

Conclusion

“Affective Ambience”: New Nollywood and the Persistence of Disneyfication

“[African filmmakers] must say that Africa is the center of the world and that others, regardless of their race, border Africa. First, Africa.”

—OUSMANE SEMBENE IN *BEHIND THE SCENES* (PAULIN SOUMANOU VIEYRA, 1981)

“How we tell stories of our past, and how we respond to the challenges of the present, are intimately connected.”

—JASON W. MOORE, *CAPITALISM IN THE WEB OF LIFE*, 5

In 2018, the US Mission in Nigeria announced, as part of its plan to “support Nigeria’s vibrant film community through capacity-building workshops,” a partnership that would bring cinematic “know-how” to the country via the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts. Recalling the arrangements through which UCLA furnished Enugu (and Lloyd Young) with moviemaking expertise in the late 1950s, this particular collaboration was the brainchild of the US Department of State, which worked with USC to “forge connections” with “Nigeria’s film industry.” That same year, the US Embassy in Abuja invited three American filmmakers, including Doug Blush (co-owner of Los Angeles-based MadPix Films and a lecturer at USC), to Nigeria, where they met with local filmmakers, while Ishaya Bako, a Nigerian student of film, was sent to the United States to attend a ten-day workshop at USC.

This was no simple exchange program. It was a “mind-molding” initiative with a specific geostrategic goal and a bluntly articulated theme: “Film as a Tool for National Security and Patriotism.”¹ “As a longtime friend and ally of Nigeria, the United States is always looking for creative ways to promote social cohesion and national unity,” asserted an American diplomat in the spring of 2018. “A new and inspired effort by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) . . . taps into the vast platform of Nigeria’s entertainment industry with support for

a new television drama that tells a story underrepresented by ‘Nollywood’—the struggle to live, love, and survive in the embattled Northeast.” Funded by USAID, the series in question, entitled *In Love and Ashes* (2018), is set in Maiduguri and depicts the factors “fomenting radicalization and insurgency” in that northeastern city. Offering the “moral message” that “all Nigerians must rise above ethnic and religious differences” in order to “overcome extremism,” the series is, in many ways, the twenty-first-century televisual heir to the strategies of “containment” of *The Mark of the Hawk*.² Translating the earlier film’s anticommunism into a moral tract against Islamist extremism, the series is an expression of the US state’s commitment to stanching the spread of such radicalism, whether in Afghanistan or Nigeria. As W. Stuart Symington, the United States Ambassador to the latter country from 2016 to 2019, put it at the gala launch of the series, “We’re here today to make sure this message gets out, to make sure *this* story becomes *your* story. It is a universal story about love bringing people together.”³

Symington’s contradictory remarks can themselves be traced back to *The Mark of the Hawk* and an era in world history in which the United States exported anti-communism in ways both specific—with carefully selected regional targets like Enugu—and “universal.” For all the production’s exploitation of Nigeria, *The Mark of the Hawk* is set in an unnamed country and trades in generalities, political and religious clichés readily transferrable to other cultures and contexts. Still, the film was a measure of American determination to shape Nigeria’s postcolonial reality. Making sure *this* story—a distinctly United States-friendly story—becomes *Nigeria’s* story remains, as Symington’s words suggest, an explicit goal of diplomatic relations that play out on the terrain of screen media. On another occasion, Symington spoke of “the partnership between creative Nigerians and Americans,” and he made special mention of the constructive potential of fantasy: “When ideas become intellectual property, they literally create new fields from dreams and grow enterprises that no walls can contain, creating new jobs out of imagination and new opportunities at the speed of inspiration.”

It is hardly surprising that, in offering these remarks, Symington cited Walt Disney as the progenitor of such “Imagineering.” The field of film and media studies might not recognize Disney’s incursions into the African continent, but Symington surely does. Throughout 2018, the ambassador publicly praised the initial efforts of Disney (and secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and Charles W. Robenson) to “penetrate” Nigeria in the 1970s. In Symington’s view, those efforts had finally come to “natural” fruition with the release of *Black Panther* in 2018. In recognition of Black History Month, the US Consulate in Lagos hosted a private screening of the Disney juggernaut at FilmHouse’s IMAX theater in Lekki.⁴ Echoing many another American visitor to Nigeria, Symington proudly declared, “I have met Nigerians who are living proof that Nigeria’s greatest resource is the Nigerian people, not oil or gas, soil or minerals, water or sunlight.”⁵ But Hollywood has always used that line: people mean tickets sold and theaters occupied.

Just two years later, the coronavirus pandemic forced Nigerian multiplexes to close temporarily. Writing a few years before the pandemic, Moradewun Adejumo recognized “increases in the rate of theatrical exhibition of commercial films” in Nigeria, and wisely noted that “there is room for both speculation and informed judgment.” Her conclusions, which neither posit a theatrical renaissance nor reject the significance of the big screen, are worth quoting in full:

If, in particular, ready access to the highest number of cinema theatres per capita in the world has not prevented an upsurge in streaming in the United States and Western Europe, there is little reason to think that the construction of additional theatres in a few African countries will reverse the general trend towards growing consumption of African movies on small screens in a part of the world with much lower levels of disposable income for leisure activities. Instead then of a zero-sum game where one form of film spectatorship displaces other forms, spectatorship on small screens at home and on larger screens outside the home will very likely continue to shape the relative status of both types of screens and feature films watched on either screen.⁶

The pandemic has certainly further complicated matters, but it has not created a zero-sum game. While some Nigerian venues have gone out of business, victims of quarantines and curfews, many are responding with ingenuity to the crisis, introducing social-distancing measures, instituting temperature checks, and acquiring special air-filtration systems, much as their predecessors, spurred on by American manufacturers and trade publications, embraced roofs and cooling systems. In the late 1970s, Disney defined the “problem” as the “lack of [a] suitable number [of] movie theaters,” but the conglomerate also expressed considerable optimism, declaring that, in due time, that “problem” would be “overcome.”⁷

Disney did not, of course, anticipate a global pandemic. Nigerian cinemas were forced to close for seven and a half months during COVID’s first year—from March until October 2020 (though some reopened as late as November). Through the efforts of the Cinema Exhibitors Association of Nigeria (CEAN), a trade organization representing theater owners, companies like FilmHouse and Silverbird were able to put pressure on the government to safeguard the big screen through tax breaks and other subsidies. “You let the cinemas die, and one of the biggest, loudest voices of the industry is dead,” said Moses Babatope, a co-founder of FilmHouse. CEAN’s exhaustive lobbying efforts helped to keep cinemas alive even through the “second wave” of COVID that struck Nigeria in late 2020. As the pandemic gained ground in Nigeria, so did End SARS, a campaign to combat police brutality in the country. To some, the concurrence of mass protests and a deadly pandemic spelled doom for theatrical film. As mentioned, a few cinemas went permanently out of business in 2020, but none of those were FilmHouse locations.

2019 was FilmHouse’s most successful year in terms of box-office revenue, with over five million tickets sold. While the pandemic ensured that the company would not be able to maintain, much less surpass, such high numbers, Babatope is optimistic. He even credits the pandemic with at least temporarily reversing

the typical split between Hollywood exports and “homegrown” Nigerian films. He estimates that, in 2020, that split favored Hollywood properties at 55 percent of screen space to Nollywood’s 45 percent. But, according to his calculations, in 2021 Nollywood took up a whopping 65 percent to Hollywood’s unprecedentedly meager 35 percent. “Local films have really, really come to the aid of Nigerian cinemas,” Babatope said in the spring of that year. “Without local films in the Nigerian cinema spaces . . . a lot of companies would have gone bankrupt” amid the pandemic-induced halting of Hollywood exports.

Still, his enterprise remains tethered to the familiar paternalist language of Hollywood internationalist “uplift.” For even as he celebrates Nollywood’s capacity to keep the multiplexes afloat during a global pandemic, he also expresses his hope that “Hollywood will encourage more cinemagoing, more appetites”—that the Marvel imprimatur, among others, will magnetize aspirational Nigerians. Whether Babatope “really” believes this statement is immaterial. Because his company is the exclusive licensee of Disney and Warner Bros. properties in Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia, it is a statement that he is clearly obliged to make.⁸

NETFLIX NOLLYWOOD

“Developing” Nigeria has long been an *idée fixe* of Hollywood, however one chooses to define the industry. If the notion of Nigeria as a significant market for Hollywood was seemingly held in abeyance during the last decades of the twentieth century, it has returned with an astonishing force in the twenty-first, spurring the emergence of a vast and ever-expanding “economy of experiences,” at the practical and symbolic center of which is multiplexing. This most recent period of excitement needs, however, to be incorporated into a longer history that stretches back at least to the late colonial period. This *longue-durée* approach, encompassing the temporal extremes of decolonization and the more recent explosion of interest in Nollywood as a source of revenue for Disney, IMAX, Amazon, Netflix, and others, is essential for a firmer understanding of Nigeria’s current, past, and possible future positions in the global capitalist grid. This is particularly so amid the belief that the United States “should throw off any restraint on its ability to retaliate against economies that it consider[s] to be discriminating against it.” The MPAA made a show of penalizing Nigeria in 1981, via an embargo (of sorts) that lasted over two decades, during which time, and hardly coincidentally, Nollywood emerged as a significant media industry.⁹ Hollywood, which, as this book has shown, had a major hand in the “rigging of the decolonization process,” continues to impose its own economic paradigms on Nigeria and Nigerians.¹⁰

My interest has been in the “particular visions of global relation” that are “lost in Western theorizations of Africa,” especially those theorizations that originate in the field of film and media studies, and that tend to ignore Africa altogether.¹¹ Western competitive interests have, in fact, never overlooked the African

continent, which has always been implicated in “idioms of capitalist ascent.”¹² To put it in more specific terms: Nigeria has never been beyond Hollywood’s global consciousness, and my goal has been to examine this history, “tracing out the lines of interrelation” that demand a fresh approach to Hollywood historiography and a deeper sense of the longstanding “multidimensionality of global integration.”¹³ *Cinematic Independence* is the story of, to borrow from Moses E. Ochonu, “seemingly contradictory entwinements and symbioses that are rarely acknowledged.”¹⁴

The field of film and media studies is arguably still stymied by the perceptual legacies of racist epistemologies and ethnocentric methodologies—by a sense of Africa as a source of “picturesque alterity” and a “confirming distance,” “a world of strange difference largely disconnected from time.”¹⁵ Recall, for instance, Dudley Andrew’s influential insistence that Nigerian films are “‘movies-that-are missing,’ movies that circulate outside our discourse,” and that are “significant by virtue of being insignificant to us.” Andrew’s essay ends with a universalizing justification for its own myopia—its own refusal to take seriously Nigeria’s constitutive role in the development of media industries both at home and abroad: “Ultimately, the vitality . . . of [Nollywood] attests to a force before which philosophy and criticism stand hopelessly in awe.”¹⁶ Such hopelessness may be a condition of certain parochial philosophical approaches and critical practices, but it is hardly a reason to shy away from the serious, committed study of media produced in, by, and “for” Nigeria, whatever the Nigerian state’s configuration at a given time. The task of understanding Nigeria’s role in the liberal political economy of capitalist imperialism is not a “hopeless” one, or remotely “scary,” as Andrew described it in 2016.¹⁷ It simply requires hard work.

I have endeavored to demonstrate how a focus on Nigeria—ignored by film theory and historiography in inverse proportion to its industrial importance to American capital—demands new approaches to Hollywood history. Hollywood has long played a part in efforts to pull Nigerians “into the flow of ‘real time’ and instill in them proper economic postures.”¹⁸ It has thus been a significant engine of broader political efforts most commonly associated with but hardly reducible to Cold War cultural diplomacy. In acknowledging some of the salient points of intersection between Hollywood and Nigeria, I am indebted to the work of Jeremy Prestholdt, who proposes that “global relations consist of reciprocities that trouble unilinear accounts of global integration.” To deny these reciprocities is, as Prestholdt puts it, “to dispossess ‘peripheries’ of their global historical relevance.”¹⁹ It is to continue to act as if Nigeria doesn’t matter—or as if it matters only “indirectly.”

Nollywood’s growing orientation toward corporate modes of financing, production, distribution, and exhibition means that business is restricted by more than just Hollywood trade practices and US trade law. Local powerhouses like FilmHouse and EbonyLife TV are effectively reproducing, on a smaller scale, the asymmetrical arrangements established and maintained by American giants.

Exhibition requirements dictate the form of New Nollywood films, and streaming services further shape the realms of possibility. Asked what Netflix means for Nollywood, director Daniel Oriahi said bluntly, “Not money”—at least, not in the short term—“but exposure. It means that, when you visit the United States, people will say, ‘Oh, I saw your film on Netflix.’”²⁰ Oriahi’s association of Netflix with the United States is telling. It evokes not merely the protracted period during which Netflix was not available on the African continent (despite the company’s much-publicized foray into the distribution of “African” cinema with *Beasts of No Nation*), but also the continued difficulty of streaming feature-length films in relatively bandwidth-poor places like Nigeria.²¹

Notwithstanding its foundational association with the convenience of at-home spectatorship and its often antagonistic relationship with traditional exhibitors, Netflix, Oriahi surmises, has the cachet in the United States that the multiplexes enjoy in Nigeria. This lofty status is linked to the (obviously false) perception that a certain curatorial discernment leads as much to a film’s streaming as to its exhibition at, say, Silverbird’s Victoria Island multiplex. Ironically, Netflix is embracing Nollywood films at the very moment that the streamer’s own original content is multiplying at an astonishingly rapid pace. This deluge of “Netflix originals”—inescapable on any Netflix account, regardless of geographic location or algorithmic “personalization”—conceivably evokes Old Nollywood’s legendary productivity, its awesome annual output of “bad” straight-to-video films. Nollywood is becoming more like Hollywood, in terms of corporate financing and production values, just as Hollywood, exemplified by Netflix and its steady stream of substandard films, is becoming more like Nollywood. The two industries seem locked in an embrace presaged by nearly one hundred years of American capitalist incursions into Nigeria.

Oriahi’s *Taxi Driver: Oko Ashewo* (2015), a feature-length dark comedy that the director made in just eleven days, opened on a total of 150 screens in thirty cinemas throughout Nigeria—impressive figures that suggest just how far the country had come, by the fall of 2015, from the low point of the immediate pre-2004 period, when there were no multiplexes to be found there. However impressive, such figures are still, of course, dramatically short of those that characterize cinemagoing in the United States, which has tens of thousands of indoor screens, a tiny minority of which have ever featured Nollywood films (and never for longer than a couple of weeks at a time). The relationship between Hollywood and Nollywood is therefore hardly what is known in US trade discourse as a “reciprocity regime”: Hollywood’s access to the Nigerian theatrical market is not and has never been contingent upon the availability of US theater screens for Nigerian films. Nigerian government quotas have never imposed the kind of exchange requirements that would guarantee American theatrical real estate for Nigerian movies.

Still, a certain protectionist impulse persists among some Nigerian filmmakers, and it is occasionally dramatized in their work. Take, for instance, Kayode Kasum’s

Oga Bolaji (2018), which, the director maintains, was intended as a principled corrective to the kind of big-budget Nollywood film that focuses exclusively on the wealthy, glamorous denizens of Victoria Island and other elite enclaves. Kasum’s lively melodrama is a breath of fresh air—both a throwback to such Nigerian classics as Amaka Igwe’s *Rattlesnake* (1995–1996) and Tade Ogidan’s *Owo Blow* (1996–1998) and emblematic of the New Nollywood style of immaculate widescreen cinematography. Frequent aerial shots show not the glitz of Victoria Island but the congestion of the mainland marketplaces. This, the director maintains, is his tribute to the “99 percent”—to precisely those struggling masses strategically excluded from the sanitized likes of Biyi Bandele’s *Fifty* (2015) and other feature-length commercials for Amen Estate, the posh development on the Lekki Peninsula, where all the mansions look alike and where IMAX screens await the affluent. The Nigerian writer David Hundeyin refers to such New Nollywood films as “Island Opulence porn,” calling attention to the genre’s relationship to classism as well as to sheer fantasy: “Watching these movies is like either watching how poor people imagine rich Nigerians live, or watching rich Nigerians depict how they want people to think they live.”²² As Hundeyin points out, the wealthy communities of Victoria Island, Ikoyi, and Lekki are subject to some of the worst effects of climate change and suffer from some of the same public-sector failures as their less privileged counterparts. Banana Island, the artificial atoll that *Forbes* magazine has hailed as the most expensive neighborhood in Nigeria, regularly floods and often reeks of raw sewage.²³ Parkview Estate, the luxury suburb of Ikoyi, is riddled with giant potholes, though none of these are ever framed by the films set and shot there. Realism, then, is not necessarily the goal of New Nollywood filmmakers committed to particular corporate visions that call for the careful exclusion of such unseemly elements.

Kayode Kasum, who was only in his mid-twenties when he made *Oga Bolaji*, admires the Nigerian filmmakers who came before him. He understands Old Nollywood as an emphatically local enterprise untouched by corporate pressures, whether imported or “homegrown.” At one point in *Oga Bolaji*, the title character, a forty-year-old former highlife musician played to perfection by Ikponmwoosa Gold, delivers a monologue that powerfully expresses the stakes of globalization and the importance of supporting the local economy: “Buy made-in-Nigeria products!” he urges his audience of friends and coworkers. “When you buy from abroad, you help *them* to grow *their* industries. You make foreign companies—and foreign countries—rich. Buy Nigerian!”

If Kasum hoped that Nigerians would have the opportunity to do just that by purchasing tickets to see his small independent film on the country’s largest theater screens, he found himself stymied by some of the political-economic conditions that this book has detailed. Yet Kasum is hardly alone. Nollywood icon Genevieve Nnaji, attempting to book her directorial debut *Lionheart* (2018) in Nigerian cinemas, soon discovered, as she put it, “that the very people who pose as

Nollywood supporters . . . are the very same people frustrating the efforts of filmmakers.” In December 2018, she complained that “FilmOne, one of the major film cinema distributors, has categorically refused to distribute *Lionheart*, primarily because they have no stake in it. They are currently invested in a couple of [their own] movies showing in the cinemas and want to protect their assets at all costs. Monopolizing the market . . . is their strategy. . . . The sheer audacity.” There can be no better illustration of the anti-competitive character of vertical integration than FilmHouse’s refusal to book a big-budget Genevieve Nnaji film. In this case, the exhibitor could not possibly claim that it was responding to consumer tastes; what consumer doesn’t want to see Genevieve Nnaji? When Silverbird, FilmHouse’s chief rival, agreed to exclusively exhibit *Lionheart*, its competitor proceeded, as Nnaji put it, “to arm-twist Silverbird [into] backing out of our agreement by threatening to boycott them in the future.” That Netflix eventually acquired *Lionheart* did little to diminish Nnaji’s rage regarding the state of the theatrical market in her home country. As she herself pointed out, Netflix penetration remained minimal in Nigeria in 2018. “I am aware of the challenges of streaming in this region, so bringing this home to you was important,” she added ruefully. Nnaji did not mince words:

It is clear to me that the interest of the consumers is not of utmost priority as advertised. These cinema chains are only here to make money off of struggling artists while protecting their investments in the films they are affiliated with. The major reason cinema chains [should] not produce their own movies is to avoid bias. Competing with the very people you are supposedly a distributor for is downright ridiculous and shameful to say the least. It is not enough that they buy out their own tickets and manipulate the numbers and time slots to keep up this false imagery of making box-office hits. They prevent filmmakers from releasing their products to manipulate foot traffic as well. Thereby forcing consumers to watch only that which is available to them. Not what they actually want to see. It sickens me to think that if this could be done to me (twice if I may add), then I can only imagine what many struggling independent filmmakers must be passing through in the hands of these industry vultures. I call them vultures because they are a bunch of opportunists, and they prey on the weak. If the only success stories you can boast of as a distributor are movies you invested in, then how are you a supporter for the industry at large?²⁴

Nnaji’s words echo those of several significant reports prepared by and for the Canadian government in the late 1980s, all of which concluded that “the dominant market position of the Hollywood majors is a result of their vertical integration and anti-competitive practices.” The reports went on to show how “the dominant US majors are able to foreclose opportunities for [outside] productions,” and they each pointed to vertical integration—widely if mistakenly assumed to have been decisively ended for Hollywood studios by the Justice Department’s successful 1948 antitrust suit—as the principal culprit, both symbol and agent of hegemony.²⁵ If Nigerian multiplex chains behave like the Hollywood majors, it is not merely

because the latter are their corporate partners. It is also because Hollywood’s business model, with all its malpractices, has long been aggressively exported as the *only* model, a precondition for constructing the big screen. While FilmOne, conveniently omitting mention of vertical integration and other anti-competitive practices, alleges that it is uniquely equipped to generate blockbusters, Nigerian filmmaker Chris Ihidero firmly disagrees. “It is a lie that you need the muscle of a FilmOne to make tent-pole movies like *The Wedding Party*,” he told me, employing a term (“tent-pole”) familiar from Hollywood discourse, and that refers to “event” films whose box-office success and commercial tie-ins (soundtrack albums, music videos, television specials, action figures, and so on) can be sufficient to prop up entire studios. “You could make them if only you knew that the owners of the cinemas . . . weren’t invested in similar films for which they’ve already reserved the juiciest slots.”²⁶

Turned down by the multiplexes, Kayode Kasum was forced to settle for screenings of *Oga Bolaji* at the “boutique” seventy-seat cinema at HappyLand/HappyWorld, an entertainment complex modeled (as its name suggests) on Disneyland and Disneyworld, and located in mainland Lagos, over a dozen miles northwest of the shiny multiplexes on Victoria Island. Yet even this opportunity—a chance for a Nigerian film to be exhibited on a big screen in Nigeria—had to be secured by American capital. Kuumba Media, a distribution company based in New York and founded by Ghanaian-American entrepreneur Freda Afia Frimpong, acquired the American and Nigerian streaming and exhibition rights to *Oga Bolaji*, booking it at HappyLand/HappyWorld after FilmHouse and the other major theater chains rejected it.²⁷ Premiering on Easter weekend in 2019, the film was shown on HappyLand/HappyWorld’s single screen—the only big screen within a six-mile radius—where it was flanked by a beauty salon and all-purpose “entertainment center” hosting snooker and table-tennis tournaments, karaoke, and wedding parties, among other events.

Near the building’s entrance stands an inflatable castle, a “bouncy house” for children that, in its size, materiality, and association with film exhibition, recalls the inflatable plastic-and-nylon CineDomes that once played host to Cinerama screenings in this part of Lagos, even as it obviously evokes all things Disney. The latter’s influence pervades HappyLand/HappyWorld, whose mascot, Rikky Rabbit, is an amalgamation of Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny (a Warner Bros. property). Such feel-good associations may or may not mask the imperialism embedded both in the obvious inspiration of Disney and in the dominance of Hollywood blockbusters like *John Wick* (Chad Stahelski, 2014) and its sequels on the HappyLand/HappyWorld screen, despite the claim that the cinema serves “independent African films.”²⁸ American capital was thus doubly implicated in the theatrical exhibition of *Oga Bolaji* in Kasum’s native Nigeria. Facilitated by American investment, as Kuumba Media paid for access to the HappyLand/HappyWorld screen, renting it for a fixed period, the film’s run was further conditioned by the persistent

influence of Disney, recalling Richard Cook's "Disneyland model" of multiplexing and proving the staying power of that model across four decades and many thousands of miles.²⁹ In other words, even when Disney is not directly involved in the management of cinemas in Nigeria, the corporation still haunts the landscape of theatrical exhibition in a country that has periodically borne witness to Hollywood's ambitions.

What, then, is the future of African cinema in this era of increasing encounters with corporate capitalism? As Ousmane Sembene says in *Behind the Scenes* (1981), Paulin Soumanou Vieyra's short documentary on the making of Sembene's *Ceddo* (1976), "The future of African cinema depends on the future of the cultural policy of the African continent. If Africa wants to have its own culture, it has to develop it. Cinema by itself has no future. . . . African governments have the opportunity . . . to guide their cinemas." Vieyra's voice-over narration concurs, culminating in an impassioned plea for the establishment and enforcement of policies guaranteeing African films access to African screens: "Alas, it is not enough to write a good script, master film language, fight to find resources to make the movie. African movies must also find a place in cinemas—starting with African cinemas."