort committed by coordinated, hardened gangs of professionalized criminals. The gang of armed robbers seems almost indispensable to early Nigerian crime dramas.

Like the occult film's cabal of ritualists or the campus drama's clique of student cultists, the gang of thieves imposes itself on the Nollywood imaginary as an subject of macabre fascination and, therefore, receives a more nuanced treatment. The criminal underworld is a space of fascination precisely because, although rumors, stories and reports of crime saturate the public sphere, most Lagosians will never see the inner workings of the city's crime syndicates. With these momentary glimpses into the domain of criminals, these films allow viewers to imaginatively explore the city spaces they typically avoid. These shadowy fraternities hide out in dangerous or remote locales, like Ajegunle or Badagary, where they engage in reckless gunplay, drink alcohol, and use drugs as a means of embodying the life of the "hard man." After a successful heist, we may follow the thieves back to their den where we then behold the ritual piling up and dividing of loot. The hideout is sometimes adorned with luxury goods pilfered from well-to-do homes. Televisions, VCRs, plush furniture, air conditioners, and a Mercedes-Benz parked out front reveal the new landscape of consumption where dreams of the good life

condense around consumer goods amidst the urban blight of the post-SAP economy of scarcity (Mbembe 2002, p. 271).<sup>34</sup> The gang sometimes consecrates its fraternal bonds with an elaborate oath-taking ceremony in which the men pledge their silence and loyalty, creating a moral bind that inevitably returns to haunt the protagonist by the film's melodramatic ending. The films emphasize in these sequences the selfish greed, violent temperament, and masculine fantasies that set these young men apart from the protagonist who is tested by his surroundings, but whose deep moral convictions prevent him from completely breaking with cultural sensibilities about right and wrong conduct.

I argue above that part of the crisis of representation, or "the lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life (facticity) and the corpus of significations or meanings (ideality) available to explain and interpret what happens, to act efficaciously," to borrow Mbembe and Roitman's words again, lies in the difficulty of rendering a full image of the city, an idea that extends to the difficulty of discerning class interests, paths to social advancement, or effective forms of agency amidst the fluidity of social relations. Nollywood's strategy for dealing with this has been to situate scenes of greatest narrative significance within the familial and private space of the home.

Teco Benson's *Terror* opens with a shot gazing across Falomo Bridge into the posh Victoria Island with its office and resident skyscrapers orienting the film in the most upscale, modernist district of Lagos. The image fades to an establishing shot outside a modest office building, and again fades to a panoramic view of the office interior. Rows of office professions

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<sup>34</sup> Video films stoke the economy of desires constructed around objects made only more desirable by virtue of their scarcity. "The powers of imagination are stimulated, intensified by the very unavailability of the objects of desire" (271). This economy of desires evokes viewers' passions, their greed, envy, jealousy and thirst for conquest, says Mbembe (271). "In the popular practices of capturing the flows of global exchange, rituals of extraversion are developed - rituals that consist of miming the major signifiers of global consumerism" (271).

sit at desktop computers, shuffle stacks of paperwork, and carry on intent discussions on the landline phone. The camera spends a good deal of effort showcasing the office technology, cutting from phone to printer to computer screen, to keyboard and mouse, all of which give the sense of the office space's connectivity with wider economic activity. As Stephanie Okereke's character, Maryam, leaves work, a private guard opens the steel security cage at the entrance of the office building and Maryam steps out into the street. She enters her car where two kidnappers who lay in waiting then seize her and immediately proceed to drive her out of the city. As the kidnappers flee the city with their hostage, the lyrics of the theme song come to the fore: "Nothing can save you. You can't run. You can't tire. This is terror town." The camera follows the car as it travels along Ring Road offering a view of the lagoon, highway flyovers, and skyline of Lagos Island. At the city's edge, the vehicle passes unimpeded through a police checkpoint, the police having been "settled" in advance, one character notes as the gang shuttles their hostage out of the Lagos to a hideout in Benin City.

The ensuing search for Maryam takes the viewer through a series of spaces typical to crime dramas: the criminal underworld, a shadowy bar, the police commissioner's office, the interrogation room, the airport to drop the ransom. As the active search proceeds, offering the view this travelogue experience of traversing spaces in the city, the narrative continually returns to Maryam's father, Chief Adams, alone at home in his lavish mansion. The phone motivates the cross-cutting between the kidnappers in their dark hideout and Adams dismayed in his parlor, or between the police commissioner coordinating his officers from headquarters and Adams pleading from home that the police not endanger his daughter. Ultimately, the game cat and mouse leads back to the Adams's household in a final scene of melodramatic revelation.

With all the characters gathered in Adams's parlor, we discover that the kidnapper,

Manfred, was once the Chief Adams's domestic servant. When the now-deceased Mrs. Adams made sexual advances toward Manfred—advances he spurned out of loyalty to his employer—Chief Adams accused Manfred of raping his wife and tossed him to the street. The dismayed young man was driving into the underworld of organized crime where he learned his illicit trade from an infamous criminal mastermind known as “The Professor.” In their hunt for Manfred, the police conscript The Professor on the premise that only he has the insight that will lead to the capture of his former protégé and the release of the rich man's daughter. Benson's *Terror* demonstrates a pattern common throughout early crime dramas whereby the menace that the criminal figure represents is made intimate, familiar and even physically proximate. As a result, the films yield brief but provocative scenarios that uncover an ideological tension between young, alienated toughs and older, wealthy patriarchs, dividing the gendered subject position along generational lines.

Anxiety stemming from the inability to sustain one's private world or to secure one's place in the city runs throughout the crime dramas considered here. Chico Ejiro's influential *Silent Night 1 & 2* both open with violent home invasions that plunge the viewer abruptly into an menacing world of urban crime. The dream sequence that picks up the narrative at the beginning of *Silent Night 2* amplifies this anxiety surrounding homely spaces by envisioning, in a dream sequence, the victimization of Mrs. Odame (Joke Silva) by the specter of her deceased son, Stanly (Ramsey Nouah). An establishing shot captures the Odame family mansion along the lagoon, in the darkness of night, its perimeter lights reflected on the water in what we know from narrative exposition to be the posh Lagos district of Ikoyi. The soundtrack is drenched by synthesized strings holding an ominous chord as the camera cuts to a close up interior shot of the feet of some unidentified intruder encroaching cautiously into the plush carpeted parlor. The

camera cuts to an unusual subjective shot at ground-level that follows as a terrified Mrs. Odame crawls retreating from her attacker. She pleads for her life with the mute figure of her deceased son, who stands over her now with pistol cocked to the side, poised to shoot. Unassuaged by her pleas, the ghost fires a single shot, killing Mrs. Odame and breaking the frame of the dream sequence. This apparition doubles as a symbol of the guilt that haunts the Odame household after the father's decision, in his professional capacity as High Court Judge, to sentence his own son, Stanly, to death for the accidental shooting death of his other son, Vincent, during a carjacking gone wrong carried out by Stanly and his friends, gang of street toughs lead by the brutal "hard man" nicknamed Black Arrow.

The narrative of *Silent Night 1 and 2* leads the spectator through the family's agony following the father's decision to condemn his own son to death, which he reasons will demonstrate to the public that law and order must be upheld at all costs. "You carried your uprightness too far," Mrs. Odame chides her husband, "We are victims of your ideals. And it doesn't seem to have dawned on you that ideals are for dreamers who want to be heroes." The narrative thereby shifts the moral focus of the film from the violent crimes perpetrated by gangs from the poor neighborhood of Ajegunle to an inward looking examination of the moral indecision of the well-to-do Ikoyi household. The film culminates in a final scene of melodramatic revelation set in the Odame family parlor, appropriately enough, where Black Arrow confronts Justice Odame face to face in a tableau not unlike Tony's encounter in *Hostages* with his fateful tormentor Chief Camson. With pistol trained on Justice Odame, Black Arrow decries, "Time for your judgment. You've judged everybody, condemned everybody. Now, your sentence, death by my bullet." The unselfconsciously dramatic dialogue reaches for a certain sublime moral principle in keeping with melodramatic conventions, while setting this

integral moment of confrontation between these Manichean figures situates the conflict of moral polarities in the vulnerable domestic sphere. The scene makes visible the occult forces and moral gravity that saturates the city, but does so by folding these anxieties and antagonisms into the space of the domestic sphere.

The same pattern by which the “scene of the crime,” so to speak, is relocated to the domestic sphere is reproduced in many crime dramas of the time. Nollywood splices the typical urban crime genre with the typically Nollywoodian family drama. Rather than playing on the anxious anonymity of public spaces of the city, its streets and markets, for instance, the private, familial spaces of the parlor, home or compound take on greater symbolic significance.

#### Coming of Age in the Time of Urban Crisis in *Owo Blow* and *Rattlesnake*

Wealth, social status, and individualism are fundamental dimensions of the story worlds of Amaka Igwe’s *Rattlesnake* and Tade Ogidan’s *Owo Blow*. Their narratives are remarkably similar so as almost to parallel one another. They present worlds animated by chance estrangement, coincidental reunions, and revealing scandals. Each film draws viewers through a tumultuous sequence of windfalls and misfortunes punctuated by scenes of astonishment and shock. Young lovers seek to surmount their disparate social positions, an orphan grows up and is regarded as a pariah in his estranged mother's home, a poor family struggles against the stigma of its social circumstances, a smart young man is pressed into a life of crime, and the wealthy are called to account for their excesses. Above all else, these films evoke a world of moral consequence, where sentimentalism and morality suffuse the representation of social relations in the city. In short, their adoption of a profoundly melodramatic mode informs the depiction of Lagos, in these films, to a greater extent than any spatial representation of the city on screen. As

these films demonstrate, the physical landscape of the city may largely elude Nollywood's frame, but video films compensate by constructing a vivid moral landscape that reframes Lagos as a melodramatic city.

Both *Rattlesnake* and *Owo Blow* are structured something like bildungsromans insofar as they trace the coming of age of virtuous young men who, when confronted by the hardships of the city, are driven to crime as a means of survival. Once involved, however, the young man's fortunes begin to rise and everything that was once denied him comes within reach. He can provide spending money and pay school fees for younger siblings, he can support his mother and earn her praise, his personal ambitions can now be fulfilled and, with his rising good fortune, the character also rises to a respected status in society. Of course, his public persona stands in stark contrast with his secret, illicit activities and the central tension of the films, therefore, comes to center around the contradiction between the central character's good intentions and the ignoble means by which he achieves them. The criminal acts of lead characters transgress the laws of secular society, which appear dysfunctional in their own right as I discuss above, but it is the battle of moral convictions subtending these stories that resonate with received cultural truths which take on greater authority than the shaky social order of the modern megacity.

Amaka Igwe's landmark film *Rattlesnake* begins with a depiction of order in Lagos, albeit a fragile one. It centers on Louis and his upwardly mobile family, who have enjoyed some hard-earned good fortune, and Odinaka, Louis's covetous brother, who seeks from the outset to feed off his relatives' prosperity. Louis is a professional at the office and caring father at home. Sometimes, when his regular monthly salary fails to come through, his family struggles to make ends meet, but their patience and his diligence pays off and Louis is promoted and reimbursed the salary arrears. Sadly, just as Louis delivers this bit of good news to his family, he suffers a

heart attack that proves fatal. Before he dies, Louis instructs his son Ahana, first, that he must attend university, and second, that not everything in life is the way it appears since “it’s the person closest to you that can kill you,” so one must remain ever vigilant. Meanwhile, Odinaka has been maneuvering to appropriate his brother’s wealth and wife, and it seems his good brother’s death will finally create the opportunity to do so. The whole family returns to their village in the East for the burial ceremony, but Odinaka is eager to return to Lagos to take up his brother’s estate. He coerces Louis’s wife, Nancy, to join him, abandoning the traditional mourning period and her children in the village.

From this point forward, the narrative is focalized through the son Ahanna’s experience and his struggle to hold his family together. This condition of anomie within the family establishes the context that later drives Ahanna to desperate measures. The covetous Odinaka abuses his new position as the paterfamilias, and while he happily inherits his brother’s wealth and wife, he disowns his brother’s children. His character is deceitful and coercive, and his penchant for gambling, drinking, smoking and womanizing casts him as a man deeply corrupted by the big city and its array ignoble pleasures.

By contrast, Ahanna demonstrates impeccable moral character and work ethic. As the sole breadwinner of his household, the young man toils sunup to sundown on the village farm to sustain his siblings. After many months of hardship in the village pass, he sees that he cannot support his siblings by farming alone and resolves to return to Lagos to search for his mother. However, upon arriving in Lagos he discovers that his mother is pregnant with Odinaka’s child and swiftly renounces her. Unwilling to return to the village and having nowhere to stay, Ahanna lives several days on the streets of Lagos, which leaves him starved and desperate. As in other crime dramas, his tribulations on the street confront him with a choice between petty theft and

prolonged hardship, which the film renders legible in moral terms as the character's inner struggle to maintain his virtue in a city where survival entails betraying one's values. In keeping with melodramatic conventions, the innocent must be victimized before his true virtue can be revealed and rewarded in what Brooks terms melodrama's "moment of ethical evidence and recognition" (Brooks 1976, p. 27). Ultimately, Ahanna snatches the purse of a woman waiting at a bus stop and is nearly lynched in the ensuing chase. He is saved by Peter, the irreverent son of a politician, who insists on taking a cut of the loot. Peter convinces his mother to take Ahanna into their home, offering her a concocted story about Ahanna's suffering (one that seems almost less pitiable than his real backstory). Meanwhile, the two continue to conduct petty but profitable street crime. The narrative witnesses these public crimes, as we might call them, from the vantage of a politically progressive urban middle class that holds them up as an indictment of the collapse of the public sphere under the mismanagement of the ruling class.<sup>35</sup> In a sequence depicting what surely were tactics recognizable to the average Lagosian, we see the boys pick pockets, snatch purses, shop lift and carry out other tricks and ruses to exact small amounts of money from unsuspecting pedestrians in public during broad daylight. When the boys attempt to steal an unlocked car, they are finally apprehended by a crowd, turned over to the police, and swiftly carted off to Lagos State Prison where—as an intertitle informs us—they serve six years.

When Ahanna and Peter emerge, they are grown men. Time in prison has disabused Ahanna of any naïve notions about how society works. He is resolved to form a gang, this time much more professional and dangerous, and with his father's dying words in his head ("It is the

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<sup>35</sup> In response to an earlier version of this paper presented in 2014 at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association, Jonathan Haynes described Tade Ogidan and Amaka Igwe's tenor in these films as "editorializing" on the political problems of the nation. I find this term useful for thinking about the depiction of public crime in these films, but I question if it applies in the same way to crimes committed in the shadowy underworld of these melodramas where individuals' actions operate on the level of the "moral occult" rather than that of mere politics.

person close to you that kills you.”), sets out to finally exact revenge on Odinaka, the figure at the root of social decay in the narrative and the source of Ahanna’s unnecessary suffering. The death of Odinaka by Ahanna’s hand plays out as yet another moment of melodramatic recognition. After cowardly offering his money and even his wife up to the armed intruders, the uncle begs for mercy. Poised over Odinaka’s cowering form, Ahanna remarks, “You plead for mercy, and yet you left me and my brother and sister in the village to suffer while you were in town enjoying yourself. Well, your time has come.”

*Rattlesnake I* concludes as Ahanna reflects on his tragic path to manhood and a life of crime. A flashback in montage highlights the darkest moments of the foregoing narrative: Ahanna seated at his father’s death bed, beaten by his uncle following his father’s funeral, abandoned by his mother and digging through the trash for food, and apprehended as a petty criminal. The montage in effect recaps the series of “moments of ethical recognition.” Such moments in *Rattlesnake* and *Owo Blow*, as we will see, strive to provide clear visibility and acknowledgement of the struggle for the salvation of the character’s virtue and full humanity in the face of the dilemmas of everyday life amidst post-SAP Lagos. They serve up vivid depictions of the banal struggles of life in an economy of scarcity in order, paradoxically, to bypass the banal and reveal everyday life to be profound existential struggle between distinct moral positions, which thereby satisfies the demand for a profound certainty in the face of social disorder, or what above was termed a crisis of representation.

In melodrama, moral polarization effaces the middle ground in which an ethical dilemma may be seen in an ambiguous or convoluted light. The world is rendered between two opposed forces and the tension between the two, villainy and virtue, saturates the surfaces of the diegetic world (and the surface of the text), as when the wicked Odinaka usurps his brother’s property

and wife, leaving the blameless Ahanna to fend for himself on the street and when Ahanna returns years later to avenge his father and himself. “These are all moments of clarification, of expressive victory, whose dramatic effect depends on the acting-out of moral identifications. Melodrama needs a repeated use of peripety and coups de theatre because it is here that characters are best in a position to name the absolute moral attributes of the universe, to say its nature as they proclaim their own” (Brooks 1976, p. 40).

The narrative development of Ogidan’s three-part tour de force, *Owo Blow*, traces the same tragic decline of a middle-class family broken up by the death of the father and the hostile environment of the city. As life becomes increasingly harsh and resources scarce, he unwillingly resorts to theft. At a young age, Wole Owolabi loses his father who is arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison after speaking out against the governing military regime's extortion of the citizenry in a daring act of political conscience. While virtuous Mr. Owolabi languishes away in prison, his family slowly begins to slip into poverty. Their struggle to fend for themselves in a hostile city requires each family member to make sordid compromises, which are rendered in series of dramatic blows. Wole’s older sister, Mope, acquiesces to the advances of a wealthy, older admirer who promises to pay the family’s expenses if she will only marry him. Stressing the moral dimension of their dilemma, Wole pleads with his sister, “Don’t destroy the image of this family. Don’t allow this society to treat us this way,” but with the mother having fallen ill and her three younger siblings starving, Mope agrees to the marriage. When she becomes pregnant, her lover abandons her and she ultimately dies after a botched abortion. Mrs. Owolabi turns to their landlord for help. He also offers to loan the family thousands of naira on condition that Mrs. Owolabi make herself sexually available to him. In a drawn out scene of particularly overwrought emotion, she sits poised to accept the money but hesitates, prompting the landlord

to fire back: “You and your family will experience the sharp fangs of suffering. The pain will gnaw you to the bone!” (*Iya to ni eyin nla bayi aa je iwo, aa je Wole, aa je gbogbo ebi e patapata. Iya aa je iwo d’egun!*). Meanwhile, unable to afford his tuition, Wole is forced to abandon his education and take up menial odd jobs to pay the school fees of his younger siblings. In real terms, Wole is forced into the informal economy’s work force, but the film casts this twist of fate in an emphatically moral light, portraying his labor as a sacrifice for his family, one based on the principle that a man must earn his money through honest, hard work. In a labor sequence reminiscent of Ahanna’s toiling on the farm, we see Wole’s hands framed in close up, washing many buckets of laundry, carting away garbage, and ironing a large stack of clothes. A song celebrating the importance of hard work bridges the extended montage. In a stroke of good fortune, Wole finds steady work as a bus conductor. Just as things are looking up, the owner of the bus gives the vehicle, and thus Wole's job, to a brother in an instance of nepotism. Having lost his livelihood, Wole falls in with a gang of area boys. A sequence depicting their various public crimes follows similar to those committed by Ahana in *Rattlesnake*. The film adopts the same editorializing tone with regard to such public crimes, suggesting it is material means not moral character that is wanting in these young men. As the epigraph of *Owo Blow* states, "This film is dedicated to the struggling masses of this country and the gradually disappearing middle class." And yet paradoxically these films are animated deep down by an anxiety about the tenuousness of social class and a fear of falling in with the urban "masses." In other words, the viewer is positioned ambivalently. We are encouraged to identify sympathetically with the "struggling masses," at the same time that we are gripped by the distress that many Nigerians experience living at the cusp of poverty.

Nollywood melodrama of this sort would be unthinkable without the body's ability to

make visible central messages concerning familial bonds, cultural norms, sexual desire, social transgression, and visceral pleasures. The prominence of the body, especially the use of pantomime to convey the sentiments of a scene, undoubtedly has to do in part with production constraints such as budgetary limits or the general practice of improvising dialogue and action from scenarios rather than sticking to closely scripted scenes. While this is good to keep in mind, it does not preclude us from reading the body as part of a video's project of representation. Crime dramas are meant to be experienced affectively just as the city is experienced through the body. This spectatorial process works with and on the body in a way that, I argue, parallels the way the postcolonial African city creates its own modes of perception or, we might say, its own spectatorial process. In other words, moving through the city, like viewing video's moving image, is an innately physical experience that both excites and taxes one's body.

The dangers of the big city are depicted to provoke us physically, just as the moral landscape is made legible and intelligible through the body. When Wole loses his job as a bus conductor, he turns to pickpocketing with a gang of area boys. In the montage that establishes this portion of the narrative, Wole and his gang team up to pickpocket unsuspecting commuters in the overcrowded bus stops and bus garages. The thieves bump and bush up against their victims, snatch their belongings and quickly disappear into the crowd. Wole's turn to petty crime draws us into an escalating sense of shock until he is finally apprehended in the garage where he once worked as a tout. His punishment is swift. The crowd strips him and his partner of their clothing, places a rubber motorcycle tire around their necks and prepares to burn the two alive. Our gaze is drawn to Wole's body, which is centered in the frame. He stands bare chested, beaten, shoulders slouched, with traces of blood still on him. The two women who have saved him from the lynch mob scold him, "Wole, see your life? Why do you behave so unruly?" The

words are superfluous to the image of Wole's body, which is where we see the moral consequences inscribed on or literally beaten into his body. Outrage works unexpectedly in this scene, since we shift from contempt for Wole's petty crimes to a strangely sympathetic identification with his battered body and livelihood. Both the lashings on Wole's body and our physical reaction to them participate in what Brooks has called an "aesthetics of embodiment, where the most important meanings have to be inscribed on and with the body" (1994, p. 17). We can understand Brook's aesthetics of embodiment and, relatedly, Larkin's aesthetics of outrage as two ways that video film positions the viewer ideologically without necessarily culminating in an overarching ideological design.

In *Owo Blow II* and *III*, Wole becomes an infamous armed robber by night and wealthy businessman by day. His success as a criminal mastermind, the notorious "Owo Blow," testifies to his spent potential as productive members of society, his talents having been spoiled on the illegitimate accumulation of wealth. He becomes, later in life, famed for his generous philanthropy and business acumen. His many charitable gestures, giving his wealth to orphanages and educational scholarships, all but erase his past as a bus tout and a criminal, but his name has already been blemished and his fate sealed. Though Wole goes to great lengths to disguise his background, word of his past reaches the police, jeopardizes his image and fortune. Wole commits suicide even though a civil court of justice has cleared him of all criminal accusations by the film's end, and the narrative arc does not require his death. Instead, his tragic death satisfies expectations established by the moral inertia that propels the story, a moral encapsulated in the Yoruba proverb, *oríko rere sàń ju wúrà àtí fàdákà* (A good name has more value than silver and gold). The logic at play here, a virtuous figure imperiled by a world of untrammled vice, perfectly complements the deep melodramatic structure adopted by virtually

all the films in question.

I argue that this vantage point distinguishes crime dramas from the occult films that have received much more popular and scholarly attention. “Business” represents social advancement in both crime and occult films and it comes in legitimate and illegitimate forms that often overlap and create a moral tension that drives the film. However, this single premise works in distinct ways in either genre. Crime dramas offer impassioned depictions of young educated men for whom crime represents a recourse given the absence of legitimate economic opportunity, while in occult films, an established older man, personifying the comprador class, amasses grotesque fortunes out of sheer greed. In other words, if the blood money ritual is the occult instrument that prosperous businessmen wield against society, as we see in films like *Scavengers* and *Rituals*, then armed robbery can be understood as the final recourse of young men whom society has failed. Understood in this light, the blood money cult and the gang of armed robbers appear like two sides of the same coin, two figures of a single urban imaginary. From different vantage points, these key archetypes of early Nollywood both seek to address what ails society and what is to be done. While portrayals of occult practices position the spectator to share in a collective outrage directed at those individuals who grow wealthy on suffering of others, depictions of the megacity’s criminal underbelly more often than not evoke a spectator’s identification with the young perpetrators. Crime films thus construct a surprisingly consistent ideological position across a body of films whose ideological bearings are notoriously ambivalent. Their indictment of the perceived sources of immiseration speaks more directly than the oblique expressions of moral outrage found in occult films.

I argue that early Nollywood crime dramas function to act out the frenzied drive to success, the fear of failing to succeed, and the anxiety that attends the new social obligations that

come with success. These films draw their urgency from depicting the dramatic rise and fall of the fortunes of young men. The central characters confront impossible social expectations that are exacerbated by an equally impossible political and economic situation, namely Lagos during a period of urban crisis in the 1990s. They find themselves caught up in a society that values self-reliance and self-aggrandizement grounded in individual enterprise during a historical moment when the avenues for young men to assert themselves have been curtailed or foreclosed. Failure is akin to death while success is bound up in evil deeds and morally corruption. Crime dramas work by testing ideas about victimhood and criminality, given these circumstances, and probing the contradictions that arise between success, failure, and shifting social obligations.

### Chapter 3:

#### “You Don’t Know Lagos:” Comedy and the Performance of Urban Subjectivity

It is surprising how little has been written on comedy in African cinema. If we recall that African cinema has historically defined itself by its "seriousness" of political, cultural, or artistic intent, we might understand why comedy has been viewed as indulgent or undignified and, thus, of little scholarly interest. But for Nigerian screen media, from celluloid film to television and, later on, video film, comedy has been standard fare for some time. In fact, one of the highest grossing video films, Kingsley Ogoro's *Osuofia in London* (2004), a farce about a bush hunter who travels to London, is considered a classic Nollywood blockbuster. The film is a variation on the perennial story of the village fool who travels to the city only to find himself comically bewildered by urban life. In the video films considered in this chapter, London is replaced by Lagos—no less a global metropolis—but the humor is much the same.

This chapter will center on a subset of comedies that make light of the differences between city and village life. Each of these films turns on the scene of the protagonist's arrival in Lagos, which opens onto all manner of slapstick humor. These scenes work to cast the country bumpkin as an illiterate who is unable to decipher the city's incoherent spaces, inscrutable social networks, and unspoken laws. The protagonist's estrangement upon arriving in the city ironically reflects an estrangement one never ceases to feel in Lagos where uncertainty has become a generalized condition of everyday life. The village fool is humorously tormented for not being "in the know," and thereby affirms what the urban viewer already knows all too well, namely the proper performance of urban subjectivity. That is to say that comedies of this sort are as revealing as they are distracting. Of course, as a genre, comedy produces its levity by distracting viewers from the potential gravity of its subject matter. And yet it is perhaps precisely for this

reason that comedies are able to probe the most controversial fault lines of Nigerian society. This chapter argues that video comedies incite more than just crude laughter. Through laughter they allow audiences to probe society's social fault lines. In this light, comedy appears like a paradoxically productive form of play, encouraging its audiences to work through their fissures and antagonisms. This form of social critique embedded within laughter must be understood in relation to the video comedy's reliance on satirical "masks" and a form of tendentious humor that facilitates an ambiguous switch of registers between laughing at the figures these comic performances aim to signify and laughing at the performance itself as performance.

#### Remarks on Comedy

Power is often the subject matter of derisive humor in canonical African cinema, which perhaps explains the critical attention given to the political dissent couched in African comedies. Existing criticism focuses largely on subgenres of comedy, such as satire and parody, which are by their very nature accommodated to the critique of power. This approach legitimates a frivolous genre like comedy by integrating it into a long tradition of African film criticism that values film as an engagé art form politically dedicated to conscientizing and uplifting the people. In this light, comedy is characterized as a weapon of the weak. It drags down the powerful and makes the display of authority into an object of ridicule. This line of argument holds that laughter directed at the chicanery of the State and its potentates effectively overturns their power, reveals its absurdity, and thereby undermines their authority. Indeed, many films invited such claims, none more so than Sembene Ousmane's *Xala* (1974), which satirizes the impotency of the neocolonial comprador class.

In the postcolony, laughter leads out of the existing—sometimes authoritarian—order

into an alternate sphere of unsanctioned freedom and, in a sense, it becomes “the people’s second life” (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, p. 8). Integral to this line of thought is Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorization of the carnivalesque as that which subverts the dominant order by creating an atmosphere of chaotic humor. This type of humor emerges from the sensibilities of ordinary people, and expresses a certain vitality that Bakhtin associates with the masses. It disrupts what is officially sanctioned, introduces change and renewal to established, static order, and it suspends hierarchies that prevented free and familiar contact among people. The carnivalesque demonstrates a tendency “to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted... To enter a completely new order of things” (34). The carnivalesque demonstrates a logic of the “world inside out,” in Bakhtin’s words, “of a continual shifting from the top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (11). He especially emphasizes the power of humor to level disparities, describing the carnivalesque as “the laughter of all the people... directed at all and everyone” (11). The utopian ideal that Bakhtin makes the carnivalesque out to be also makes it an attractive analytic for understanding postcolonial African satire in film and visual culture. However, the politics of carnivalesque humor are insufficient as a lens for understanding Nollywood comedies, given their silence surrounding figures of State power paired with their overanxious mockery of marginal figures in society.

In *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze*, Olivier Barlet observes an element of the carnivalesque in the depiction of politicians and elites as grotesque, and in the exaggerated mockery of peasants and villagers. In Bassek Ba Kobhio’s *Sango Malo* (1990), the irascible

village chief is mocked on both counts: for his enjoyment of the unearned privileges of his position and his overbearing local governance in addition to his ironic ignorance of the ways of the world at large. The grotesque marks his depiction, for instance, as when we see his beautiful, young girlfriend pampering him and massaging his callused feet. When the Chief demands recognition—unsuccessfully—from his antagonist, Malo the schoolteacher, the young woman applauds Malo as “brave and handsome,” underscoring the Chief’s impotence. He displays his ignorance of the world beyond the village when receiving a returning village member who found work as an airline flight attendant. “Do planes have seats reserved for chiefs?” he inquires, prompting a burst of laughter from the crowd that has gathered and now beholds the Chief’s incomprehension, again marking the limit of his power. It suffices here to note that comic moments of this sort exemplify canonical African filmmakers’ deployment of humor as a subversive convention. Laughter reverses power roles when, as Barlet claims, “A particular reality is denounced by forcing the spectator to laugh at it” (2000, p. 133). There are countless scenes of this sort in Nigerian video film comedies. However, the humor found in popular video film, by contrast, often takes for granted established sets of values and power relations.

A progressive ideological critique prevails in criticisms on humor in postcolonial African cinema. Laughing in the face of adversity performs a cathartic function, or it helps viewers cope with circumstances as yet outside their control. But Nollywood comedies offer cold solace for those wishing to laugh away deep anxieties about the precarity of life. As the foregoing discussion suggests, popular ideas about performance are governed by a pragmatic world-view that concerns itself with the usefulness of different cultural performances (Fiebach 1999). Comic actors and standup comedians can jest ironically about corruption or the fact of being Nigerian, as Adejunmobi observes, but “they are rarely ironic about social marginality itself” (185). To this

she adds an insightful explanation: “The jokes about ethnic identity and disability in particular allow the audience to laugh at what would otherwise be a source of anxiety, that is the narrowness of the presumed distance between being treated as ‘normal’ and being rejected as an outsider in the society” (185). The site of social critique, Adejunmobi claims, shifts from that of power and politics, in the strict sense, to the everyday performances of social and economic roles. But we can extend this analysis of the types of “judgment” that humor fosters. This would be, after all, another way of speaking about the way laughter allows a society to work through its cultural fault lines (Williams 1991). Theorizing how video comedy comments upon social roles also entails revising existing theories of humor in Africa, which examine laughter’s relation to political power, to account for new notions of power—not simply power concentrated in the hands of the ruling class or autocrat and imposed from above—and its role in shaping new subjectivities that “involve exercising the ability to laugh, play, and entertain in a context where the old authorities are virtually absent” (Tcheuyap 2010, 29).

### Performance in Urban Theory

Nollywood video comedies rely on a popular sense of humor that revels in burlesque caricature, exaggeration, and stereotyping. In this sense, they almost inherently call for highly theatrical performances. Certainly more than any other genre of acting, comic actors build immensely successful careers by developing a single signature comic persona. An actor like Moses Olaiya was synonymous with his stage persona Baba Sala, just as Nkem Owoh cannot be separated from his character Osuofia nor Funke Akindele from Jenifa. Having a notable stage persona establishes instant recognition with local audiences to whom the actor’s humor is addressed. The premise guiding the production of a comedy like *Lagos Na Wah* (1997) was to

pack into one loosely woven narrative as many as possible of these popular comic actors with larger-than-life personas. The characters they depict function like types, putting on display various “typical” social roles that supposedly belong to the city.

The generic excess of comic performance, rendering characters as caricatures, mocks the typecast figure and produces a laughter of ridicule that positions the spectator ideologically. Kenneth Harrow likens such characters to “folk characters” of trickster tales, often animal figures like *ijapa* the trickster tortoise and the gullible *aja* the dog in Yoruba storytelling.

They are not what they seem, what they appear to be but have to present their appearance as a mask in order to be comprehended as a sign for some other, unseen subject. Their meanings are unidimensional, but it requires more than one dimension to access that meaning, and it is always one degree removed from their appearance.... *They are foolish in order to produce the meaning of the tale, which is not foolish. They are the tools of that storyteller who stands behind their figures, yet who needs them in order to speak.*

(Harrow 2013, p. 238)

I take this as the starting point for understanding the unique nature of Nollywood comedy, namely the recognition that video comedies offer up comic characters whose performances function like masks, or like “signs for some other, unseen subject,” and therefore may present themselves as fools even though the import of the narrative itself is not foolish. The analysis that follows here is interested in characterizing the nature of those masked performances and illustrating how they work as the instruments of the storyteller behind the narrative. I argue that in many video comedies, the voice of the storyteller that speaks through these typecast comic figures is site of the narrative’s underlying ideological import. It is, therefore, also the site of comedy’s embedded social critique, which is often functions to reify popular attitudes and

notions of the “normal” or “correct” way to comport oneself in the city. As an extension of popular Nigerian humor, however, these videos also turn the focus of comic ridicule back onto those figures who seem to represent modern, sophisticated urban subjects, as I will demonstrate. The humor cuts both ways, in other words, and prompts a negotiation of social fault lines through laughter. In the simplest terms, the city gives rise to new styles of performing the self. Video comedies about city/village is the “forum” where those performances undergo comic scrutiny, and laughter works to critique and expound upon the power that shapes these social performances.

To understand how video comedies speak obliquely to society’s fault lines, it is important to distinguish clearly between mediated performances, such as those served up by comic actors on screen, and unmediated performances, which are not framed or set off from the activity of everyday life, but are instead integrated within and arguably constitutive of social reality. Moradewun Adejunmobi addresses these distinctions in her examination of the relation between media, performance, and “reality” in Nigeria. I agree with Adejunmobi that the country’s growth in screen media has not yet led to the type of “self-referential turn” that obtains with media publics elsewhere in the world, but at the same time, this does not mean that “reality” is not questioned, or that video comedies and their audiences do not scrutinize the gap between outward appearances and the social actors behind the masks. “Indeed, we might wonder whether for many in Africa any kind of ‘reality’ existing outside of performance is really useful” (Adejunmobi p. 180). Therefore, while Nigerian comic actors and standup comedians may not traffic in the same postmodern irony that is popular in postindustrial media spheres, their humor does nonetheless focus a great deal on the self-conscious critique of social performances as such. “Nigerian standup comedy offers social critique, though a remarkable amount of that critique

pertains to the performance of social and occupational roles” (Adejunmobi p. 186). By way of example, Adejunmobi points out the difference between derisive humor directed at buffoonish or inept political figures who perform their office poorly, and other subjects whose performance is executed so perfectly as to defy or twist the logic of “real life.” She refers to jokes about romantic courtship and the various ways that men can outwit and circumvent the demands of their female partner. Precisely what makes a joke about a trickster’s skilled performance funny is the fact that the performer can outdo “reality.” “These performances work and become a source of humor because they are so well done,” Adejunmobi argues, and it is this same fact that reminds the audience “that they need to exercise caution in a time and place where everyone is presumed to be a performing subject. In short, life itself is a series of performances” (188-89).

There is no time or place in which this could be truer than African cities today. Humor of this type grooms an audience’s sensibilities and foster an awareness that in the city, things are not always self-evident, and that who can do what, with whom and how is often up for negotiation (Simone 2010). In the context of the standup joke about the too-perfect performance, laughter indicates an audience’s (unconscious) recognition of a performance as performance. It also acknowledges, by accepting the premise of the joke, that performance can nevertheless change the conditions of social reality. In other words, an audience’s laughter brings forth the representation’s performative effect; it sanctions the representation’s ability to produce the object or relations it represents. Therefore, far from merely putting on appearances, performances can sometimes have real effects. A theory of performativity, as opposed to performance more generally, would not be concerned merely with urban styles and social roles, but also with the way social reality itself is produced and shaped.

This calls to mind Ato Quayson’s anecdote about an Accra taxi driver who insults a

pedestrian in the striped crosswalk after narrowly avoiding a collision with her. Despite he himself being at fault—having ignored the designated crosswalk—the taxi driver’s insult and the laughter it receives from onlookers together indicate that following the zebra crosswalk itself is not the only protocol for crossing a busy street in Accra (2014, p. 18). The joke that prompts the public’s laughter calls into action a “local urban performativity, the main characteristic of which is the fact of seeing and being seen by a potential audience on the street. In other words, in this instance the discursive register of the formal rules of zebra crossings is intersected by a different kind of register, whose protocols are those of a local urban performativity” (Quayson 2014, p. 22). Thus, an altercation between taxi driver and pedestrians, in which the taxi driver’s witty derision earns the laughter of onlookers, has the performative effect of recoding the protocols of crossing a busy street in Accra. Quayson’s anecdote brings into focus “the intersection of spatiality and spectatoriality,” which sets bustling African cities as the stage for innumerable performances. Attention to this inherent interaction in the city between spatiality and spectator reveals the integral role of context and audience in achieving performative moments, which is to say make moments when a performance can producer or reproduce social reality. Urban space, after all, where everything is open to the gaze of the public, “translates everything in the heated altercation into the display of the mastery of unstated yet critical cultural codes of rhetoric and delivery” (Quayson 2014, p. 17).

In recent years, Africa has been a rich site for adapting and enriching theories of performance and performativity, especially in view of the continent’s growing urbanization. The discussion of performative theory has touched on gender roles, economic practices, spatial logics, and cultural and individual identity in African cities. Performing urban style has been discussed in terms of its implications for our understandings of cultural identity, but if we

understand performance to entail not only the marked, ostentatious displays of personal style, but more generally to refer to every social role enacted, we must then acknowledge the city, to borrow Adejunmobi's term, as the site of innumerable "occupational selves" being constructed and performed. After all, so many modes of performance in the city are bound up in making money, growing one's social network, or accumulating social status. When Adejunmobi writes, for instance, about the distinction between "customary expectations surrounding performance of the social self and performance of social obligations from other types of 'professional' performances that are becoming commonplace..." (183), one could easily imagine the modes of performances assumed by Lagos's professional class and the ways they embody a "modern" subjectivity in order to unlock particular economic opportunities. When this up-and-coming middle class sloughs inconvenient customary obligations, it in turn concerns those family and friends outside the city who suffer at the loss of claims upon those obligations. In this context, as I discuss further below, *Jenifa* (2007) and *The Return of Jenifa* (2012) appear like a grotesque parody of the "yuppie" lifestyles depicted in New Nollywood films. Indeed, given that a great deal of the humor in city/village comedies turns on the tensions between competing expectations of good conduct, we might frame them as type of comedy of manners, which is to say a comedy of conflicting performances of social roles.

I want to underscore the point that framing the discussion of urban subjectivity within the discourse of cultural or postcolonial identity is to gloss over the extent to which urban subjects are shaped increasingly by the material conditions of scarcity in African cities (Mbembe 2002). Urbanites find recourse not in arguments over authentic identity, for instance, but in alternative regimes of intelligibility, including witchcraft discourse, religious fundamentalism, and experiments with the casino-logic of neoliberal capitalism (Mbembe and Roitman 1995,

Geschiere 1997, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). For this reason, it is imperative to underscore the economic implications of urban performativity. The experience of public space in the city is especially marked by minor social practices oriented around commerce. Streets are the site of innumerable activities, but everywhere one goes, one inevitably finds small commercial transactions taking place. In fact, every individual in public space is implicated in commerce at all times insofar as those navigating the street who are not vendors themselves are potential customer. AbdouMaliq Simone argues that such circumstances demand that urbanites hone their ability to speculate and predict social roles and opportunities from myriad interactions taking place on the street. On the part of vendors,

efforts have to be based on some kind of calculation, some kind of reading of what could be the most advantageous set of words and styles with which to approach a potential customer, collaborator, patron, or client. The key is also not just how to turn individuals into one of these fixed identities but to keep open the possibility that any particular individual that is engaged could act as several at various times. An economy of anticipation then actively gears individual and group actions toward shaping a wide range of possible outcomes from the combination of many different actions, feelings, styles, and functions that operate in a given market place. As this economy of anticipation is generalized across the city, it clearly shapes what the city then becomes. (Simone 2010, 25-6)

A host of scenes from video comedies comes to mind here. The arrival of the country bumpkin always takes place in a motor park cum marketplace, the exact site that Simone takes as his site of observation. We find the logic of the economy of anticipation at work when area boys scope out a woman they suppose to have just arrived from the village, considering her baggage and

attire. Insofar as living in the city offers more opportunities for making money—just as it demands that one make more money to avoid slipping into destitution—we could say that the performance of urban subjectivity is always entangled to a degree with economic concerns. It is also pertinent here to bear in mind that most rural-urban migration occurs in search of economic opportunity, for “commercial gain” in a general sense, and it demands developing what Adejunmobi calls an “occupational self.” Furthermore, a great deal of migration to and from the city is prompted by the need to perform obligations to one’s family: journeying to Lagos to find work to support the family, for instance, or traveling from Lagos to home during holiday or for large life events to keep up ties (Gugler 1964, Gugler 1988). The urban subject is, after all, located at the intersection of a ubiquitous informal economy and the moral economy of social ties that allows one to navigate it. This means that insofar as achieving prosperity or slipping into poverty depends to a large extent on maintaining, growing, and utilizing one’s social network, social performance is integral to determining one’s place and relative mobility in the city.

Sasha Newell’s study of youth culture in Abidjan deserves special mention here. His examination of public displays of wealth and prosperity by young men whose nightlife personas far outstrip their actual means brings into focus the distinction between performance, understood as putting on an act or acting out a social role, and performativity, which realizes that social role in the event in its being acted out. In this sense, the performance of urban style can have social and material repercussions.

Newell also reminds us that performances of a lifestyle that is, in reality, beyond the means of the individual to sustain aim nevertheless to demonstrate the cultural knowledge and sensibilities that come with being an urban citizen. Thus, in the view of those who put on such airs and those who bear witness to them, the performance “is a demonstration of the superior

person one would embody all the time if one had the money for it, a display of potential” (Newell 2012, p. 1). Therefore, the various styles and selves through which Lagosians may produce their identities are both the putting on display of one’s ideal self, and a step toward rearranging social supports and thus one’s social reality through which one might maintain the identity one performs. This point will become especially important in my reading of *Jenifa* and *The Return of Jenifa* below. Newell goes on to note that:

Abidjan’s residents saw the difference between the ‘look’ people were able to project and their material position in life as a positive transcendence of their surroundings rather than an artificial put-on. This was in part an appreciation of the quality of the specific actor’s performance, but in a deeper and more important sense, this was an appreciation of the nature of performance itself, the ability of metaphor to produce reality rather than merely comment upon it, for illusion sometimes participates in the construction of reality.

(Newell 2012, 5)

Nevertheless, the performance of urban style—or modern subjectivity, or a particular class identity, for that matter—is “not consumed monolithically, but from conflicting evaluatory schemas” (Newell 2012, p. 11). These conflicting sensibilities also provide the fodder for the type of standup comedy that Adejunmobi discusses, and the public deployment of humorous insults that Quayson describes. Ultimately, in performance as in joking, incompatible sets of practices and judgment—official or improvised, urban or rural, cosmopolitan or nativist—rise to the public’s attention and are able to be articulated when they collide and become readily evident. An urban setting provides a flashpoint given the social and cultural heterogeneity that exist constantly side-by-side in the city. This is where Nollywood video comedies come into the picture. In direct dialogue with local audiences about subject matter that piques the tension

between these conflicting sensibilities, video comedies provide the forum in which audiences can plumb society's social fault lines and in which laughter plays a role in both reinforcing and subverting the terms of social reality and social performance.

### Coming to the City

Audiences' tastes inevitably vary, but video comedies seem to hold very low cultural esteem in Nollywood, perhaps precisely because these films refuse to seek legitimization by making appeals to the intellect, the spirit, an idea of tradition, or a sense of moral education. Yet it is this lighthearted amusement that makes video comedies paradoxically suited for addressing controversial or potentially serious subject matter. The comedies I examine here suggest that the lower genres of popular culture do much more than produce passive distraction for unengaged viewers. These city/village comedies fall in with a larger corpus of comedies that deal precisely with migration -- both the translocal and transnational variety -- and the nervous humor that accompanies the meeting of incongruous cultures, sensibilities, gender roles, languages, and livelihoods. Behind or alongside the laughter there is a preoccupation that is not endemic only to Nigeria, but can also be found in cinema cultures across the global South where rapid urbanization has presented the city as a flashpoint for anxious humor around the status of cultural identity and subjectivity after the advent of globalization.

Although certainly not the first of its kind, *Osuofia in London* (2003) stands out as the most notable and widely popular example of the genre in question. The narrative begins in the village where the local fool, Osuofia, receives word from London that his estranged brother has died leaving him an immense fortune. Osuofia need only travel to London to collect his deceased brother's estate. This news sets in motion the plot, which is largely driven by the staged "culture

clash” of this bush hunter entering into the modern global order that London represents. The film shares a lot with *Ikuku/Hurricane* (1996), the Igbo-language comedy written by and starring Nkem Owoh as a character named Osuofia (Haynes and Okome 2000, p 82-3). In *Ikuku*, however, Osuofia is the town drunk and his modernized brother, Dr. Raymond, lives in Lagos, not London. In fact, the underlying premise of *Osuofia in London*, as well as many its characters and tropes, are borrowed from a larger story cycle of rural-urban migration comedies in which Lagos stands in for the space of modernity *par excellence*.

*Lagos Na Wah* (1997) was one of the earliest video comedies in this story cycle. The narrative opens with Solomon the protagonist’s voiceover describing the lack of opportunity in the village that has held him back from achieving his life’s ambitions, and the money that he believes can be had in Lagos. “Village dey dull. Everything dey for Lagos!” laments Solomon. After several expository shots of the village, the narrative rushes us off to Lagos where we observe Solomon disembark from his bush taxi at the busy Ojota motor park. Dressed in an absurd pair of “bakassi boots” with flamboyant high heels and barely able to conceal his bewilderment, Solomon stands out as a typical “johnny just come,” a stereotype that the actor assumes to the amusement of onlookers, who unwittingly become accomplices to the comedy. Passengers on the danfo chuckle and glance over their shoulder as Solomon pays the bus conductor not once but at every stop, apparently confused and intimidated by the young Lagosian boy’s thick Yoruba accent as he spits out every conductor’s favorite phrase, “owó e dà?” (where’s your money). The newcomer’s ineptitude is put on display so that the more sophisticated or street-wise viewer can share in the laughter of those on screen who provide the spectatorial point of identification.

Solomon arrives in Ajegunle only to discover that his uncle has packed out of his

apartment and moved to Abuja, leaving Solomon no relations to help him and no roof over his head. Fortunately, he is taken in by the neighbors, Klarus and Giringory, who are moved by his plight and offer to show him the ropes in Lagos. At this point the narrative only loosely follows Solomon's struggles in the city while it explores a string of comic episodes involving typical city figures, each played by comic actors whose performances on Nigerian television programs had already ensured their popularity as household names. Baba Luwe, the gateman at the Ajegunle compound where the characters live, engages in a "who's on first?" type skit with a prospective leaser named UK (short for Eucharia), which Baba Luwe mishears as U.K. Believing the man just returned from London, he demands five year's rent upfront, but only after ensure the man enjoys football, local alcohol, and chasing young women, which are, after all, Baba Luwe's own pastimes.

The clownish Paulinuse embodies all the worst characteristics of a typical useless man. His laziness is only matched by his lechery, and while his wife Lovina and their troupe of children show the signs of chronic hunger in a household without a competent head, Paulinuse's own corpulent figure—supplemented by a false, padded belly—shows the signs of his gluttony. As he explains to Chief Ezego, his long lost wealthy friend from the village, one day Lovina appeared at his doorstep in Lagos and informed him his parents had "passported" her there in order to marry him. Unwilling to assume the responsibilities of marriage, he told her to pack up her load and return to the village but when he turned his back for a moment Lovina "don carry belly" (got pregnant), Paulinuse explains, ignoring his own part in the pregnancy. Chief Ezego congratulates his friend, but Paulinuse retorts, "carry your hand commot there! Congrats for where? I dey for Lagos. One cup of garri na twenty naira." (Take back your handshake. Congrats for what? I'm in Lagos, and here a single cup of garri costs twenty naira.) To avoid incurring

further childrearing expenses, Paulinuse makes all attempts to control himself, sleeping on a separate corner of the bed, refusing to share the same cup of water, walking backwards into the bedroom for fear that even gazing at his wife might cause another pregnancy. Hopelessly ignorant of proper, modern birth control methods, his family swells to eleven children. In the final scenes of the narrative, Paulinuse receives his long-awaited retirement check from his employer Chief Jegede and, believing the check to be worth a million naira, immediately sets off to the bank to deposit his new fortune. He brings his eleven children marching along like some clownish parade and the emaciated family dog as “escort” in the absence of a police guard along the way. The punchline drops when the bank teller, a modern woman in pantsuit and educated accent, informs him his check amounts to a mere five hundred naira. The whole ordeal recalls Sembene Ousmane’s *Mandabi* and the gentle mockery of the illiterate Dieng who is incapable of cashing his money order. But unlike Dieng, whose character is, as Harrow notes, “a butt of the satire whose humor is placed at work in the service of oppositional cinema,” there is no oppositional ideology at work in *Lagos Na Wah* through which the film’s comic objects of ridicule might be recuperated. Adejunmobi is right to wonder what ethics grounds these mediated performances of unmediated social performances. What is the storyteller behind the mask trying to say other than to caution the audience that “All life is performances.” Despite irony that keeps us one or two steps removed from the characters and their inane clowning, is the viewer positioned to simply scorn the backwards ways of villagers or does the laughter suggest a slippage or space to negotiate these positions?

The type of humor and spectatorship these films foster withholds identification with any single character on screen and instead places us in the role of the onlooker. In contrast with the prevailing tendency in Nollywood to stage dramatic narratives in domestic spaces, comedies take

place in the street, in public, where the comedian's performance gains the "edge" it needs in order to deliver its full comic payoff. This form of laughter arguably only works in that intersection of space and spectatorship to which Quayson refers in his analysis of the taxi driver's insult and the public's laughter. The key is not that a village setting lacks this intersection of spatiality and spectatoriality, but that the two spaces, urban and rural, provide the discursive support for two separate orders of performance and intelligibility. Each place has its own spatial logic.

Video comedies that depict the migration of villagers to the city, or of villagers returned home after a journey to Lagos or abroad participate in reifying a developmentalist notion of space, whereby the village stages belatedness and the city represents the perpetual present of global modernity. If such a clear-cut spatialization hardly corresponds with the real conditions of the city in which the majority of urban residents maintaining active relations with family in a rural place of origin, then we must ask why comedies exaggerate cultural barriers between city and village. Their narratives revel in rehearsing these stereotypes and make no conscious attempt to challenge what is presented as commonplace ideas about rural and urban Africa. None of the films produce a coherent image of the city's spaces. It is generally true of Nollywood (English and Yoruba) that the choice of location depends on the constraints of production, not the portrayal of a specific vision of Lagos. One obvious exception is the giant statue at old Shangisha toll gate, *Three White Cap Chiefs*, a notable landmark in Lagos where characters inanely offer food or prayers to their ancestors.

The Yoruba-language comedy *Jelili* opens in a small town that is quickly losing patience with the young trickster, Jelili, who time and again disturbs the peace. Jelili hampers the *babalawo's* ceremonial offerings, convinces daughters to defy their fathers, disrupts the private

liaisons of young lovers, and lusts after unavailable women. His mother takes steps to reform her son's behavior but her efforts are undercut by the boy's father, who cautions that Jelili is only acting out of youthful rambunctiousness. One night, at a crossroads, Jelili spies his comic nemesis the *babalawo* planting a sacrifice. Jelili quickly invokes a praise of the *orisa* Esu and devours the offering, but the sacrificial food disagrees with his stomach and Jelili is permanently afflicted with flatulence. The family sees no other option for this trickster but to send him to Lagos with his uncle Akanni. Upon arriving in Lagos, Jelili's absurd attempt to mimic Lagosian fashion -- he wears a mishmash of native *ankara* cloth, a Nike baseball cap, and futuristic sunglasses -- singles him out as a "J.J.C." (Johnny Just Come) and he falls prey to the tricks of a pidgin-speaking Igbo man. The ensuing rivalry brings the two tricksters in confrontation with the authorities, though with luck and a little pleading they always manage to escape. However, when Jelili's sexual appetite lands him in trouble with a local don, his luck runs out. He is severely beaten and sent back to the village.

The narrative arc is much the same in *Ipaja*, though the village, the city, and the characters are not as carefully developed. Lamina and Lamidi are a couple of layabouts who amuse themselves by disturbing the peace and harassing young women. After filching police uniforms from a clothesline, they set up a mock checkpoint on the road and, wearing the ill-fitting police uniforms, begin to demand money and favors from passersby. The joke crosses the line, and when the real local police give chase, only Lamidi escapes by hitching a ride to Lagos. He fails comically at his first jobs in the city, but finally lands work as a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) operator -- this after he admits that he crashed the last car he drove! The scenes on the BRT bus act as a showcase for the improvisational skills of various comedians who are clearly working from scenarios instead of a script. Among Yoruba filmmakers, this is a common

practice adapted from Yoruba theater tradition that underscores the actors' imagination, wit, and delivery. The actors build off one another creating pandemonium on the BRT and, as the theme song exclaims, "all sorts of nonsense happens!" [*Orisirisi lo n sele o!*] with varied comedic success.

By contrast, comedy is interwoven with romance in *O o M'Eko* [You Don't Know Lagos]. Saliu is a sweet but foolish man who is dedicated to his one love, Folake, though her mother has promised her to a wealthier, uglier man named Adigun. In spite of it all, Saliu and Folake continue to rendezvous under the *orombo* tree to flirt and kiss. One night, they are followed by Adigun's lackeys, intent on shooting Saliu, but the assassination is botched and they shoot Folake by mistake. Saliu is presumed the killer and must flee to Lagos where he is immediately confronted by the chaos of the city. Actor Odunlade Adekola is at his best in the slapstick comedy that ensues, and the scene becomes truly representative of the staged arrival, which is characteristic of this genre. He disembarks at a busy bus stop looking clueless among the march of commuters and out of place in his grubby farmers clothes. Saliu awkwardly accosts a stranger who he misrecognizes as Sarafa, a rude boy from his village. At a roadside vendor, he tries on fashionable sunglasses, gesturing wildly and remarking that, "The sun has set!" [*Ile ti su!*]. At the bus garage, he is bewildered by the flow of commuters coming and going and is nearly toppled over by passing market traders with huge loads on their heads. In the market, Saliu is offered an "original" (i.e. authentic) Blackberry phone at a reduced rate and, believing he has met a foolish trader, Saliu negotiates the price down to a mere 9,000 naira. But the trader has the upper hand and exchanges the phone with a lump of fufu before handing over the box.

These comedies are animated by accident and happenstance, and the astonishment they produce. They feed the popular fascination with danger, especially the dangers of the metropolis,

but in a way that we know every danger will be overcome. The comic protagonist escapes at the last second, ideally in an abrupt, accidental escape that astonishes viewers and enhances the pleasure of flirting with danger. Comedies are notable for their lack of supernatural and occult elements. By comparison with melodramas or occult films, here chance supplants the supernatural as a logic of narrative structure. It is by chance that the protagonist is thrown into catastrophe and it is often abrupt coincidence that delivers the protagonist. Folake is accidentally shot and Saliu is mistakenly held responsible, leading him to flee to Lagos. When pursued by the police, Lamidi is accidentally hit by a motorist who happens to be driving to Lagos and offers Lamidi a ride. Of course, comic characters are often tricksters who must be brought in line for social order - and narrative closure - to prevail. The downfall of such characters is an inevitable outcome but its cause can still be felicitous or coincidental.

In all these narratives, the journey to the city incites a clash between uncouth village ways and the hustle and bustle of the modern metropolis. One finds the same comic trope played out interminably. *O o M' Eko* stands out for its construction of the village as a place where romance and intimacy are possible. In *Jelili* and *Ipaja*, the pranks of the village are magnified in the city until the characters find themselves engaged in outright criminal activity. (For example, when Lamidi arrives in Lagos it initiates a parallel narrative about handsome, rich men who kidnap women on the road). In *Jelili* (2012), the protagonist attends a lavish dinner with visiting foreign business partners only to execute a series of social faux pas, including opening his water bottle with his teeth, the same way he opens his beer bottles back in the village. In *O o M' Eko* (2012), the villager arrives in Lagos wearing tattered *agbada* and carrying a large load from his farm. As he attempts to navigate the crowded bus stop, the slapstick comedy conveys the incongruity of his situation. Yoruba comedies about rural-urban migration portray a hyperbolic

reality that is always made more exaggerated by the character's bodily gestures. That is to say that Yoruba comedies incorporate a good deal of slapstick humor, especially when the protagonist first arrives in Lagos. Even though the character's bewilderment is one with which many visitors and residents of Lagos can likely relate, we cannot relate to the comic protagonist himself, who is often too foolish (*O o M' Eko*) or too grotesque (*Jelili*) to evoke anything more than laughter or disgust.

Video comedies raise important questions about the relations between narrative, audience, and identification. Generally speaking, video film narratives pull the story in multiple directions, and seek to satisfy multiple ends. They attempt to keep the viewer enrapt with convoluted plot twists and parallel story lines as the story stretches to two or three hours. Some genres carry with them stronger narrative conventions than other genres. Dramas, romances, and occult films are animated by their narrative momentum and their tendency to culminate in scenes of scandal, loss, or vindication. More than any other genre, comedies exemplify Nollywood's inclination toward episodic narration, or narratives that accommodate "interrupted viewing" practices. Given their organization into a series of loosely related gags, comic dialogues, slapstick set pieces, and improvised antics rather than a singular narrative arc, the trademark of video comedies might be its non-narrative features. For example, at the height of his popularity, Yoruba actor Baba Suwe reportedly prerecorded a number of comic set pieces. When producers came to request his acting, he sold them the prerecorded scenarios, which they could edit into their narrative (personal communication, Tunde Kelani).

Like the "aesthetic of attractions" that, as Tom Gunning famously argues, shaped the relationship between audience and film in early non-narrative cinema, video comedies invite the spectator to enjoy brief intensities of wit or jocularity, instead of suturing the spectator to a

seamless narrative world. In other words, if all Nollywood video films encourage to an extent distracted or “interrupted” viewing habits, and these habits reflect the fact that such videos will be consumed idly at home or momentarily on one of the increasingly ubiquitous televisions located in businesses around Lagos, then we might relate the type of spectatorship that comedies encourage as something like the urban spectatoriality that Quayson describes, a removed onlooker with an amused vantage onto the activities of some busy Lagos street scene. Comedies encourage a spectatorship that mimics the spectatoriality that Quayson describes as integral to public space in the African city.

This mode of narration and the forms of identification it engenders are on full display in *Okon Lagos* (2012), first Ibibio-language comedy produced by Emem Isong’s Royal Arts Academy. Okon (Ime Bishop Umoh) is a useless man, who cannot manage to support his wife, much less pay his debts around town. He commands respect neither at home nor among other men of the village. Simple-minded and incapable of expressing himself in a composed manner, he is nevertheless determined to become wealthy and important in the village. Having established his character and motivation for traveling to Lagos, the narrative quickly brings us to Okon’s arrival sequence. The village hunter Okon finds himself in the urban jungle dodging speeding vehicles. He is attired in clothing inappropriate for the modern city, but a band of thieves posing as a bus driver and his conductor soon strip him of his bags and cloths. In desperation, Okon goes to appeal to the iconic Lagos statue known as the “Three White Capped Chiefs”; he stands in his underwear before the statue and supplicates the memorial as if it were a shrine to his ancestors back in the village. The three gags work to elicit laughter rather than move the narrative forward. The laughter gives rise to a sense of mild social admonishment for this pathetic but harmless figure. As Okon dashes through heavy traffic, or is tossed half-naked from

the bus by his attackers, or mopes pathetically before the large city statue, this depiction disallows the spectator's identification with the character, although his treatment does invite a sympathetic response.

This sequence of hardship comes to a close when Okon finds work as a houseboy for another Ibibio-speaking man from Akwa Ibom, a former university lecturer named Basi, and his unabashedly Westernized wife, Isabella. What is important is that these characters also fail to earn the audience's identification, even though they embody on screen exactly the type of urban sensibilities the audience is positioned to share. The narrative mocks the "bush" man's disastrous arrival in Lagos, elicits the viewer's laughter and thereby positions him/her as modern urban subjects. The extent of the humor's ability to interpolate the viewer corresponds with the viewer's sense of being "in" on the joke or in the know when it comes to the performance of urban subjectivity.

In this sense, Adejunmobi is right to wonder what ethics grounds this mediated performance of unmediated performances. What is the storyteller behind the mask trying to say other than the point that "All life is performances." Despite irony that keeps us one or two steps removed from the characters and their inane clowning, is there a coherent ideology or is that where the slippage and negotiation happens. Harrow points out that the comedian is the foil that makes us comfortable with what is "normal" (247). However, we might ask if something else also happens when the villager eventually acclimates to his milieu—which does happen in many of the comedies in question, although not all—and is shown in the process of learning what's "normal." The humor enters a different register more like the slick, seamless performances that Adejunmobi observes in Nigerian standup comedy. The laughter stems from the amusing recognition of an ostentation performance as performance, and thereby functions more like a

deconstruction of the norm in Lagos. It is humor preoccupied with the exceptionalism of Lagos life, and the general fluidity of norms and social rules.

In the comic episodes that follow the derisive laugh turns back on itself targeting the narrative figures of metropolitan modernity. Basi was once an esteemed lecturer at the prestigious University of Ibadan, but when the politicians in power cut the nation's education budget, he lost his job in a wave of retrenchments at the university. Basi never misses an opportunity to rehearse his story to anyone who will listen, and the story itself slips into a form of parody as it is retold several times throughout the narrative, each time more indignant than the last. His role is to lift up and mold Okon, his "cousin" from Akwa Ibon, into a modern urban citizen, or so it would seem, at least, if Basi's own position as man of the house and man of letters were not merely a shell, an outward appearance. He meets with other educated, articulate men to debate "the problem with Nigeria," which comes across as an exercise in sophistry. When other characters switch out of Ibibio or Pidgin, Basi never fails to correct their pronunciation. Gradually his character is more evidently marked by parody that undercuts the authority of the impotent intellectual whose idealism is only outstripped by his pretentious manners. By contrast, his wife Isabella dominates the household. She is materialistic, particular about her clothing, and offended by Okon's general mannerisms, which she complains are "too ethnic." She speaks English with a posh accent, a fact that Okon mocks by pinching his nose to imitate the way she "speaks through her nose." While Basi provides a parody of himself, Isabella is the object of ridicule that we regard through the vantage point that Okon and the other servant provide. It is like the Gateman whose role in the narrative is something like a placeholder for the everyman, or a marginal vantage point (Diawara 2010). We laugh at the fool for being foolish, but on another register his ostensibly naïve commentary on the excesses and pretensions of his

supposed cultural superiors draws them down into the absurd carnival of performances and opens a position of oppositionality to power and wealth.

I have argued that video comedies are notable for their non-narrative features—not the seamless flow of storytelling but a series of intensities punctuated by laughter that need not add up to a whole. I have also argued that this structure encourages a spectatoriality that corresponds with that of the public space of the city. I finally have argued that even though laughter typically interpolates one to share a modern urban sensibility, even this subject position comes under comic scrutiny. I want to add here a framing concept, that of video comedies as a “body genre.” Although Linda Williams focuses on melodrama, horror, and pornographic films in her famous essay theorizing the affective operations of different genres, she does note that comedy can work like a body genre at times (1991). In the comedies considered here, it is the punch lines that matter, not an ideological or moral conceit and not an efficient narrative arc with the gratification of closure. Laughter itself is a bodily response that often comes unconsciously, or even requires one not to overthink things. The advantage of viewing popular humor in this way is to understand how the public’s laughter on the street secures the shift of register from the official to the unofficial or “in-the-know” protocols, how it momentarily reveals the real relations among people and things, how it performatively establishes a shift in the social reality in that moment, how a good performance can have “real” effects.

I argue that comedies are uniquely capable of addressing problems that are persistent, shared in common, and create commonly held anxieties. Like Nigerian melodramas, these comedies act on the bodies of viewers (Larkin 2008, Krings and Okome 2012), albeit in ways that differ significantly. Comic scenarios are designed to shock and outrage audiences but without the same moral inertia as melodrama. They push the limits of disgust and suspend the

repercussions of crossing that line, meaning we can take pleasure in being grossed-out. Gender roles, for instance, provide a recurring fault line and rich grounds for humor. In *Jelili*, several men (and Jelili) enter a beauty pageant, dress in women's gowns, and parade on the catwalk before the most respected members of the community in a playful violation of gender roles. The men are placed under the tutelage of women, who put them through rigorous training to walk, dress, and behave well like women. The titillation of transgressing social norms is at the root of such humor, but the scenario also draws attention to the unquestioned values inscribed in gender. (For example, the men in drag are mocked because they cannot correctly answer questions about how to be a good wife). In the section that follows, I wish to examine how the ambiguity and uneasy laughter that surrounds those comic figures located where competing social and cultural values collide often shifts between a conservative anxiety, especially about the diminished power of men, and an implicit acknowledgement and enjoyment of social performances as such.

#### Tendentious Humor Surrounding “Big Girls”

As the foregoing survey of video comedies reveals, the forms of laughter these narratives produce inevitably circle back around to issues of power, although the power in question is not identical to the power of the postcolonial elite, which is the favorite target of postcolonial cinema's carnivalesque derision. Hardly a weapon of the weak put to work subverting an autocratic authority imposed upon the masses from above, the laughter of Nollywood video comedies deals in another mode of power that cannot be embodied in a single figure and does not manifest itself in brute displays of force. City/village comedies foreground what Tcheuyap describes as postcolonial Africa's “new forms of subjectivity which involve exercising the ability to laugh, play, and entertain in a context where the old authorities are virtually absent.

Postcolonial power reveals itself in a *different* form—not exercised from above by colonial centres, but shifting and omnipresent, as described by Michel Foucault” (2010, p. 29). In a way, the dynamic between power that precedes the subject and the subject that emerges only through negotiation with, for instance, the power embodied by the family, community, or society is one of Adejunmobi’s fundamental concerns, although she does not use these terms and speaks instead about the discrepancy between performance of the individual self and that of one’s social self, the most obvious example of the latter being, for Adejunmobi, one’s obligation to family.<sup>36</sup> It is also a concern that motivates Harrow’s theorization of Nollywood’s “masks,” by which he refers to the various new identities and subjectivities that Nollywood puts on display. Taking *Osuofia in London* as an exemplary model, Harrow argues that Nollywood’s typecasting, stock characters, and genre conventions—what its critics point to as Nollywood’s trashiness, all that confines it to a position of “low” cultural esteem—are in fact its strength because through these excesses “it displays its masks and masking performances as though they were rehearsals for parts, rather than pure being imitated in its quiddity” (259). In this play with masks, with assuming, modifying, and switching identities, or putting on performances that fulfill the expectations placed upon one in given social circumstances, we witness Nollywood video comedies addressing in an unexpectedly sophisticated way those new forms of subjectivity that are said to be emerging in Africa today.

Stock characters figure prominently in the comic vocabulary of the films considered above, providing ready examples of the various masks and disguises to which Harrow refers. But this does not always mean that the performance of these typecast urban/rural figures get folded into the narrative so as to be made visible to the audience as such. In some instances, these social types are offered up as objects of ridicule meant to convey a light cultural or moral

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<sup>36</sup> “Kinship involves obligation and in that respect, performance” (Adejunmobi, 181).

admonishment or as the object of derision for a more modern, sophisticated audience that is “in the know,” but a critical self-awareness is evident in some video comedies, and therefore important to identify and differentiate for the way such an awareness changes the entire import of the humor. More than any other comedy considered here, the tremendously popular Yoruba-language comedy *Jenifa* and its sequel *The Return of Jenifa* characterize the difference between mere performance and the extent to which performance can be harnessed in a form of agency.

Funke Akindele’s fame centers on her comic persona, Jenifa, from the eponymous 2007 home video *Jenifa*, which enjoyed immense popularity at the time of its release. In the first part, we follow and are amused by the transformation of Suliya, a very bush girl though popular in her village of Ayetoro, into Jenifa, the cosmopolitan “big girl” who lives large by manipulating wealthy men in Lagos. In the sequel, *The Return of Jenifa*, released in cinemas in 2010 where it made N 38 million (that's the second highest grossing Nollywood movie ever), Jenifa returns to the village a refined woman from the modern metropolis, or at least this is the outward performance she assumes while the narrative itself examines this projected persona as an overtly superficial display, but one which earns the recognition of Jenifa’s family and friends who nevertheless see her performance as such.

When young Suliya, the top girl in her village, heads to Lagos to begin her university education, she makes all manner of preparations for the transition to a new life of fashion and urban style. But the way she carries herself as she first walks onto campus misses the mark entirely and she is ridiculed by the savvier college girls who have assimilated impeccably. These first scenes generate their humor around the incongruity of spatial logics that ostensibly divide the village and the city, not at all unlike the rural-urban migration narratives described above. In fact, the narrative conventions of the first half of *Jenifa* do not differ from other video comedies

including *O o M'Eko*, *Jelili*, and *Okon Lagos*. Jump cuts between the campus and the village give a physical sense of the divide, but the conduct of characters tells us more about the distinction being illustrated between spaces. The narrative positions us to laugh with the college students as we laugh at Suliati and her bush parents who do not know how to use a phone. We succumb to the comedy of incongruity that seems so common among city/village comedies. The clash between village girl and big girl is reiterated again and again in the characters' style of dress, their accents, their grasp of English slang, and their sensibilities with regards to men and money.

I believe that something about Funke Akindele's performance captures the ambivalent humor of this genre unlike the other films. We are invited to laugh at Suliati's failed attempts to "blend" with her college peers, while the film again and again directs our focus to her exaggerated imitations of urban style and global popular culture in order to underscore the difference between "tush" and "bush," or posh and pathetic. But by "failing" to meet the mark, and by reproducing the performance of the "fine girl," but doing so poorly, we could say that Jenifa puts on the mask in order to play at certain stereotypes of the materialistic, modern urban woman, and of the young woman as a gold digger, the "fine girl" or "big girl." In her examination of Nigerian standup comedy, Adejunmobi refers to the female comedian Helen Paul's stripping down of the stereotypical "fine girl" persona, which Adejunmobi glosses as a performance intended to convey that "being considered a fine girl is simply a matter of performing using the appropriate props" (186). In essence, the humor surrounding this gendered performance stems from the recognition that what you see and desire is not what you get necessarily. This humor gets complicated in *Jenifa* as the narrative oscillates between presenting stereotypes about those with and those without "exposure" to cosmopolitan sensibilities in a manner that reinforces the valuation of a modern urban subjects over their rural counterparts, and

presenting these typecast characters as masked performers playing at the type in order to create a tendentious laughter that acknowledges these performances as such. The difference between the two positions turns on whether we understand *Jenifa*'s comedy as a subdued misogynistic disdain for the ostentatious behavior of young college women, or as a means of finding agency through performance.

When Suliat first arrives at the hostel she imposes herself upon Becky's clique and is tossed out of the hostel. The clique invites her back when they see she has no where else to turn, but only after laying down the ground rules and insisting she attempt to "blend." The "blending"/becoming scene, itself a take on the perennial Pygmalion trope so common in comedy of manners, pinpoints item by item the details that distinguish a big girl from a village girl: no picking noses, must sit up straight, must cross one's legs, should pepper one's Yoruba with empty English phrases, must dress just so, must learn the subtleties of make up, must lose one's local accent, must say "ouch" not "Yeeeh" when one gets hurt. This scene is followed by their trip to the salon where Suliat undergoes transformation and emerges "Jenifa." This scene reverses the standup performance of Helen Paul, who gradually removes all the accouterment of her "fine girl" persona, but both skits convey the same premise, pointing to the construction of the mask and thereby making it the object of humor as opposed to the social actor who dons the mask.

We can understand *Jenifa*'s drawn out transformation scenes, like Helen Paul's stripping down skit, as examples of what Harrow, in reference to Osuofia's comic performance, calls "tendentious minstrelsy" which functions on the basis of a division "between the blackface one puts on and the person revealed to be underneath the mask once the paint is washed off" (253). In *Jenifa* and *The Return* the blackface burnt cork paint is replaced with eyeliner behind Gucci

sunglasses, but the premise that “the outer mask becomes the object, and when so obviously put on,” as when Jenifa struts and speaks like a Lagos fine girl, just like Osuofia’s impersonation of a proper English gentleman, “we laugh at [her] and [her] naiveté” (253). Harrow goes on to argue, following Judith Butler, that as these characters “exceed the mask and are shown assuming a role to be played for the other... they display an agency that becomes apparent as they are viewed as putting on the mask” (253).

The film departs from this style of comedy after the first disc and pursues the girls in their journey to become the biggest big girls on campus. The film leaves behind the comedy of incongruity along with Jenifa's village habits since we have come to see her remaining localisms as endearing quirks. The viewer now regards Jenifa as the character Suliat putting on a performance as a last recourse when confronted by the chauvinism of the stylish, modern citizens of Lagos. The big girls may sneer at her accent but it proves their wickedness and envy.

As the narrative develops, mixed genre conventions appear to guide the events that follow. The narrative builds in ever more gratuitous demonstrations of the materialistic preoccupations of big girls to the point that their blind pursuit of cash, cars, and status leads them straight into the trap of campus cultists. There is considerable evidence of genre mixing as this portion of the narrative follows the conventions of a moral revelation, where evil befalls the girls as a consequence of their dealings with immoral elements, a typical Nollywood trope. This narrative impulse to imagine the containment of female sexuality and power in the form of material acquisitiveness runs throughout *Jenifa* and *The Return*, but this gendered moral discourse feels insufficient to actually effect that containment for the spectator for whom the moments of laughter outweigh the instances of moral shock that are inserted in order to offer closure. Ultimately, the clique of four meet with four different fates that illustrate the

consequences that inevitably follow from a life lived frivolously.

The overarching moral discourse on materialism and the sexuality of young urban women is undercut throughout by the (non-narrative) pleasure associated with fashion, fads, commodities, and urban popular culture generally, to say nothing of the mixed pleasure usually attending Nollywood's aesthetics of outrage (Larkin 2008). I would emphasize, furthermore, that outrage contains within it a vicarious participation in that which transgresses social norms. To view video film is also to imaginatively partake in their televisual/cinematic worlds. In *Jenifa* we observe the typical repertoire of symbols signifying gratuitous wealth: expensive liquor, lavish interior rooms, SUVs, fine clothes, bundles of cash. However, I propose that the film does not aestheticize commodities in a way that we might claim the film's display of commodities stimulates the viewer's consumption of their image. Rather, they still function as signs of wealth, class, status, and power embedded in a story about the social and moral dynamics surrounding the escapades of big girls and big men. (See especially the preparation for the party, and the first meeting with the chiefs.) But the film does set aside an extended party scene, just before the occult explodes onto the screen, during which the film attempts to create the ambience of decadent enjoyment, to show us the lights, the gyrating hips on the crowded dance floor, the food and drink, and the skimpy cloths on sexy bodies. This scene reminds one of countless music and party scenes in Yoruba home videos.

The narrative of *Return of Jenifa* departs from the decisive segmentation to which *Jenifa* adhered. We pick up the story in a glamorous Lagos neighborhood. Jenifa has retained her comic quirks but has also mastered her environment to a degree. Jenifa never quite sheds all traces of her local, village girl mannerisms, which we find endearing and innocently humorous. The story re-establishes her character and the ground rules for the film's particular variety of comedy

before we set off for Jenifa's home village of Ayetoro in a journey that reverses her movements in *Jenifa*. In a sequence that mirrors Jenifa's blending with the other women at university, we watch her distribute gifts from the big city: makeup, perfume, miniskirts and brand name T-shirts. Again we laugh at the construction of the big girl persona as she bestows her sensibilities upon the young ladies of Ayetoro, teaching them the lessons she was taught before she could become a big girl: practice meticulous hygiene, use an affected American or English accent, wash off the Indian beauty mark that was their mothers' style, wear make up just so, and generally do everything "sessily" (sexily). We laugh at the impersonations of city women just as we were made to laugh at Jenifa before she could compose her identity and learn to deliver a practiced performance of urban style. Furthermore, we roll our eyes at the borrowed prestige that Jenifa brings with her from Lagos and her exposure to fashion and urban popular culture.

In the village, the question of money, its source, and its moral status again arise and illuminate a social fault line at the intersection of gender roles, access to money, and the performance of urban and rural subjectivity. Jenifa arrives home in time for the Ileya Festival during which each family with the means to do so must make a contribution to the expenses of the celebration. Jenifa's family has been receiving remittances from their daughter in the big city and are therefore acutely aware of the generous contribution the rest of the village expects of them; surely, no less than a male ram will suffice. When Jenifa's father returns home with an especially small goat, his son and wife chide him for the embarrassment such a small goat will bring for the family: "Who owns that little goat tied up out front," his wife questions sarcastically. When Jenifa enters the scene with a large ram, her brother dragging it by the horns, the Father's kid goat is dwarfed just as his authority is diminished by depending upon his daughter for money. The tension between the emancipated daughter and the diminished patriarch

turns on Jenifa's prosperity in the city and her questionable relationships with wealthy men, which is the source of her money. Confronted by her father, Jenifa mumbles unconvincingly about working in "an office." "I heard about your escapades in Lagos, and each time I ask you, you tell me it's all rumors. Yet your mother jubilates every time you bring money home. She gets so excited once she sees money she doesn't inquire as to its source." The father's attempt to point at the unspoken but public secret of Suliati's new life as "Jenifa" falls on deaf ears. Jenifa's mother and brother appear fully willing to overlook her relations with men as long as she can continue to fulfill her obligations to the family. They offer a knowing recognition to Jenifa's performance as a Lagos fine girl, given that this assumed persona ensures their own needs and desires will be met. The scene recalls Adejunmobi's anecdote about the Nigerian family who choose to rent three cows to sufficiently honor their deceased father, even though only one cow will be slaughtered for his funeral feast. She concludes that although the community is well aware that the extra cows will be returned to their owner and not slaughtered, they are willing to participate in the performance of prestige and to lend it their acknowledgement.

### Conclusion

The transformation of the self, from a village girl to a big girl, is at the heart of Jenifa's story, but we find the same dream of upward social mobility conjured throughout Nollywood. The *Jenifa* series stands out because it has brought that transformation to life, it has made "grass to grace" the principle driving every element of the series. Suliati has shed her local appearance and mannerisms for a meticulously self-styled urban persona. The divide between Suliati's local character and her Lagos persona represents the old and new in unmistakably distinct stylings. In precisely the same way, the divide between *Jenifa* and *The Return of Jenifa* marks an

unmistakable turn in the aesthetics of video film, a transformation that parallels Suliat/Jenifa's journey, as well as her internal conflict between change and authenticity, money and morality. Could we not say that Nollywood has endured a similar rags to riches journey since its humble beginnings in the marketplace. The *Jenifa* series puts this transfiguration into perfect focus in nearly all its dimensions: theme, narrative structure, image, mise-en-scene, modes of production and distribution, and of course characterization. Adejunmobi argues that the growth of media industries in Nigeria has begun to fundamentally change the relationship between media, performance, and social reality, and has shaped audiences' expectations around mediated and unmediated performance. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the rise of New Nollywood with its red carpet cinema premieres, slick visual aesthetics and glamorous star system that today captivate Nollywood fans, one might easily forget the industry's origins, the transformation being nearly night and day.

## Chapter 4:

### New Nollywood: The Rise of Nollywood's Metropolitan New Style

The story of Nollywood's unlikely origins has been by now thoroughly detailed in scholarly and journalistic accounts that often frame the film industry as perpetually on the rise. It is true that in its first decade, Nollywood thrived by releasing thousands of films directly into video markets and networks of petty commerce, which carried the films across West Africa. However, by 2007, signs within Nollywood suggested that that industry had entered a period of generalized fatigue: among producers disheartened by various constraints on the industry's growth, and among audiences who hunger for new stories and more refined images. Now earnings from those markets have dwindled due to piracy and high levels of competition. Nevertheless, Nollywood's rise to the status of regional cultural dominant has brought about alternative opportunities for distribution, prompting a number of filmmakers to begin experimenting with high-stakes, big budget films explicitly intended for exhibition at national, regional, and diasporic cinemas. The results have stirred optimism that the industry might soon witness a renaissance and have inspired a new watchword, "cinema culture," which, in Lagos in 2011, captured the hope that Nollywood might find new life at the clutch of multiplex cinemas that continue to multiply in major cities across Southern Nigeria. The top-of-the-line films that have since emerged from this ongoing process of industry segmentation have come to be known as "New Nollywood."

For industry insiders, this new brand of films satisfies the developmentalist anticipation that the industry will gradually rise to achieve so-called international standards as its films travel along broader regional and diaspora cultural flows, extending their reach to wider audiences, propelling even more growth and improvement, and so on. But the films themselves remain

scarce at local video markets, in part because producers must safeguard their film—and large financial investment it represents—from exposure to the piracy that attends wide-scale DVD circulation. New Nollywood finds itself confronted by the same dilemma that canonical African cinema has faced for decades—how to make sophisticated filmmaking both financially sustainable and widely appealing to audiences on the continent. To be sure, the production and distribution circuits for Nollywood and African cinema remain distinct and, as Jonathan Haynes admonishes, we should be careful not to flatten or conflate them (2014: 58-9).<sup>37</sup> For instance, the film festivals that traditionally sustain the repertory of African cinema, including FESPACO, Carthage Film Festival, and Durban International Film Festival, marginalize video film submissions, while alternative vetting institutions, such as the Africa Movie Academy Awards, emerge on the momentum created by Nigeria’s video film boom. Alternately, countries like Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon continue to produce great achievements in film, even as they play a role in the growth of popular screen media. Recent scholarship has linked Nollywood to vibrant video film practices in Senegal, Ghana, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Barbados, and the global African diaspora (see Garritano 2012; Krings & Okome 2013; Saul & Austen 2010; Ajibade 2007). In an important essay on this proliferation of screen media, Moradewun Adejunmobi discusses a “televisual turn” in African filmed narrative fiction (2015). I intend here not to argue that New Nollywood negates this televisual turn, but rather suggests that competition or convergence are both insufficient models to describe the diversification of film practices and media forms found in Africa today.

This essay does intend to examine how New Nollywood and its spaces of exhibition lend

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Haynes contends that New Nollywood and African cinema continue to differ in their sources of funding, the type of audience they address and attract, the politics they represent on screen (Haynes 2014: 58-9). I share his concern that we not overstate the convergence of these different film practices, but we should continue to reconsider the types of questions we put to different films.

fuller texture and density to an emergent neoliberal subjectivity. An urban professional class assumes a central role in these films, particularly as the “aspirational” model of “Africa rising” to meet new opportunities wrought by globalization. Troubling as their ideological limitations may be, these films push the boundary of new aesthetic trends in which contradictory realities can be subsumed beneath an assemblage of affective encounters with sumptuous objects, places, and lifestyles. In the foregoing, my analysis of affect seeks to carry forward Carmela Garritano’s illuminating comments on the aesthetics of new Nigerian and Ghanaian film productions, a style she describes as “an assemblage of desires, bodies, objects, and intensities that presents spectators with pleasurable, affective encounters with new urban consumerism” (2014: 47). Like Garritano, I draw from Anastup Basu’s *Bollywood in the Age of New Media*, a study of affect and informatics in Bollywood cinema, in order to imagine a new set of questions that we might put to new African screen media.

This chapter proceeds in four sections. The first examines describes trends of differentiation among films and filmmakers in the industry in its ongoing evolution. The second section argues New Nollywood and Nigeria’s new multiplex cinemas share an affective resonance that organizes the senses to foreground connectivity, mobility, and contemporaneity with global consumerism. In the third section, I detail how these films tap into a new aesthetic backed by corporate sponsorship and resembling the slick advertisement images that today crop up across Lagos. They inhabit what I term a metropolitan vantage point – which is to say a perspective that naturalizes metropolitan phenomena such as airline travel, trendy technology, consumer culture, global pop culture, lifestyle brands, high fashion, and luxury goods. This observation leads me to argue that, whereas “old” Nollywood sustains its connection with the popular imagination of its intended audience, New Nollywood—with so much value imputed to

images and style—stands as a direct expression of the cultural and economic forces shaping life in Lagos today. The final section identifies the ways Kunle Afolayan's *Phone Swap* exemplifies the new emphasis placed on film style.

### Trends of Segmentation

The recent shifts in production and distribution methods respond to over-production that continues to saturate the video market with a glut of low-grade movies, and the unregulated television broadcast of Nollywood movies, which has created a new puncture in an already leaky distribution system.<sup>38</sup> During the initial home video boom of the 1990s, audiences witnessed the trickle of new feature-length films, about four per week in 1995, give way to a flood, at least 20 per week in 2001 (Abua 2002, p. 166). This astonishing level of productivity held for years even grew to 31 features appearing in video markets every week by 2007 (Bala 2007, n.p.). This intensification of competition placed producers under strain as they struggled to eke out marginal gains, in the worst cases profiting as little as N10 per VCD, while also working to satisfy audience demands for improved standards of quality. Many discovered that "the amount of films produced had in fact become inversely proportional to the number of copies sold and the funds

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<sup>38</sup> During the initial home video boom, the trickle of new feature-length films, about four per week in 1995, became a torrent of at least twenty per week in 2001 (Abua 2002, p. 166). Productivity steadily grew and by 2007 the video marketers were cramming thirty-one new feature-length movies onto already crowded shelves every week (Bala 2007, n.p.). Though Censors Board records show the number of films *approved* for release decreasing slightly to about one thousand films a year between 2008 and 2012, those figures mask the influx of films *submitted* for review, which did not relent. Meanwhile, some producers simply circumvented official review altogether. If we go by numbers generated by the marketers themselves, nearly half the films produced go unrecorded by the Censors Board. At Idumota Market in Lagos, the heart of finance and distribution for Yoruba-language films, the marketers association organizing and regulating the sale of video films has imposed limits on vendors, effectively holding the number of new releases to thirty every two weeks and going so far as to suspend all new releases for a full month. According to the marketers association's own records, even under these self-imposed restrictions, the Yoruba-language producers released twice as many films in 2012 than the 389 recorded by the Censors Board.

available for production" (Jedlowski 2012, p. 30). Alessandro Jedlowski argues that by 2008 an excess of informal institutions and practices, including "the absence of regulation, the ineffective copyright regime, and the low barriers to entry," lead to "a high degree of imitation" and helped drive what was widely perceived as a crisis for the industry (2012, p. 28). Producers also witnessed their sales being siphoned off by local free-to-air and regional subscription television channels, of which Africa Magic was only the first.<sup>39</sup> To make a dire situation worse, the NFVCB's introduction of the tenuous first steps toward a centralized national distribution system created a vacuum which pirates and amateur marketers quickly exploited (Haynes 2014). Though Censors Board records show the number of films *approved* for release decreasing slightly to about one thousand films a year between 2008 and 2012, the influx of films *submitted* for review has not relented. Further distorting the figures is the fact that many producers simply circumvent censorship review altogether. If we go by numbers generated by the marketers themselves, nearly half the films produced go unrecorded by the Censors Board. At Idumota Market in Lagos, the heart of finance and distribution for Yoruba-language films, the marketers association organizing and regulating the sale of video films has imposed limits on vendors, effectively holding the number of new releases to 30 every two weeks and going so far as to suspend all new releases for a full month. According to the marketers association's own records, even under these self-imposed restrictions, the Yoruba-language producers released twice as many films in 2012 than the 389 recorded by the Censors Board.

Intense pressure from competition and the demand among audiences for improved quality has driven both recent structural changes in the industry and the growing differentiation among film texts and segmentation of film audiences. These conditions have prompted some producers

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<sup>39</sup> These channels do not always pay for rights to broadcast and pay poorly when they do. Africa Magic's representative at the "Nollywood in Africa, Africa in Nollywood" conference held at the Pan African University (July 2011) cited \$700 as the amount paid for unlimited broadcast rights.

to push the limits of how fast and cheap a film can be shot, pressed to video CD, and disbursed to video markets, a process that appears today more like the assembly line of a factory, or “subsistence filmmaking,” as one veteran director skeptically terms it (Bond Emeruwa, personal communication, June 15, 2014). These sensationalist films rip stories straight from the headlines of local tabloid publications and even acquiring their cover images directly from local video-tabloids. They can even be purchases at the same neighborhood kiosks, motor parks, and pop-up pirate video sellers along sidewalks where such tabloid material is sold. For example, the movie *The Missing School Girls*, although allegedly banned by the federal government, was available “under the table” at video markets in Lagos as early as mid-June 2014, no more than eight weeks after the abduction by Boko Haram insurgents of nearly 300 school children in Chibok, Borno State, that exposed to the world the ineptitude of the Goodluck Jonathan administration, sparked local protests marches and international outcry, most notably the hashtag campaign #bringbackourgirls, and generally embroiled the nation in a wrenching political drama. The movie's catchphrase, “Chaii, there is God OOO...,” which references the first lady Patience Jonathan's histrionic plea during a government inquiry, had become an ironic slogan of daily use by then, in the same way “oga at the top” and “subsidy” had entered daily vocabulary following frustrating public fiascos. To be sure, *The Missing School Girls* represents an extreme variant of the sensationalist aesthetic of immediacy which seeks, in its timeliness, to be equal parts inflammatory and lucrative.

Another trend in segmentation has produced a boom in indigenous-language films that appeal to audiences based on shared language, experiences, and attention to topical issues. Yoruba-language filmmakers have quite successfully operated in this way for years, addressing a ready-made, loyal audience on perennial themes, with actors whose presence alone implies a

welcome predictability for audiences familiar with their screen personas and performance repertoires. Garritano has observed a similar trend in Ghana's video film industry. There she identifies a surge in Akan-language films that are "topical in focus and made and consumed quickly [and that] dialogue directly with local publics" (2012: 172-73).

Producers on the other end of the spectrum have created a growing body of professional films that depict particular modes of consumption, gender relations, family bonds, and forms of global popular culture in a bid for wider transnational reach. These filmmakers have pursued the path of greater professionalization and found success in reorganizing their production practices so as to operate more like a film studio. These practices include employing several directors at once, coordinating several films in different stages of production, shooting films for low- and high-end markets, branding iconic characters, operating film training programs, handling publicity in-house, and distributing their films directly to vendors and through studio-own storefronts at major video markets. These films do not represent the vanguard of the new wave of films, but they do point to a more sustainable trend.

None have been as prolific as Royal Arts Academy, the production company founded by Emem Isong in 2010 in the Surulere neighborhood where the production branch of Nollywood has historically rooted its offices. Isong entered banking after receiving a degree in Theater Arts from the University of Calabar, but she soon left her career in banking to work as co-producer on the Nollywood classic *Jezebel* (1994). She went on to write and produce her own films and to collaborate with influential marketers like Rob Emeka Eze of Remmy Jes Productions and high-profile directors like Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen until Isong opened Royal Arts Academy as a film training program catering to the swell of young film personnel looking for an in road to the industry. Today Royal Arts comprises of three branches: a film school, a production unit and a

distribution arm, though the school operates independent of the production and distribution branches.

This production company is vertically integrated and thus has more creative control and more direct oversight of the financing, production and distribution of its films. It has consolidated the relationships between producers, actors and personnel into an outfit that operates like a film studio. The studio retains a writing team of four, Uduak Oguamanam, Kehinde Joseph, Rita Onwurah and Bola Aduwo, some of whom also produce the films they write. Royal Arts owns all its own film equipment, including camera, lenses, tracks and dollies, lighting and sound recording equipment, though they may turn to a reputable production equipment leaser to rent anything they lack, such as a generator to contend with Nigeria's unreliable power supply.<sup>40</sup> Although Royal Arts does not keep directors under contract, virtually all its films are shot by a handful of directors, like Desmond Elliot, Ikechukwu Onyeka and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, who have long-standing, strong ties with Isong. Like Kelani's Mainframe and Afolayan's Golden Effects studios, any editing and post-production is done in-house by both contracted and freelance editors, which circumvents independent editors from the Editor's Guild to whom most producers turn for post-production facilities and one-time services. In fact, the aversion of the filmmakers in question to the politics of the guild system has earned them the reputation within the industry mainstream as “individualistic” filmmakers. Nevertheless, for a studio like Royal Arts, all this makes it possible for the production unit to

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<sup>40</sup> At a rental rate of as much as N 40,000 a day, Kunle Afolayan decided to buy a generator the size of an SUV for his own Golden Effects Studio, which he also rents out to smaller producers for small income on the side. Yinka Edward explained that though Afolayan's studio owns its own RED Mysterium digital video camera, they rented specialized lenses from the Nigerian Film Institute (NFI) in Jos. This must be a considerable cost to the production since, as Edward explained, they must pay for an NFI official to fly from Jos with the lenses and stay on as custodian of NFI property during filming. These NFI resources are hypothetically available to any filmmaker in Nigeria, but the attendant costs place such equipment out of reach for most.

work simultaneously on four or five films in different stages of completion and to release no fewer than six features in a year.

Like a major film studio, Royal Arts can anticipate that a few features will sell exceptionally well, like *Okon Lagos* (2012) or *Nollywood Hustlers* (2009), and will thereby allow Isong to recuperate any expenses lost on several films that failed to sell well. This method gives Royal Arts the advantage of maintaining continual forward momentum since Isong does not depend on turnover from one film to bankroll new films. As she put it in an interview, "I don't wait for the turnover, but I know eventually it's going to come." ("Limits of Informality" 2014: 177). New productions and releases are lined up so close as to overlap, meaning Isong does not need to wait for one film to peak in sales before putting money into a new production. This affords her producers and directors the leeway to tailor different filmmaking practices to low- and high-end markets in an overall strategy for attenuating financial risk. For instance, Isong explained to me that her Ibibio language films, produced quickly and inexpensively, are so popular with audiences in the Southeast that they bring a larger return than her high-budget English-language films that can circulate across West Africa. In this sense, Royal Arts employs the same logic of cross-collateralization that, according to Simon During, was common among the first movies consciously aimed at transnational film markets (1997: 814). The difference is that Isong's company makes this model workable across the ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines along which the industry has witnessed growing segmentation. The fact that this sort of differentiation occurs within a single company, almost like Hollywood's two-tiered system of "A" and "B" films, indicates that Nollywood's recent hodgepodge differentiation of films does not arise from a gap in technical capabilities or competency as much as it reflects different filmmakers' measured strategies for contending with an unwieldy, unforgiving video market.

The latest development in the industry's segmentation has been the rise of New Nollywood. This clutch of sophisticated films reach out to transnational and metropolitan audiences by bypassing the grassroots home video market in favor of new distribution windows, including satellite television, streaming video websites, video on-demand, in-flight entertainment, and especially theaters in West Africa and the diaspora abroad. While not every Nigerian film that appears in cinemas is a New Nollywood film, all the films in this new wave did debut in theaters before ever appearing on DVD, and many have simply never made it as far as DVD distribution. The theatrical release in 2010 of four Nollywood films, Chineze Anyaene's *Ije: The Journey*, Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine*, Jeta Amata's *Inale*, and Lonzo Nzekwe's *Anchor Baby*, signaled a coup for the industry in view of local producers. These were followed in 2011 by Mahmood Ali-Balogun's *Tango with Me*, Obi Emelonye's *Mirror Boy*, Funke Akindele's *Return of Jenifa*, and nearly a dozen others. The following year saw the theatrical release of over twenty Nollywood films as the slotting of Nollywood movies alongside Hollywood and Bollywood fare became a normal arrangement. A number of these early films did exceedingly well at the box office and, although few films have since come close to replicating this level of success, acclaim from local critics and favorable publicity still offer these films large sums of symbolic if not actual capital.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the cinemas serve as both the first window in a tiered system of release and a starting point for gauging what is new—and not so new—in Nollywood.

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<sup>41</sup> According to one film distributor's box office figures, the highest grossing Nollywood film remains Anyaene's *Ije*, which made over fifty-two million naira (USD \$ 325,000) after appearing in just six theaters around the country. For perspective, that figure is double the earnings of most Hollywood films of the same year, like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Twilight Saga*, *Sex and the City*.

## Metropolitan Audiences and Multiplex Cinemas

In 2004, Silverbird Group, a private media house with holdings in radio, film distribution and exhibition, television, and real estate, opened a five-screen cinema on the top floor of the company's shopping center newly built in the posh seaside residential and commercial district of Victoria Island.<sup>42</sup> The construction of the country's first multi-screen cinema in an affluent pocket of urban development signaled a departure from the cinema culture of the 1970s and 1980s, which flourished around some thirty cinema halls located across Lagos that brought American, Chinese, Indian, and some Nigerian films to broad urban audience until these theaters went defunct in the early-1990s.<sup>43</sup> The success of the Silverbird franchise sparked renewed interest in cinema exhibition, which seemed more viable given the return of relative security and stability to Lagos. Today, three companies, Silverbird, Genesis, and Filmhouse, operate more than twenty multiplex cinemas in major cities across Southern Nigeria, including Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Uyo, Enugu, Calabar, Ibadan.

These cinema operators envision their theaters as leisure destinations for those seeking

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<sup>42</sup> Silverbird Group was first founded by Ben Murray-Bruce as an entertainment and event promotions company called Silverbird Productions. Beginning in the late-1980s, its cornerstone event was, oddly enough, the Miss Africa World Beauty Pageant, a regional competition for which Silverbird acquired the rights from the Miss World Beauty Pageant. As Patrick Lee of the Silverbird Board of Trustees related to me, the idea to build a multiplex cinema arose when visiting foreign dignitaries for the beauty pageant protested the lack of Lagos nightlife (Lee, personal communication, March 13, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> During Nigeria's oil boom, when cinema halls enjoyed a peak due to boosted domestic consumption and strengthened purchasing power on film importation, Lagos alone hosted twenty-eight licensed cinemas and a rumored forty "pirate" cinemas (Ekwuazi 1987: 82). The American Motion Picture Exportation Corporation of Africa (AMPECA) supplied these cinemas with Hollywood B-films from MGM, Columbia, United Artists, 20th Century Fox. Chinese and Indian films arrived through illicit import networks linking Bombay and Hong Kong films to Nigerian cinemas through pirate distributors in Dubai, Cairo, Abu Dhabi and Singapore, in part because the cinema halls were often owned by Indian and Lebanese Nigerians with personal relationships (NK Murthy personal communication, July 16, 20013; see also, Larkin 2008: 222-24). By the end of the 1990s, these cinemas closed due to growing economic and social instability. The surviving cinemas were not converted to churches or warehouses.

entertainment and an escape from the enervate grind of the city. “It’s an excursion,” as Jonathan Murray-Bruce, the General Manager of Silverbird Entertainment, put it to me during a conversation about the galleria’s opening.

If you have a cinema alone then people just come and go. We want to have an entertainment area, a mall where people will come to the cinema, go to shops and [partake of] everything. When you have a mall and a cinema together, you have a lot of people coming but you want them to stay around. Those same people will want to go to a movie, will want to eat, will want to shop. . . . It’s interrelated. They play off each other. And soon it becomes a destination, a full day event. Especially considering traffic and how hard it is to get anywhere [in Lagos]. You want a place where its convenient for people to come, enjoy their time, and then they go home so they aren’t going from one place to another. It’s more incentive for them to come out. (personal communication, March 20, 2013)

The shopping center caters to the city’s most elite consumers and explicitly codes itself as a landmark of exuberant leisure. It is precisely because of this overt coding that the mall serves as a symbolically charged reference point for all Lagosians. In one scene from *The Return of Jenifa*, for instance, the metropolitan “big girl” Jenifa (Funke Akindele) enjoys an afternoon of shopping and spa treatment at Silverbird Galleria. The sequence, otherwise insignificant to the plot, moves from establishing to interior shots so as to capture the character crossing the mall’s threshold and marveling at the change of mise-en-scène. The scene suggests a fascination with the ability of the mall, like that of the cinematic apparatus, to enframe a lifelike world of its own. The shopping center provides the enhanced allure of environments that Achille Mbembe calls “synthetic spacetimes,” or “constructed tableaux on which disparate images are grafted,” which is to say

environments “through which late modernity and the globalization of capitalism have transformed human [sensory] perceptions” (2008: 60). This stimulation of visitors’ sensory perceptions and the mall’s commodification of leisure time are integral to the space’s construction of modern subjectivity, as we glimpse in Jenifa’s orchestrated passage through the mall’s threshold.

Upon entering the Silverbird franchise branch at the Accra Mall in Ghana, Garritano recalls that “though many of the specific stores were unknown to me, the mall seemed an utterly familiar place, its geography and atmosphere replicating any shopping mall I might find in the United States. And this, of course, is precisely the point” (2012: 176). Be it Accra or Lagos, the mall promises the same pleasures that a clientele, who have enjoyed a level of cosmopolitan “exposure,” as one might say in Nigeria, come to expect from similar encounters abroad. To achieve this affective experience, Silverbird Galleria in Lagos imported specialized technology and equipment and enlisted expert consultants from Universal Cinema Services, according to Patrick Lee, General Manager of Silverbird's sister cinema, Ozone, and member of Silverbird Group’s board of trustees. Based in Texas, Universal Cinema Services functions something like a one-stop shop for cinema franchises from Japan and Italy to Ghana and Nigeria. The company provides consultation on architectural and spatial design, specialized labor for outfitting the cinema, and procurement of technology and equipment, from the film projector and sound system right down to the seating, popcorn machine, wallpaper, and tiles. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that for any well-traveled cinema-goer, entering a cinema hall provokes an experience of the uncanny.

Although a singular landmark within Lagos, Silverbird’s architecture and décor are a local iteration of a spatial form that is reproduced around the world. The same is true of the

mall's intended affective experience, meaning that to enter the theater entails entering a globalized sensorium. As such, the cinema promises to insert spectators, as if seamlessly, into an immersive space of consumption—centered on the film—that is shared around the globe. It is marked, as Amit Rai argues, by the intensification of the dream of total cinema, the multiplication of the image across an array of screen media technologies, the illusion of freedom in the form of choice from a plethora of self-differentiating options, and the complete immersion of the body in “image-commodity consumption through the simulation of reality as its intensification” (2009: 140). The cinema's sensorium, furthermore, the so-called cinema experience, is as much temporal as it is spatial. In fact, the fantasy of immediacy and perfect contemporaneity with global media flows is so integral to Silverbird cinema's aura that the company petitioned (successfully) for the rights to premiere Hollywood blockbusters in tandem with their American premiere. Closing the temporal gap has enhanced the cinema-goer's fantasy of partaking in a global consumer culture in real-time. The ritual of cinema-going is made all the more dramatic by contrast with the backdrop of Lagos, its generalized condition of economic scarcity and fundamental spatial discontinuity, from which one retreats into a décor of continuity, mobility, and immediacy.

The boundary between the chaotic streetscape and the galleria's highly controlled interior is marked by a security gate manned by a detail of private security guards. Beyond the entrance, one immediately confronts large advertisement banners, draped from the top to the ground floor, bearing the brand images of telecommunications companies such as MTN, Airtel, Etisalat, as well as those of Airk Airlines, Coca-Cola, and regional banks. The images encourage one's identification with a lifestyle of pleasures and enjoyment, of high technology, high fashion, and the idea that one must, as the motto above one retail clothing store exhorts, “Wear it, Love it,

Live it.” Within the building, screen media is pervasive. A digital projector casts a video image across the floor before the circular central plaza, while dozens of smaller digital screens perch around the mall screening advertising images. The Union Bank on the ground level features a twelve by eight foot flat screen television that cycles through trailers for films currently showing at the cinema on the fourth floor. Small plasma-screen consoles beam image and sound from atop small kiosks provided for patrons to charge their mobile devices. The mall’s dedicated private generator, an expensive but essential infrastructure given the epileptic public grid that subjects Lagos to daily blackouts, produces the electricity.

The configuration of shops and attractions gives one the sense of an array of global spatial imaginaries drawn together, enframed within the structure of the shopping mall and composed to suggest their immediacy and accessibility. Furthermore, as Amit Rai argues of multiplex cinemas in India, “middle-class habituations connect buying in the space of the [multiplex] to movement and modernity through technologies of the global (credit cards, privatized devoted energy generators, cell and land phone lines, wireless and fiber optics, English-speaking salespeople, regularized quality control, standardization. . .)” (2009: 159). In this way, the material organization of the multiplex cinema conscripts the body in the constitution of “modern” subjectivity and strongly foregrounds the illusion of free and infinite mobility in the experience of that modernity.

In the lobby plaza of Silverbird, sales representatives from a Dubai travel agency greet shoppers and solicit them to consider a luxury holiday in the United Arab Emirates. A GT Bank advertisement invites visitors to upgrade to their world-class credit card, which offers the freedom to “spend anywhere in the world.” An Asian fusion restaurant with its exotic cuisine appeals to a cosmopolitan curiosity for an ambiance and flavor of somewhere foreign. All

remaining surfaces are stylized to match an imaginary of classical architecture with marble floors, striated columns, and a fresco painting that ornaments the ceiling over the ground floor's open-air plaza. Central air conditioning pumps out cool, dry air, fragrant as if scented by a floral air freshener. Music fills the atmosphere, mingling with the diffuse voices of shoppers on all floors. The complex configuration of this spatial design expands the “cinema experience” into a dense set of affective associations, such that, as Silverbird's Jonathan Murray-Bruce observed, they “play off each other, and soon it becomes a destination, a full day event.” As he later remarked to me: “Cinema, what you're selling is an experience. You come in, you get into a hall, and you are away from the outside world. You come in by yourself, with a date, with a friend. They get to immerse themselves in another world. They have the big screen, the sound. It is easier to lose yourself in the story” (Murray-Bruce, personal communication, March 20, 2013).

In the Nollywood films screened at Silverbird, that story is more than ever invested in the display of goods that “offer themselves as artworks not just for sale but also for use in people's fantasies and in the production of lifestyles” (Mbembe 2008: 60). One can imagine an analogy between the film's engagement with the spectator and the shopping mall's designed effect on the shopper, a parallel that has long existed in other commercial film industries but seemed impossible for Nollywood given its arduous conditions of production. Garritano similarly argues, in regards to the Ghanaian film industry, that the cinematic world of glamour films functions in parallel with the environment of the mall, “provoking desire not only for the goods on display, but for the characters’ lifestyles” (2012: 177). This same commodity aesthetic is at work in many New Nollywood films, such as Michelle Bello's romantic comedy, *Flower Girl* (2012). In one key scene, set in a clothing boutique, the modest and plainly dressed protagonist, Kemi, transforms into a posh socialite in a makeover montage that would be recognizable to anyone

familiar with contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies. Kemi models for her friend in the dressing room, trying on several outfits that each stylistically signify a different persona, a new subjectivity, one of which she will select and inhabit according to the dictates of the genre. The scene performs the fantasy intimated by the motto above the retail store: “Wear it, Love it, Live it.” In this light, we can glimpse Nollywood's growing power to link image, affect, and the performance of new subjectivities.

New Nollywood gravitates toward these venues because they bear the imprint of global consumerism, and because releasing a film at the multiplex cinema can be imagined as tantamount to injecting Nigerian film culture into the global slipstream of image-commodities. With images styled after sleek advertisements and enclosed, controlled storyworlds that lend an illusion of seamlessness, New Nollywood appears comfortably at home in the world of the multiplex, striking an eerie visual harmony with the cinema sensorium. On another register, the films and cinemas both demonstrate a deep preoccupation with real and imagined mobility, as evident in the films' narratives, which traverse national, cultural, and economic borders, and in the confines of the multiplex where the fantasy of having the world in one's grasp comes alive through a complex assemblage of semiotic and sensory stimulations.

Multiplex cinemas of this sort do not succeed by catering to the biggest audiences possible but rather by drawing an urban consumer class willing to pay ₦1500 or \$9.50 per ticket and a loyal cadre of university students able scrape together ₦500-1000 for a discounted ticket. Reluctant cinema operators began scheduling local films to appease tacit pressure from the Censors Board and public comments by Nollywood stakeholders. The move was viewed as a small concession to avoid a publicity battle over the cultural content of films appearing at the new cinemas. Since then, however, cinema operators, who hold greater leverage, have turned the

matter to their advantage through dubious scheduling practices and by displacing publicity and advertising expenses onto producers. From their perspective the current arrangement costs nothing, requires no long-term commitments, expands their film offerings, and attaches their brand image to the “cool” aura surrounding New Nollywood. Nevertheless, these cinemas do not envision themselves as part of the local film industry, with the exception of Filmhouse, which is amenable to local producers. This poses an obstacle for producers who would like to see cinemas develop into a viable alternative distribution platform. Recently, the case has been made that what Nollywood and the average Nigerian needs is an extensive network of single-screen community cinemas in low-income, high-density neighborhoods. Proponents envision something similar to existing cinema venues in Kenya and South Africa, and more formal than the ubiquitous video parlors (Tomaselli & Shepperson 2014: 120-23).<sup>44</sup>

As one might expect, New Nollywood films are a popular target of the “soft piracy” of file-sharing between individuals, and eager audiences will continue to acquire some films by illicit means. File-sharing thrives particularly on university campuses, dormitories and hostels where students, who likely cannot afford a cinema ticket, can easily download a film to their laptop or smart phone from a friend's hard drive. Local audiences also have occasional opportunities to glimpse these films at free public screenings and film festivals. Afolayan screened *Phone Swap* at Freedom Park in downtown Lagos Island during the 2013 Lagos Black Heritage Festival and Kelani's films provided evening entertainment at five locations across the

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<sup>44</sup> The “pirate cinemas” that Ekwuazi (1987) describes have been substituted by video parlors and football viewing centers that have Nollywood movie channels in their satellite television subscription. Though sports viewing centers must be licensed in Lagos and are prohibited from televising anything but sports, most neighborhoods in the city have several viewing centers that screen with impunity whatever content appeals to patrons. Comprised of the most basic infrastructure, perhaps benches “arranged facing the viewing area while curtains block out light and, unfortunately, air from the outside” (Ajibade 2007: 5). These spaces of exhibition provide the cheapest access to films to perhaps the largest audience.

University of Lagos campus during the 2012 National Sports Festival. Kelani has also collaborated with university student unions to organize campus screenings of his latest films for a nominal fee. He experimented, years ago, with a mobile cinema project that brought his films to viewing centers, schools and outdoor venues across the Southwest in the same manner as Hubert Ogunde, Ade Love, Eddie Ugbomah and Ola Balogun, filmmakers of the celluloid era who personally distributed their films. However, due to the *ad hoc* nature of these arrangements, Kelani rarely earned more than what was needed to recuperate the cost of organizing the exhibition. Simply put, very few legal, reliable channels exist for audiences to access New Nollywood movies outside the circuit of cinema exhibition and online distribution. This is a consequence of the deliberate gravitation toward modes of distribution that mitigate the risk of piracy.

Among producers, cinema distribution has prompted excitement owing, in part, to the belief circulating within and outside the film industry that New Nollywood movies do not suffer financial losses. Speculation has further fostered the belief that any theatrical release, even a short run at a handful of screens, will generate at least modest revenue for the producer, while some dream of making back their money before their film ever hits the video markets. But appearances are not what they seem given that, in more cases than not, local films lose money on theatrical releases.<sup>45</sup> Federal and state entertainment tax on exhibition venues remains punitively high, at as much as 20 percent of a film's net box office earnings. The remaining revenue is shared between the cinema operator and the producer according to a prearranged sliding scale that, under the most equitable contracts, begins at an even 50/50 percent split and slides each

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<sup>45</sup> Documents from Blu Pictures Distribution shows that of the nine Nollywood films that appeared in theaters in 2010, only two, *Figurine* and *Ije*, earned over ten million naira. In 2011, only three films earned above the same benchmark, while the other nineteen local films that appeared in theaters rarely broke three million naira in ticket sales.

week in favor of the cinema operator. In a film's final week in theaters, as much as 70 percent of the revenue could go to the exhibitor, but few Nigerian films remain in theaters for long. Finally, producers who contract with a film distributor, like Blue Pictures, Silverbird Film Distribution or Film One Distribution, forfeit a percent of their film's earnings to the distributors in commission fees. When all is settled, the producer collects between 30-35 percent of the gross box office earnings, and 30 percent of next to nothing is still next to nothing. This means that all but the highest performing films will fail to meet expected earnings and others will sustain colossal losses.

### Producing the New Image

Today, a mere five-minute walk south of Silverbird Galleria, the largest urban development project in Lagos's recent history is underway. Eko Atlantic City, this newest expansion to the Lagos metropolitan area, is a spit of luxury real estate that extends from Victoria Island directly into the Atlantic Ocean, appearing like some Dubai-style paradise risen from sea, but in fact the product of immense sand dredging. This monumental, private construction project has consequently erased—or rather, buried—the historic Bar Beach, where urchins and tourists, drug peddlers and Pentecostal prayer warriors, *suya* sellers and families on holiday were once free to congregate. To witness the way Victoria Island and its surrounding districts (Lekki and Ikoyi, in particular) have developed into a world onto itself with shopping malls, towering luxury apartments and corporate headquarters, a Porsche car dealership, and countless nightclubs calls to mind James Ferguson's oft-cited contention that in Africa today “capital is *globe-hopping*, not *globe-covering*” (Ferguson 2006: 38). It tends to connect discrete locations rather than bringing whole locales into economic confluence in some flat world

fantasized by neoliberal ideology. The curtailed traffic of commodities and people within specific sedentary urban spaces brings into focus the degree to which a similar disjuncture reproduce itself in the megacity. But images, especially digital images, have a more kinetic circulation, and are able, therefore, to flood an array of surfaces and screens, flow in a viral—rather than formal, agential—manner, and take hold as one of the most flexible and supple commodity forms available in Lagos.

Here it is key to attend to what Arjun Appadurai terms the variable “spatial scopes” that differentiate forms of circulation, and the fact that “visually and electronically mediated forms can have a much larger reach in the era of the cell-phone, the Internet and the digitized image” (2010: 9). Digital imagery's unique facility for rapid, expansive circulation arguably elevates its role in the production of urban social life and what “the metropolitan” means, especially given the growing abundance of advertising images, visual enticements, and sights of impossible desire scrolled across a city like Lagos. In Lagos today, one also notices an uncanny parallel between New Nollywood films and the advertising sensorium that is reproduced across the surface culture of the city as corporate advertising targets urbanites with ever more sophisticated marketing. The most felicitous examples include billboards for celebrity endorsements in which Nollywood stardom and corporate marketing directly converge. What is troubling is the globalization, democratization or proletarianization of desire whereby urbanites are everywhere invited to embrace their yearnings and longings while the means of fulfilling desire has been segmented, confined, reserved for specific zones of development.

Achille Mbembe has recently suggested that contemporary capitalism's reliance on images has reinvigorated the link between image technology and affect, such that the nature of images is increasingly defined by how they act upon one's affect and sensory experience and, by

acting upon them, shape one's subjectivity. He describes the pathway that leads from affect to emotion and on to passions and convictions, and how these pathways are more than ever before activated by the circulation of images intended to stimulate desire, demonstrating that the link between affect and capital not only inscribes itself on everyday life, but also shapes the physical, political, and psychic conditions surrounding subjectivation.<sup>46</sup> This observation provides a useful means of understanding key aspects of Nollywood's new look. The distinction between mainstream and New Nollywood turns on the fact that, while the latter carries on as an index of popular reactions to the fraught and corrosive effects of contemporary capitalism on social life, the latter serves more and more as a direct demonstration of capitalism's production of social life in the city.

A consensus within Nollywood studies holds that the formal qualities of a film bare an important relationship to the places where it is circulated, sold, and viewed. In the case of mainstream Nollywood, we can easily picture the images that adorn videocassette jackets and VCD slips, often a tableau of celebrity actors, whose faces alone signify certain expectations about the genre, story, and acting style, arranged according to unstated but habituated codes that promise something about the drama and imagery contained inside. These videos then flow through street settings that resemble a dense shopping center turned inside out, presenting to the public commodities marked by little or no aestheticization. The images compete with one another for attention in saturated urban markets, neighborhood video shops, and the piles of videos wheeled about in carts by mobile vendors. In short, the industry has grafted itself onto the existing media circuits (Ajibade 2007), and engendered new social spaces of its own (Haynes

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<sup>46</sup> I paraphrase here comments that Achille Mbembe offered during his “Africa in Theory” presentation at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Witwatersrand on April 13, 2013. Their website provides an informal print version of the presenter's statements at <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/content/africa-theory-10795>.

2007), which has effectuated “the re-mapping of the visual and aural landscape of the city” (Okome 2007: 11). However, it is hard to begin to compare this “cottage industry” of image creation with the media environment of the shopping-mall-cum-multiplex-cinema where images make direct appeals to one's affect and immerse the senses in an aesthetic designed to stimulate and channel desire.

In Nollywood's endeavor to standardize its trade and foster a glossy visual style, considerable effort has been put toward the mastery of cinematography and production design such that the image itself directly expresses value rather than merely providing the frame or container for some valued object. For many producers, well-crafted visuals attest to the industry's adoption of so-called global best practices, and the public's wide praise for New Nollywood's heightened production values suggest their satisfaction with the industry's new look. One might consider, as Alessandro Jedlowski does, the reflexive glimpses the industry offers of itself in the “making-of” videos that now commonly serve as an online promotions tactic. Such videos showcase the technical skill of the filmmakers, the costly state-of-the-art equipment, the trendiness of the celebrity actors, and the fashionable aura that surrounds Nollywood (Jedlowski 2014: 163-64). These producers are keenly aware that they have a unique purchase on the personal and collective desires of African audiences, and this awareness seems, in recent years, to have motivated producers to pour resources and effort into creating ever more sumptuous representations of those fantasies and fears. As a result, New Nollywood has become synonymous inside and outside the film industry with high production values, or at least the appearance of achieving elevated standards.

The budget of New Nollywood has generally grown beyond anything home videos could ever manage: one to four hundred thousand dollars, or nearly ten times what mainstream

producers allot for production costs. A budget of this size buys the filmmakers time more than anything else, meaning that the gestation period for a film may now stretch into months rather than the weeks or mere days required to complete the slapdash productions that many expect when imagining Nollywood. With time and money, filmmakers have also begun to scout locations that before were out of the question. By necessity Nollywood movies have always been shot on location, either behind the compound gates of a villa in the city or at more modest homes tucked away in rural locales. In either case, production takes place far from nosey crowds, area boys and venal police. With larger budgets available, some producers have begun to build sets and shoot at sound stages around Lagos where once only television and music video producers could afford to shoot.

With the advent of private satellite TV and a corresponding rise in demand for Nigerian advertisement, television, and music video content, private investors began building commercial sound stages in converted warehouses.<sup>47</sup> For example, Dream Factory Studio, which features two separate sound stages, was founded in 2010 by Yinka Oduniyi, a television producer who shoots high-end advertisements for multinational corporations and local companies. The studio has all the equipment needed to shoot a film: a full lighting work up, grips, microphones, dollies and tracks, as well as Panasonic camera equipment. Oduniyi also keeps an editor and sound engineer on contract so that post-production sound mixing and editing can take place under the same roof. Spaces of this type offer producers a great deal of control over the lighting, sound, setting, and camera movements that produce the cinematic features that viewers recognize as defining high production values.

The sound stage built in Calaba at Tinapa Free Trade Zone, which many hoped would

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<sup>47</sup> I learned of the growing availability of sound stages after a visit to the offices of Femi Odugbemi, the executive producer of the most popular soap opera on Nigerian satellite television, Tinsel. The program is shot at a sound stage in Ikeja, Lagos.

draw film production to the eastern regions, failed to attract Nollywood producers and seemed all but defunct until it secured a production deal with *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013) producers. Today the studio in Tinapa hosts one full-time occupant, Mo Abudu's Ebony Life TV network which aims to broadcast original content globally via satellite television, mobile device apps and streaming online, a sign that sound stages nation-wide will likely continue to align with television production as long as that medium remains more reliable, lucrative and predictable than the film industry. The price tag is high, between two and three hundred thousand naira (USD\$ 1200-2000) per day, but this has not deterred producers like Mildred Okwo, who shot her romantic comedy titled *The Meeting* (2012) almost completely within the Dream Factory sound stage. The same studio provided Afolayan's art director on *Phone Swap* the necessary facilities to construct a replica airplane interior for a key scene of the film. The plane was fabricated entirely from scratch, including the addition of decals to give the illusion of details where none existed. To create the overhead console, its dials, and the overhead storage compartments, for instance, the art director photographed the interior of a real airplane, printed the images onto laminate and pasted them onto the structure like an artificial skin.

As one can surmise, such a feat demanded a great deal of space, a meticulously constructed set, a precise lighting design, and considerable effort put into production design and cinematography. On Afolayan's set, those duties fell to art director Pat Nebo and director of photography Yinka Edward, who together are responsible for the hallmark naturalistic realism of Afolayan's films. A veteran from the earliest days of the video film boom, Nebo trained professionally for interior design and today builds sets for advertisements and publicity events for major Nigerian companies. Edward is likely the most esteemed Nigerian cinematographer today, having also shot Kenneth Gyang's *Confusion Na Wa* (2013) and Izu Ojukwu's *Lions of '76*

(forthcoming), and as such makes his primary living as director of photography for advertising segments. In conversation, Edward explained to me that Afolayan's crew shoots at a very deliberate pace. The cinematographer estimates that a single day spent on set can capture five minutes of usable footage, a glacial pace compared to mainstream Nollywood. This means that even interiors that are not intended to be glamorous but actually a bit dingy must also be carefully constructed. In *Phone Swap*, the village home in Owerri was arranged to fit Afolayan and Edward's vision, which even entailed constructing the rickety veranda where Akin, the persnickety businessman, is forced to sleep.

Branding and cross-promotional strategies are more important than ever in Nollywood today. Cinema distributors like Joy Ilebeno of Blue Pictures Distribution advise filmmakers to set aside N 1-3 million for marketing, meaning some New Nollywood producers spend as much on marketing their film as mainstream home video producers spend to shoot their film. Although marketing may represent a disproportionately large investment relative to production costs, this is owing to the notion that one does not simply sell a movie, but that the marketing of a film, grooming its brand and shaping its image even before the audience has its first glimpse will enhance the experience of the film as much or more than its basic content or substance. Some producers mount formidable publicity campaigns in order to cut through the mainstream market's glut of films. The aim is ultimately to make their film go viral and reverberate across multiple media spheres. When Afolayan was still conducting pre-production on *October 1st*, he directed a music video for 2Face Idibia and Victor Olaiya that sets the musicians against the re-imagined backdrop of highlife modernity. Stylized like a period piece, the video showcases Afolayan's unprecedented attempt to aesthetically recreate post-Independence Nigerian in *October 1st*. A promotional "making-of" documentary that appeared on Youtube mentions the

state-of-the-art film equipment used and that Afolayan flew the final edit to London for color correction, implying professionalism and prestige. Afolayan himself comments that, although his crew has never before shot a music video, he believes the finished product demonstrates that today's film professionals can deliver high production values. This manner of cross-promotion makes the reverberations of Afolayan's upcoming feature film felt across local screen media, given that the promotional video represents a spin off of the music video, which is itself, in its aesthetic concept, a spin off of *October 1st*. Furthermore, it permits the director to amplify his popular persona and strengthen his relation to parallel spheres of popular culture, as Nollywood celebrity actors do, by channeling what Noah Tsika calls “the simultaneity of various modes of transmedia publicity” (2014: 101).

In the past, producers have made isolated attempts to bridge what John McCall calls the capital gap between formal and informal economic activity, a divide that leaves Nollywood's latent economic value invisible to formal capital (McCall 2012). Without any recognized form of collateral, Nigerian producers have long been locked out of formal financing opportunities and thus the engines of informal finance that propel the mainstream have remained the marketers in Onitsha, Alaba or Idumota, whom many filmmakers view as the principal force holding the industry from growing beyond the tried-and-true methods of finance, production and distribution. In 2007, one attempt to bridge the capital gap involved a cohort of producers whose pilot project produced four films on funds from local bank loans and gathered data on their distribution. When the film's sales tanked, marketers were accused of impeding their distribution so as to sabotage any future deals between the banks and producers, retain control of film financing and thereby safeguard their position in the industry (Fidelis Duker, personal

communication).<sup>48</sup>

Given these power struggles within the industry, New Nollywood's production practices would not be possible if the filmmakers could not circumvent the finance and distribution scheme that is the foundation of the video marketplace. Through notoriety, New Nollywood has attracted the interest of formal capital, which has long sought to broach the video film industry but has hesitated out of distrust for the industry's opaque accounting practices and leaky distribution network. They have managed to source funds from state government grants, federal government loans and grants, banks loans and sponsorship deals with corporate advertisers, and typically pad the budget with contributions from their personal wealth. While grants – which can amount to over ten million naira – and sponsorship deals represent “free money” that will not need to be paid back, loans from private banks and the federal government place a significant burden on these filmmakers, who cannot always pay them off. The contractual obligations that filmmakers assume when accessing formal loans, sometimes through microfinance banks, are almost predatory, with interest rates as high 20 percent and a repayment period as short as three months. Given existing flaws in the industry's distribution, few producers will gamble their careers on loans of this type.

From a producer's perspective, formal finance partnerships and corporate sponsorship grow more central to filmmaking as, on one hand, the costs of production rise and, on the other,

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<sup>48</sup> The initiative in question, known as Project Nollywood, brought together EcoBank and four established filmmakers – Charles Novia, Fred Amata, Chico Ejiro and Fidelis Duker – in an effort to create a template for banks that wish to grant loans to Nollywood producers (“Project Nollywood and EcoBank.” *This Day* November 18, 2007 [Accessed: 10/16/12 at AllAfrica.com]). The films produced on EcoBank's loan funds and later confiscated by video marketers include *Letter to a Stranger* (Fred Amata), *100 Days in the Jungle* (Chico Ejiro), *Senseless* (Fidelis Duker), and *Caught in the Middle* (Charles Novia). Project Nollywood also received financial backing from the South African telecommunications company MTN “Project Nollywood Rolls out Four Films in a Day” *Vanguard* November 18, 2007 [Accessed: 10/16/12 at AllAfrica.com]).

the financial returns continue to be eroded by piracy. In this regard, Kunle Afolayan leads the way in securing sponsorship deals from major Nigerian corporations like the construction and food processing company Dangote Group and telecommunications company Globacom, not to mention multinationals Honeywell, GSK Luzocade Sport, and Toyota. In fact, his 2012 film *Phone Swap* was conceived and scripted to meet a call by Samsung for a feature length Nollywood film that would go beyond product placement and integrate Samsung phones directly into the premise of the narrative. The measly five million naira budget they offered was not enough for Afolayan, who chose to produce *Phone Swap* on his own and later landed sponsorship contracts with Blackberry, Honeywell, and Globacom (Glo). With this type of attention from formal-sector investors on the rise, a third of a film's budget could derive from sponsorship deals, although the relationships forged are far from fair and equal. Major companies see the opportunity for cheap publicity in movies that, in a sense, autonomously reproduce and distribute themselves across Africa and the diaspora thanks to the uncontrollable shadow industry of video piracy.

Sponsorship and product placement are not the only examples of a growing interpenetration of Nollywood and international corporate capital. The expanding demand for formal training programs within the industry has corresponded with the over-seas expansion of New York Film Academy in its drive to become a global education brand. This for-profit trade school's first Nigerian graduates include Stephanie Okereke, Kunle Afolayan, Chineze Anyaene and Desmond Elliot, among the most revered figures of New Nollywood. The success of these filmmakers has made New York Film Academy's the most recognizable international film school in Nollywood despite the school's reputation outside Nigeria as a predatory educational program that offers degrees of little value and training of dubious benefit to students. Anyaene echoed a

sentiment I heard from other Nigerian NYFA graduates when she told me that she knew that NYFA took advantage of its foreign students, subjecting them to exploitative tuition rates, but that through the school she connected with film personnel and equipment that allowed her to shoot *Ije: The Journey*, which was conceived as her master's thesis project. On the other hand, when I asked Kunle Afolayan whether studying at NYFA had prepared him to make better films, he chuckled, shook his head and insisted that it is better to learn the craft on the job.

With a campus in Union Square and Soho, New York, and another facility on the Universal Studios lot in Los Angeles (although the school's disclaimer states it has no official affiliation with Universal), NYFA began expanding its brand of short-term training workshops overseas in 2008, particularly targeting developing nations where film production represents a burgeoning industry. Today it has satellite campuses in Abu Dhabi and Australia, and offers short-term programs in China, India, Brazil and Nigeria. Its policy of open enrollment means that the school admits anyone able to pay the tuition rate, which ranges from \$1,500 for some short-term programs to \$20,000 per semester for two-year MFA students, according to Andrew Rice (“Gold in the Developing World,” 2012). In partnership with the Nigerian communications consulting firm Del-York International, headed by Stephanie Okereke's husband Linus Idahosa, NYFA has held annual workshops in Abuja and Lagos where recent MFA graduates and American media practitioners offer crash courses in screenwriting, acting, cinematography and editing.<sup>49</sup>

Even when corporate sponsorship does not leave a heavy footprint on the film itself, it always manages to position itself in the interface between the film and the audience through celebrity endorsements, social media marketing, and event marketing. In Lagos in 2013, one

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.nyfa.edu/film-school-blog/new-york-film-academy-teaches-film-workshops-in-abuja-nigeria/>

could find a film premiering at cinemas almost every weekend. Producers have turned these red carpet events into an opportunity to draw additional funding for the film by selling advertising rights. According to Afolayan, the mobile phone company Blackberry paid twice the amount it paid for its product placement within the film itself simply to advertise their brand at the hotel where he held the red carpet premiere of *Phone Swap* (Kunle Afolayan, personal communication, June 20, 2014). On occasion, the red carpet itself can bear a sponsor's brand image! In short, the growing penetration of Nollywood by marketing and advertising finance leads to a scenario in which the capital gap closes and, to follow Anastup Basu's provocative suggestion, the flashes of words and images on and around the theater screen become "capital itself (and not the reflection of it) precisely because it acquires a 'life of its own' by virtue of being value in serial flow" (2010: 99).

#### "Advertised Modernity"

As a category of films, New Nollywood shares little in common besides the space of the silver screen. They are diverse in setting, theme, story arc, and genre, and demonstrate a continuum in terms of extending the major conventions of Nollywood film culture, with some films navigating familiar terrain and others studiously avoiding the habits of mainstream Nollywood. For example, *Return of Jenifa* and *Weekend Getaway* (2013) spring directly from the Nollywood imaginary, while *Ije: The Journey* and *Anchor Baby* still rely heavily on melodrama's signifying practices, even if put to work on foreign soil, and *The Figurine* and *Phone Swap* (2012) do away entirely with home video conventions.

The films inhabit what could be called, for lack of a better term, a metropolitan vantage point that orients its vision toward the world at large and naturalize metropolitan phenomena

such as airline travel, consumer culture, global pop/MTV culture, high fashion, lifestyle brands, and luxury items. Garritano (2014) turns our attention to Basu's work when she notes that these changes in Nollywood resemble changes in India's Hindi-language film industry, which only became the internationally recognized "Bollywood" after a comparable period of segmentation and aesthetic formalization in the 1990s. That industry's A-grade films soon began to flaunt an aesthetic of "advertised modernization," a term Basu uses to refer to cinema's transposition of modernity into a collection of fungible signs within a megacity's kinetic ecology of sights and sounds. In this case, modern subjectivity does not arise from consolidated systems of value, forms of order, or domains of knowledge, but is instead experienced "in volumes and quick saturations" that flit across the screen as bits of information, "without any obligation to 'totality'" (Basu 2010: 92, 94).<sup>50</sup> Thus, for instance, films can showcase all the trappings of modernity, such as technology, consumer culture, and democratic values, without holistically grounding them in the domain of science, discourses of bourgeois taste, or the rights of the liberal subject (Basu 2010: 234-35). I would also underscore that this transposition of the notion of modernity, this assembling of modernity, makes possible the accommodation of contradictory realities, or what would otherwise appear as a film's ideological limits.

Kunle Afolayan's *Phone Swap* best illustrates this aesthetic trend as well as a number of impulses driving New Nollywood. The narrative situates its main characters, Mary and Akin, as polar opposites, divided along lines of social class and lifestyle, barriers that are exacerbated before finally crumbling as the two unwittingly fall in love. The story satisfies the generic expectation that in romantic comedies opposites will attract and love will conquer all in the end.

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<sup>50</sup> The distinction between information and knowledge is key to Basu's notion of advertised modernity. He writes that "Information is different from knowledge precisely because while the latter consolidates truths through an agonistic navigation of difference or a dialectical resolution of problems (what Benjamin calls 'explanation'), the former only scatters and makes kinetic renderings in varying densities, without any obligation to 'totality.'" (Basu 2010: 94).

Romance, family bonds, marriage arrangements, and the betrothed's moral character are not unusual concerns for a Nigerian film. What is striking is the role mobile phone technology is cast to play in developing this theme of romantic and familial connectivity, such that the technological connectivity that mobile phones afford becomes the enabling factor and key metaphor for achieving and maintaining the social connections of family, friends and lovers divided by physical distance as well as social and economic boundaries.

The narrative centers on Mary, a tailor with aspirations of becoming a fashion designer, and Akin, a fastidious businessman with a callous personal demeanor. When they physically collide in the airport on their way to pressing engagements, they accidentally swap phones and end up routed to the wrong destination. Mary arrives in Abuja where an important shareholders meeting that could decide the fate of Akin's career is scheduled to take place, and Akin arrives in Owerri where Mary's family has called an urgent meeting to resolve a marital dispute. The story is animated by the personal transformations that Mary and Akin undergo as they work in cooperation to resolve the disparate conflicts, the nature of which corresponds to each character's personal weaknesses. Mary must become more assertive if she wishes to leave her work as a tailor and advance to working as a self-employed fashion designer, whereas Akin must shed his Western pretensions and learn humility in order to counsel compromise within Mary's family and realize the need for reunion with his own.

In the opening sequence of *Phone Swap*, the camera wanders, in extreme close up and shallow depth of focus, over the objects in the each character's room, studiously picking out and ascribing significance to the volumes of books, trays of designer watches, and silk ties in Akin's room, and the Singer-style sewing machine, mannequin, and piles of colorful *ankara* cloth in Mary's. These shots bring the spectator's eye right down into the minute details of the mise-en-

scène and inspects them for what they tell us about characters we have yet to glimpse. In other words, these objects speak the language of commodities, an idiom in which the viewer is presumed to be fluent. Mary receives a wake-up call from her employer on the other side of town and another phone call from her father from his cornfields in Owerri. A jump cut from Mary's bedroom to a high angle panoramic view of the fields at the precise moment the phone rings punctuates the distance and, as Mary enters the streets of Lagos, the film cuts between golden corn stalks of the village and the buzzing *okada* motorcycles and pungent LAWMA garbage trucks of the city. The sequence concludes in parallel fashion with Akin and his mother. The camera recreates the same high angle panoramic shot over the mother's lush compound depicting her telephoning her son as he is chauffeured to company headquarters in a private vehicle, the Lagos traffic shunting by outside the window of the car.

Like many other New Nollywood romantic comedy, *Phone Swap* develops a world of binaries that it presents as complementary and seeks to resolve by binding one to the other. When Mary and Akin find themselves holding the phone and inhabiting the life of the other they are displaced from their natural element, the confines of their everyday lives, which the film resolves by bringing about a new balance in each characters' life and bringing the two closer together in a romantic union. The switch—Mary attending the shareholder meeting and Akin mediating the family dispute—and later reunion achieves an assemblage, in Basu's sense of the term, by overlapping its diagrams of urban corporate power politics and rural kinship politics. The assemblage depends on the mobile phone and its publicized ability to suture together vastly disparate spaces and times. The phone motivates the narrative drive toward closure in which Mary and Akin's detours lead back to the site of their first hostile collision, this time as a romantic reunion. On the level of aesthetic form, it is continuity cinematography and editing that

do the work of stitching together these divergent worlds, visually producing the connectivity that mobile phones promise.

Within this aesthetic of advertised modernity, air travel emerges as the supreme expression of free mobility, and consequently, the international airport at Lagos becomes an ever more common sight in Nollywood films. In Afolayan's films, as with Tunde Kelani's, the narrative never travels internationally, instead focusing on dynamics within the nation. However, many New Nollywood films orient themselves in relation to life abroad, as with characters who freely travel abroad (*Flower Girl* [2012]), who have established lives abroad (*Ije*, *Anchor Baby*), or who embark on a journey home after years abroad (*Mirror Boy*, *Maami* [2012], *Doctor Bello* [2012], *Streets of Calabar* [2012]). A number of New Nollywood stories are structured by the journey back to Africa from abroad rather than the reverse trajectory which almost by definition structures the story arc of the diaspora genre that Jonathan Haynes identifies (2013). For instance, the narrative of *Mirror Boy* is set in motion when a child born in the UK to African parents travels back to an unnamed African country and is drawn into a quest of self-actualization that sets him in search of his estranged father and patrimonial village. These films glance at the family village through a romanticized gaze rather than from the perspective of one on very familiar terms with mundane life outside of the big city.

It is significant that village scenes and the hometown must be polished up, ornamented; something must be added to their appearance before they are inserted in the story. Home must be written into the world in a visual language consistent with that of Nollywood's stranger and more spectacular assemblages. Speaking from firsthand observations, Afolayan's crew went to great lengths to erect the rural domestic compound where Mary's family, in the course of resolving their grievances, gradually humanize the callous Akin and expose him to a vague, ineffable, life-

changing truth about the authenticity of village life, a truth we perceive in the beautiful visuals of the cornfield or family parlor at dinner time. It recalls Basu's observation that, "In a new dispensation of the image as a direct expression of value, the home has to acquire a cinematic plenitude of colors, textures, bodies, and objects in order to upgrade its affective strengths and emerge as an exemplary exhibit of a national-cultural heritage" (2010: 80).

We might contrast this with Tunde Kelani's *Maami*, bearing in mind that Kelani drew from childhood memories to recreate a semi-autobiographical portrait of a tight-knit neighborhood in Abeokuta and included details from his own experiences as a child, hunting for fruits in the bush, marveling at the *egungun* masquerades, reading Yoruba novels to his parents and grandparents, and learning the moral ideals of the community. This intimate Abeokuta finds its counterpoint in the bustling megacity of Lagos where famed footballer Kashimawo returns just before commencement of the 2010 World Cup. But even here, the protagonist's memories of his mother and his childhood in the small city come to us by way of nostalgic and visually sumptuous flashbacks. (Kelani explained to me that the one-room residence that Kashi shares with his mother [Funke Akindele] was reconstructed and shot at his Mainframe Studio to better control production values). These tales of migration abroad and back home likely strike a chord with viewers in Nigeria who know family members or have themselves repatriated after significant time abroad, an audience that has, in recent years, made its mark felt on the cultural and social life of Lagos especially.

### Conclusion

Like any popular cinema around the world, Nollywood must depict the impassioned struggles that make everyday survival possible, while simultaneously endeavoring to forget those

struggles in an imagined escape from the demands of the mundane. The same could be said of the industry itself as it strains to make do while it simultaneously projects a fantasy of its own effortless success. But a paradox arises, as Moradewun Adejunmobi points out, whereby audiences relate to these films out of “both the desire for escape from everyday life and the desire for relevance to everyday concerns” (2010: 110). New Nollywood exacerbates this ambivalence by offering viewers what are to date the most refined and carefully crafted images of collective desires in which few obstacles bar exuberant consumption, free mobility, and the achievement of high social status. At the same time, the narratives in which these desires are couched offer fewer points of connection to everyday concerns than mainstream Nollywood. These films avoid a view of the world as seen from the cracks or margins of society and take for granted that a certain level of wealth is normal. Neither the marginal characters nor the overarching logic of these new narratives demonstrate the same moral doubts about prosperity and poverty that one finds in mainstream home videos. In fact, in many ways Nigeria’s new screen media exacerbate a frustration whereby collective desires outstrip the means to attain them within what is for most Nigerians an economy of scarcity.

It illustrates a contradiction of neoliberal capitalism, which works “to produce desire and expectations on a global scale yet to decrease the certainty of work or the security of persons; to magnify class differences but to undercut class consciousness” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 298). If we ask who is represented in these films, who appears onscreen and who remains outside the narrative frame, or what sort of spectator these films construct, we find that many New Nollywood films are grounded on a terrain that stands apart from what many viewers experience as everyday. Just as neoliberal capitalism has wrought the radical, albeit selective, transformation of the material landscape of Lagos, it also shapes the social landscape of the city by dictating

what it means to be “metropolitan.” It should come as no surprise that consumerism is embedded in the deep structure of the films, or that they publicize their purchase on a modern subjectivity and define that identity with fungible signifiers drawn from metropolitan life.

It is easy in the short term to see how the films considered here place limitations on imagination, accommodating themselves, as they do, to an “aspirational” vision of metropolitan life that plays out some of the most pernicious features of neoliberal capitalism. It takes a more conjectural approach to suppose that these films might also lead to something more. Kenneth Gyang's tangled dark comedy of chance encounters *Confusion Na Wa* is illustrative in this regard. As one of four scripts selected by the influential Hubert Bals Fund of the International Film Festival Rotterdam and produced on an astounding twenty-seven thousand dollars, *Confusion Na Wa* does not fit the New Nollywood trend of costly production and marketing, and although the film's Nigerian theatrical release initially failed, it earned recognition at AMAA (including “Best Film” award of 2013), the New York African Film Festival, and the Los Angeles Pan African Film Festival. Not relying on box office revenue or corporate sponsorship, Gyang achieved a great deal with limited means an abundance of talent, which has always been the story of Nollywood. This suggests that Nollywood's distribution crisis might not be solved on the distribution end, but by continuing to experiment with film practices that suit the industry's shifting terrain, keeping in mind both its persistent obstacles and emerging opportunities.

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