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Nairobi-based Middle Class Filmmakers and the Production and Circulation of Transnational Cinema

Abstract: Filmmakers in Nairobi are embedded within transnational circuits of cinematic production and distribution. Many make use of Euro-American funding to make their films and seek to show their films in prestigious festivals outside Africa, but in so doing they are critiqued by scholars and critics who worry that the involvement of outsiders in African cinema curtails filmmakers' creative freedom. This sort of criticism does not account for the fact that Euro-American audiences and filmmakers from elsewhere might share a common taste in stories. Based on an eight month period of research in Nairobi in 2014-2015 where I conducted 31 expert interviews with 27 filmmakers, I argue Nairobi-based filmmakers are members of a transnational middle class, with transnational experiences and tastes, and that accounting for this leads to new understandings of the production and circulation of their films and African film more broadly.

Keywords: Nairobi-based filmmakers; middle class; transnational filmmaking; taste; cultural industries; African film

1. Introduction

The dynamism of African media production today "invite[s] us to study media 'from' the south as a way to make sense of wider transformations taking place the world over" (Jedlowski 2016, 189), and as such, the case of Nairobi-based filmmakers offers fertile ground for the study of global taste beyond the Euro-American mainstream. This paper sets out to explore the transnationally connected modes of production and circulation that these filmmakers use. These filmmakers frequently make use of transnational funding schemes with capital drawn from Europe and North America and distribute their films internationally within the circuit of international film festivals, and to a smaller extent using online platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. Yet, at present little is known about the industry in which these filmmakers work. They have been noted in the literature for the unusual fact that the most successful and critically acclaimed filmmakers in Nairobi are women (Bisschoff 2012, 64; Bisschoff 2015, 73; Dovey 2012, 22; Wenner 2015, 190),[1] but other factors influencing their work, including the fact that they are all middle class, have not yet been assessed. In her study of gender and creative work in Europe, media scholar Angela McRobbie notes that even if the freelance market is insecure for all workers, middle class women retain a significant advantage over working class women (2009), thus highlighting class as an important analytical variable. Several studies note that class-based inequality has been under-examined in creative and cultural industries research and find that it has significant influence in shaping patterns of work in these industries in the United Kingdom (cf. Oakley et al 2017; O'Brien et al 2016). In an African context, African film scholar Jonathan Haynes' recent

[1] This literature notes the presence of women in Nairobi's film industries as 'interesting', but does not explain why women are so prevalent in this space. Further research is needed on gender and filmmaking in Kenya to explain this phenomenon.

work on market segmentation in Nollywood (2016) also points to the growing need to explore the impact of class on shaping patterns of creative work. In line with this turn to assessing class in creative and cultural industries scholarship, in this paper I will examine the role that being middle class plays in the production and circulation of films by Nairobi-based filmmakers.

The current global media landscape is one where filmmakers from outside Euro-America frequently make use of Euro-American funding to finance different aspects of their projects. This model has been challenged on the grounds that it compromises the artistic independence of non Euro-American filmmakers by forcing them to comply with genres and styles of filmmaking that the Euro-American funding bodies wish to see (Diawara 2010; Halle 2010; McCluskey 2009; Peranson 2008; Ross 2011). For instance, German film scholar Randall Halle argues that contemporary European co-productions with filmmakers in Africa and Asia are a form of Neo-Orientalism because they support "the production of stories about other peoples and places that it, the funding source, wants to hear" (2010, 314) and that the resulting "films must offer stories that appeal to European and North American audiences" (2010, 317). These arguments, rather implausibly, position funders as all-powerful, but more importantly they do not account for shared tastes that cross borders, and the fact that Euro-American audiences and filmmakers from elsewhere might share a common taste in stories. The balancing act of satisfying funders and maintaining one's artistic integrity may be, in the words of Nigerian-South African filmmaker Akin Omotoso, "the devil you choose to dance with" (quoted in McCluskey 2009, 166), but filmmakers do have a choice in these encounters and that choice is influenced by their individual profiles and competencies. Writing specifically about film festival funds but in a statement that is relevant to all forms of co-production, film scholar Marrijke de Valck notes that without considering the tensions between commercial and artistic interests that underpin the "the process of supporting world cinema as art cinema" "scholars run the risk of approaching festival funds as stable and univocal bodies that simply "have an effect" on filmmaking and filmic texts without sufficiently taking into account the contradictions and the process of negotiation that are involved" (2014, 43). This article seeks to foreground the strategies and processes of negotiation that Nairobi-based filmmakers employ when working with 'foreign' partners to make and distribute their films.

1.1 Methods

Our contemporary world is globalized, but "global networks are maintained, adjusted, guarded, and configured in the local" (Myers and Murray 2006, 3). Putting the creative productions of Africans in conversation with artists from elsewhere (as is necessary in an interconnected world) "will require more—not less— 'local' knowledge of these multiple places" (Julien 2015, 26). A national framework of analysis offers little insight into the work patterns of Nairobi-based filmmakers because the state provides little support for them, and rather it is through local networks in Nairobi and transnational connections that these filmmakers are enabled to make their films (Steedman

forthcoming). According to Higbee and Lim, the term 'transnational cinema' "risks celebrating the supranational flow or transnational exchange of peoples, images and cultures at the expense of the specific cultural, historical or ideological context in which these exchanges take place" (2010, 11-12). Thus, in order to avoid the perils identified by Higbee and Lim and to ground my study of transnational connections in the concrete spaces where filmmakers work, I undertook eight months of field research in the place where Nairobi-based filmmaker live and work most: Nairobi, Kenya.

My main method in the field, and the empirical heart of this paper, was expert interviews. I first approached filmmakers Wanuri Kahiu, Judy Kibinge, Hawa Essuman, and Ng'endo Mukii because I considered them especially notable based on their international profiles (gained through touring their films on the international film festival circuit), and then built the rest of my interview sample (31 interviews with 27 filmmakers) by snowballing and cold-emailing other filmmakers as I learned about their work.[2] I included filmmakers with established careers as well as emerging filmmakers. Each interview was semi structured and though I had a prepared list of questions I let our conversations flow organically and tailored them to suit the professional profile of each individual filmmaker. In preparation for each interview I read extensively about each filmmaker including published interviews. Many of the filmmakers I interviewed were accustomed to being interviewed by the press (such as Judy Kibinge and Wanuri Kahiu), so I had to be especially aware of the self-presentation and performativity that is part of all interviews when analysing my interview transcripts.

By embedding myself within Nairobi for an extended period (eight months), I was able to contextualize the work of Nairobi-based filmmakers within the broader context of both screen media industries in the city and the business and policy context much more broadly – such as the lack of state support for their filmmaking (Steedman 2019) and the importance of Nairobi's position as a hub for the international development industry (McNamara 2016). Through observing the film exhibition and distribution circuit in Nairobi I learned internationally popular Kenyan films had not lost 'local' resonance, as critics often assume (cf. Diawara 2010); rather, audiences in Nairobi share a taste in films with audiences abroad but they have difficulty gaining *access* to them because large-scale distribution infrastructure does not yet exist in the local market. Empirical and field-based research showed that there is no essential or insurmountable difference in taste between Nairobian and international audiences. Thus, fieldwork in Nairobi was thus an essential first step in challenging binary thinking about taste.

[2] The following interviews are cited in this paper: Anne Mungai (5 March 2015), Appie Matere (6 May 2015), Barbara Karuana (3 March 2015), Emily Wanja (3 June 2015), Hawa Essuman (7 November 2014; 4 May 2015), Jennifer Gatero (26 May 2015), Jinna Mutune (13 December 2014), Judy Kibinge (6 November 2013; 25 November 2014; 13 May 2015), Mildred Achoch (8 December 2014), Natasha Likimani (13 May 2015), Njoki Muhoho (17 February 2015), Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann (24 April 2015), Wangechi Ngugi (27 April 2015), Wanjiru Kinyanjui (24 March 2015), Wanuri Kahiu (27 October 2014), Zippy Kimundu (29 March 2015). My analysis is based on insights gained from my entire interview corpus.

2. World Cinema and African Cinema in the World

Unlike industries such as Nollywood and Bollywood that circulate globally in large part due to demand from diaspora audiences (cf. Bhaumik [2006] on Bollywood and Adejunmobi [2007] on Nollywood), the international circulation of the films of Nairobi-based filmmakers is not fueled by a Kenyan diaspora eager to watch films from home. Instead, these films tend to circulate within film festivals and in other artistic spaces. Europe and North America "have been, historically and until recently, the main regions in which films by Africans have circulated through festivals" (Dovey 2015a, 23), so assessing the politics of their circulation – and discourses about that circulation – in these places is essential.[3] African films are pigeonholed "within genres such as 'world cinema'" largely because of "the sporadic and isolated programming of these films within 'A-list' festivals" (Dovey 2015a, 56). African films from vastly different contexts displaying widely divergent styles and themes are grouped together – as world cinema – based on the shared similarity of Otherness. The expression of each filmmaker's individual creativity is undermined in this homogenizing approach, but filmmakers still can and do assert their agency in these encounters and influence the transnational circulation and interpretation of their films.

World cinema, in the mainstream sense, essentially began in the 1950s with "the Euro-American discovery of Japanese cinema" (Bhaumik 2006, 190). Film scholar Lucia Nagib suggests a definition of world cinema where it encompasses all the cinema of the world (2006), but film scholar Kaushik Bhaumik argues instead that "far from being exhaustive world cinema is a category constructed through a process of cultural translation that picks up only that which is familiar or made familiar through particular prisms of interpretation employed in mainstream Western cultural discourses" (Bhaumik 2006, 190). To be considered 'world cinema' in the mainstream sense, a film must have 'crossed over,' which means gaining a viewership in the 'West' beyond diasporic audiences. Bollywood and Japanese cinema offer a useful contrast here. Bollywood is excluded from world cinema and derided as "merely derivative of Hollywood since the West has not shown its admiration by producing films emulating Bombay film styles," whereas "Japanese cinema is worth talking of since Western influence on Japanese cinema was matched by the West's admiration for Japanese cinema" (Bhaumik 2006, 189). Within world cinema what is valuable, or derivative and therefore discardable, depends on the terms of cultural exchange, which are unequal, and because world cinema is a Euro-American classification, slanted in favour of Euro-America. To put it plainly, world cinema is what is simultaneously Other, and rendered familiar, when viewed from the perspective of the Euro-American mainstream.

Film festivals have played an essential role in developing the canon of world cinema since *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1951) screened at the Venice Film Festival in 1951.

[3] Film festivals remain an essential venue for the international circulation of films by Nairobi-based filmmakers, but their films also circulate in VOD platforms online. Unfortunately, examining the online circulation of their films is beyond the scope of this paper.

Film scholar Julian Stringer importantly notes that film festivals tend to provide the first moment of contact between 'non-Western' cinema and Euro-America, and as such "scholars tend to approach them through the nostalgic invocation of those moments when non-Western industries were 'discovered' – that is, discovered by Westerners – at major international competitions" (2001, 134-135). The implicit assumption in this mode of thinking is "that non-Western cinemas do not count historically until they have been recognized by the apex of international media power, the center of which is located, by implication, at Western film festivals" (Stringer 2001, 135). Because Nairobi-based filmmakers' films have shown in international film festivals they have 'crossed over' and can now be considered under the rubric of world cinema.

Crossing over means being seen by audiences in different locations than where the film was made or the filmmaker's home context. Crossover audiences are often treated polemically because of an assumed difference between 'local' and 'foreign' spectators and how filmmakers are assumed to manipulate their work to accommodate foreign tastes. For instance, it has been suggested that Chinese Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou's films are essentially made *for* "Western" spectators rather than Chinese viewers, and this involves selling out the 'real' China for a manufactured spectacle of "enchanting, exotic stories about the other country 'China' through stunning visual images" (Lu 1997, 126). The same can be said of Japanese film, where "criticism of Japanese cinema has often been dominated by an Orientalist construction of 'Japaneseness' as Other to a homogenous West, and has tended to focus on how 'Japanese' or 'Western' a given film or director may be" (Hutchinson 2006, 173). Returning to the context of African film, 'calabash cinema' has been used as a derogatory term "called upon the moment Africans feel an African film is in any way 'pandering' to an 'external' and 'exotic' view of Africa" (Dovey 2015a, 52). I have mentioned these three examples, all from different contexts, to show the pervasiveness of this kind of nativist discourse within world cinema. A commonality across all these discourses is that the artist is not free to create; rather, they must create for an essentialised national or continental audience and present the national 'properly.' Within the African film context, filmmakers and scholars have for a long time committed themselves to an 'oppositional criticism' explicitly aimed at defining African film against 'Western film' (cf. Tcheuyap 2011, 26; Thackway 2003), but this criticism has always suppressed recognitions of the true diversity of African cinemas. As film scholar David Murphy so forcefully argues, "the reductive opposition between Africa and the West merely produces a sterile stand-off between the different cultural influences which are so clearly present in African films" (2000, 243). Arguments rooted in authenticity cannot account for contemporary production. As Tcheuyap suggests:

> By incorporating new visions, genres, representations and aesthetic expressions, today's filmmakers are not only interrogating sub-Saharan African identities, but are furthermore staking out a place for African cultures in global flows where identity oscillates between 'global and local, nation and (non)nation' (Petty, 2008, 1). In a context of transnational, hybrid, shifting and multiple identities, it

> is difficult to imagine that African productions have remained immune to outside influence. (2011, 12-14)

Nativist criticism both fails to see films as acts of representation, not sociological documents, and suggests a binary division between spectators local and foreign – a division that is too simple to account for transnationally shared tastes, as I will now go on to elaborate.

3. Filmmaking and Nairobi's Transnationally Connected Middle Class

> "It's almost like the middle class of Africa feels like a dirty secret. Because you hear so little about them" –Hawa Essuman (interview 2015)

In reflection of the wider trend of studying the middle classes in Africa (James 2015; Melber 2016; Mubila, Aissa, and Lufumpa 2011; Ncube and Lufumpa 2015), literature focusing on the middle class in Kenya, and in Nairobi specifically, has proliferated in recent years. Kenya is an important site for the study of middle classes in Africa because, according to economic definitions, it possesses an unusually large middle class.[4] Yet, despite these figures "it is difficult to speak of social classes in Nairobi. It often seems that 'vertical' links across apparent class boundaries impede the formation of horizontal linkages between those who share the same 'objective' economic situation" (Spronk 2012, 64). Further complicating class based understandings of Kenyan society is the fact that "children and their parents, or adult siblings within the same family, may have different class positions" (Neubert 2016, 116). A Marxist or Weberian understanding of class where class position is stable across generations is thus not directly applicable (Neubert 2016, 116). For anthropologist Lena Kroeker, the middle class in Kenya constitutes a group with the resources, social and financial, to mitigate periods of uncertainty and avoid sliding into poverty (Kroeker 2016).

Yet, the middle class is not "something that we can find 'out there' and measure within the population of Kenya," not something easily quantifiable, but rather "the (imagined) goal and result of people's ambition to climb the social ladder" (Spronk 2016, 13). Spronk importantly identifies class-based self-perception as a crucial variable to study, alongside other indicators of material positioning within Kenyan society. She argues that the connections between "(1) access to education and the resulting salaried occupations, (2) consumption patterns and lifestyle choices, and (3) modern self-perceptions" result in being middle class (2014, 99). The Nairobi-based young professionals of her study enact their middle class position in relation to global frameworks:

[4] The African Development Bank (AfDB) uses "an absolute definition of per capita daily consumption of $2 to $20 in 2005 purchasing power parity (PPP) US dollars" to define the middle class in Africa (Ncube 2015, n.p.). According to AfDB calculations, 44.9% of Kenya's population is middle class (Waldmüller, Gez, and Boanada-Fuchs 2016, 4).

> Their self-perceptions as "modern" or "sophisticated" are important for their pursuit of upward mobility, which directs them beyond the borders of Kenya … They are very conscious about their cosmopolitan tastes and practices and are proud to be a part of a larger world beyond Kenya, orienting themselves toward South Africa and the African diaspora. (Spronk 2014, 107-108)

Accounting for class-based self-perception, as a perception that identifies itself with middle classes beyond the national border, is particularly important because it suggests a way of thinking about middle classness in Nairobi that is not geographically bounded. Nairobi-based filmmakers can be defined as middle class based on easily quantifiable characteristics of class such as house location, job, car ownership, education, and English language skills,[5] but it is their self-perception in addition to these material markers that allows for seeing them as part of a transnational middle class.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that "to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts … corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes taste to function as markers of 'class'" (1984, 1-2). This same function can be seen in Nairobi. The transnational orientation of middle class filmmakers can be seen, for instance, in their media choices. Nairobi-based filmmaker Barbara Karuana expressed a middle class self-identification in our discussions. While formulating a critique of local television programming, Karuana told me:

> I ask myself, why is our TV terrible? And then I realise that it is because they don't tell the kind of stories I'm interested in hearing about. And that's not necessarily reflective of the Kenyan society as a whole… I can tell you for a fact that I live a very different life from someone who lives across the road in Kibera. … My thought process, and my interests, and my concerns are *exactly the same as someone who lives in the States, or in the UK or whatever*. (Interview 2015)

What Karuana demonstrates here is a very clear sense of her position in a distinct Kenyan subgroup with a cosmopolitan orientation and very different material circumstances from those of lower income groups.[6] In a corresponding statement critiquing television, she expressed class issues even more plainly through the rhetorical question: "why would me, a middle class Kenyan, choose to watch something on NTV [a local free-to-air network] and not watch something on Netflix?" (interview 2015). Like Karuana, Nairobi-based filmmaker Jennifer Gatero also described herself as middle class and articulated her class standing through modes of her screen media viewing: "I, myself am middle-class … I watch DVDs, I have cable TV, or I have Netflix, a lot of people I know have Netflix, so we've moved out of local TV" (interview 2015). , Scholars have argued watching 'quality' television is a new form of distinction (Lavie 2015), meaning watching 'quality' television – as Karuana and Gatero see themselves as doing – can be status giving. This link between class position and taste in art (in this

[5] These are the indicators of middle class position used in the first study of Nairobi's middle classes (Latvala 2006).

[6] In her evocation of the informal settlement Kibera, Karuana expresses class difference in a typical Nairobian way, as commonly "people refer to social classes by quoting a part of the city" (Overbergh 2015, 102).

case television) is in line with a Bourdieusian understanding of taste. Karuana and Gatero's statements reflect the fact that they see themselves as part of a global network of similarly minded people who share interests and tastes regardless of where they live – a self-perception that Spronk (2014) would characterise as modern and middle class.

It is remarkably commonplace for Nairobi-based filmmakers to have lived, worked or studied abroad. Zippy Kimundu, for instance, began studying mass communication and TV production and, following her education, moved to Uganda. She realised that working in Kenya, she was getting jobs where she would be "someone's assistant, first learning, an intern getting coffee, but I knew if I went somewhere I would step right in and work … So I moved to Uganda for that reason" (interview 2015). While in Uganda, in addition to working in the film industry, she studied for a degree in public administration (interview 2015). A pivotal moment in her career came when she attended Maisha Film Lab, a non-profit film training initiative supporting emerging filmmakers from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda run by filmmaker Mira Nair, as an editor. Subsequently, she studied for an MFA at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts Asia before returning to Nairobi to work.[7] To give another example, Dorothy Ghettuba left a career in venture capital in Canada to start her production company Spielworks. Ghettuba is often credited, alongside Alison Ngibuini of Al Is On Productions, with creating a new type of locally made television – one that is cosmopolitan and upmarket - using new production models (Achoch interview 2014; Karuana interview 2015; Mutune interview 2014; Likimani interview 2015).

Accounting for their transnational middle class position is necessary in order to understand how they approach working with funding bodies based outside Kenya. When I asked Nairobi-based filmmaker Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann about her process of finding funding for her films she said:

> I think it's a combination of A, having an idea that keeps returning and B, also checking what calls there are. So often you'll read about a call and it will be for a fiction film, or for this or for that, and you think OK actually, I wonder if I could think of something for that. Or you have an idea and you think, how can I apply for that? But usually I always think predominantly about how I can get funding. (Interview 2015)

She has been quite successful using this approach considering her film *New Moon* (2018) received funding from the East African documentary film fund Docubox, Göteborg Film Festival, the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) Bertha Fund, and through a crowd funding campaign. As outlined at the beginning of this paper, her strategies would commonly be read by critics as 'selling out,' but more accurately her strategy can be read as a highly pragmatic approach to funding. She 'spins' her ideas and projects so that they appear in alignment with the intentions of

[7] Many prominent filmmakers of Kimundu's generation also trained at prestigious film schools abroad. For instance, Wanuri Kahiu completed a Master's in film directing at UCLA and Ng'endo Mukii studied at the Rhode Island School of Design and at the Royal College of Art in London.

funding sources. As is common among Nairobi-based filmmakers, her ideas are also shaped by her personal experiences outside Kenya, including living and studying in France, the Netherlands, and South Africa (Ndisi-Herrmann interview 2015). Pioneering African directors may have focused on making post-colonial critiques in their films, but "the new cadre of directors is looking beyond nationalism and situating its discourses in the turbulent cross-flows of globalization" (Tcheuyap 2011, 12), where they are also situating their production and distribution processes. When we see Nairobi-based filmmakers as part of a transnational middle class it becomes more tenuous to interpret their filmmaking careers as 'less authentic' when they involve collaborations with non-Kenyans in either production or distribution phases.

4. The Cross-border Circulation of Films by Nairobi-based Filmmakers

Here is it important to note that the filmmakers I have been discussing so far are not the only ones operating in Nairobi today. There is another industry, named Riverwood, that exists quite separately from the one populated by the middle class filmmakers that are the subject of this article. Riverwood films are predominantly shot in Kikuyu (and sometimes other vernacular languages) "and produced and consumed along language and, closely related, ethnicity lines" (Overbergh 2014, 210).[8] The type of filmmaking practice in Riverwood is reminiscent of Nollywood-style filmmaking – indeed scholars have described Riverwood as the Kenyan counterpart of Nollywood (cf. Calvin 2014; Krings and Okome 2013, 15). However, while there are similarities because Riverwood films are made cheaply and quickly, a crucial distinction between these industries is that, unlike Nollywood, Riverwood films struggle to find popularity with audiences and to become profitable (Overbergh 2015, 100). They do not have an international market (though they desire wider distribution [Overbergh 2015]) and do not receive funding from the sources that Nairobi-based middle class filmmakers use to finance their films.

Nairobi-based middle class filmmakers do not consider themselves to be part of Riverwood. Even veteran filmmaker Wanjiru Kinyanjui – who worked with Riverwood filmmakers to create *Bahati* (2007) and *Manga in America* (2007) – draws a clear distinction between herself and Riverwood filmmakers. She describes herself as a 'professional' director and those working in Riverwood as 'amateurs' (Kinyanjui 2008). Veteran producer Appie Matere articulated a key difference between her work making films for South African pay-TV company M-Net and Riverwood. She gave a workshop for Riverwood filmmakers and realised in that context that she is not one of them when she mentioned that she was working with a budget of 800,000 KES (£6000) per film and it "was little money":

> and everybody pinched each other - what is she talking about? Eight hundred thousand! That's a lot of money. Then I explained to them and I told them it's not … you think it's a lot of money because where you come from, but look at it as we

[8] For further discussion of distinctions within Riverwood see Overbergh (2015).

> have to use eight hundred thousand to [maintain the] M-Net standard. Their standard cannot go low. (Interview 2015)

She also said that her making a film for 800,000 KES (£6000) for M-Net was the equivalent to a 20,000 KES (£150) Riverwood film in the sense that she has to be incredibly frugal in order to "maintain the standard" M-Net requires – essentially, 800,000 KES (£6000) is a small amount of money to make a show of the required quality. A full comparative study of middle class and Riverwood filmmakers is not possible within the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that Nairobi-based female filmmakers have the cultural and social capital (to use Bourdieu's terminology [2011]) to attract funding and market themselves in the festival circuit that Riverwood filmmakers so far lack. Gaining access to international projects (such as making films for M-Net) or international distribution circuits such as film festivals requires particular competencies in self-promotion that so far middle class filmmakers have been shown to have but Riverwood filmmakers lack.

Nairobi-based filmmakers work hard to navigate the complicated terrain of crossing over to reach global audiences and continuously assert their agency in this process, as I will demonstrate through the case study of Wanuri Kahiu and her short film *Pumzi* (2010). *Pumzi* is her most high-profile film[9] and it is one of the most celebrated recent films from Kenya. Upon its release it "became instantly known as 'Kenya's first science fiction film'" (Cieko 2017, n.p.). It is frequently invoked in critical discourses because of its newness, which is generally understood in terms of genre (Calvin 2014; Cieko 2017; Harrow 2015; Higgins 2015; Womack 2013). *Pumzi* can be easily read through the lens of science fiction – it is set in a dystopian future in a post-apocalyptic landscape and human society now lives underground in a tightly policed community governed by a council that carefully controls their movements (through granting or denying exit passes) and even their thoughts through compelling inhabitants to take dream suppressants. The science fiction genre is not new of course, but the hype surrounding *Pumzi* seems to emanate from the fact that this is *African* science fiction. As discussed in Part 2, scholarship has tended to interpret African film within certain parameters – essentially of speaking back to Western discourses about Africa and 'correctly' representing Africa (Harrow 2007, xi). In the circuit of prestigious film festivals "African film and filmmakers tend to be treated … as an *exception*" and outside the purview of mainstream film criticism and discourse (Dovey 2015a, 60; emphasis hers). Within this terrain of criticism and reception Kahiu resists the tokenistic praise of her film (as new *for an African* and thus worthy of praise) and insists on situating it firmly within a transnationally shared film canon.

In a 2013 interview, Kahiu describes the creation of *Pumzi* and says she "didn't choose science fiction," rather "because the story is about a girl in the future it became a science fiction film" (XamXam 2013). The film's transformation into science fiction came

[9] Kahiu had completed several films including *The Spark that Unites* (2007), *Ras Star* (2007), *From A Whisper* (2008), and *For Our Land* (2009) when she made *Pumzi*.

at the behest of her producer who asked her to choose between science fiction and fantasy. She says, "so I made a decision at that point to go more science fiction than fantasy. But it wasn't an active choice that I'm going to make a science fiction film to deal with issues. I was just writing a story about something that I felt strongly about" (XamXam 2013). *Pumzi's* genre was only secondary to its story, and while the producer had a role to play in shaping the final version of the film (as producers typically do), the creative heart of the film remained with Kahiu. While *Pumzi* is continually invoked as 'new,' Kahiu persistently connects the film and its genre (science fiction) back to older storytelling traditions, and thus resists tokenistic praise of her work. In a TEDxEuston talk, Kahiu "expresses the concern that science fiction in African cultural contexts is not a new phenomenon and is inherent in African storytelling … To insist that *Pumzi* is the first science fiction film from Kenya downplays the presences of futurist discourses in the country, and the African continent more broadly" (Cieko 2017, n.p.). Kahiu argues, "way before any terms were coined that defined Afrofuturists there were storytellers who composed narratives populated with science, fantasy, mythology and speculative storylines" (2016, 167) and "Afrofuturism and speculative fiction have always existed in Africa. Indeed, they pre-date western images of science fiction" (Kahiu 2016, 173). Because science fiction is not actually new in Africa, the laurels bestowed upon Kahiu are not as laudatory as they first appear. In this respect, her critical stance is one that actively resists being shallowly categorised. She has similarly expressed ambivalence about being labelled as Afrofuturist (Kahiu interview 2014) and an 'African filmmaker' (TEDx 2013). She resists being labelled as *only* Afrofuturist, African, or new. She calls herself "a global African working in science fiction" (Kahiu 2016, 172) and stakes a claim that "while African theories of cyclical time may influence my work, I am equally affected in the idea of multiverses being explored in the [Large Hadron Collider]" (Kahiu 2016, 172). She is attempting to move herself and her artwork away from the possibility of easy categorisation and into a space where she can be recognised as an artist without caveats.

Kahiu resists attempts by others to pigeonhole her work and markets herself as a 'global African' artist making films that fit squarely within a transnationally shared canon of global cinema. De Valck argues that it is through using words such as "auteur, talent, and personal voice" that "festivals position filmmakers in the art historical lineage of other great masters in the fine arts, literature, theatre, dance and music" and thus reinforce their own legitimacy as artistic showcases (2014, 44). Kahiu can thus be seen as speaking in the 'language' of film festivals when she asserts her creativity and innovation and positions herself as an auteur. Marketing is instrumental for priming spectators and critics to interpret films – for instance to see a film like *Pumzi* as new, as science fiction, or rather as part of longstanding transnational storytelling traditions. Literature scholar Graham Huggan argues "for every aspiring writer at the 'periphery,' there is a publisher at the 'center,' eager to seize upon their work as a source of marketable 'otherness'" (1994, 29), and the same may be true that film festivals and critics 'seize' upon the films of African filmmakers for their Otherness. Yet, to focus only

on the gatekeepers—be they publishers, festivals, or critics—neglects the agency of the cultural producers to also shape the reception and circulation of their products. Yet, as my discussion of Riverwood has shown, the ability to speak the right language and to markets one's self is also a class based competency, and thus the middle class position of Nairobi-based filmmakers must be accounted for.

5. 'Tarzanism' and African Filmmaking: The Case of One Fine Day Films

Historically, former colonisers, and particularly France, have been the dominant funders of African films and a substantial body of literature has been published discussing the power dynamics underpinning these filmmaking relationships (cf. Barlet 2000; Diawara 1992; Diawara 2010; Dovey 2015a; Saul 2010). In *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (2010), African film scholar Manthia Diawara outlines a history of engagements between 'the West' and Africa that he sees as deeply problematic. He states: "the West always thinks it can solve Africa's problems just by landing there, hand-picking some people and organizing them to fight against ignorance, disease and corruption" (2010, 76). He goes on to term this type of engagement "humanitarian 'Tarzanism' in Africa" (2010, 76). Throughout his book he remains deeply suspicious of any non-African (and particularly French) involvement in the domain of African filmmaking and life more generally arguing "we all know by now that "partnership" has become a buzzword for appropriating the concerns of Africans for the purposes of European and American aid workers" (2010, 81). Yet, examining the tensions, compromises, and negotiations in specific partnerships is necessary when evaluating commercial and artistic relationships (de Valck 2014). Thus, while remaining aware of the history of unequal power relations between Euro-America and Africa that Diawara highlight's forcefully, it is nonetheless necessary to test these assumptions against contemporary case studies, which I will do here using the film production project One Fine Day Films (OFDF).

OFDF is perhaps the most prominent recent film project in Nairobi, as it has succeeded in consistently producing a series of critically acclaimed feature films since its first project, *Soul Boy* (directed by Hawa Essuman), in 2010.[10] The project was started by famous German film director Tom Tykwer and his wife Marie Steinmann and OFDF receives support from a number of different organisations including DW Akademie, a German development organisation focused on media capacity building, and Ginger Ink Films, a British-funded production and service company based in Nairobi (McNamara 2016, 26). During the production of *Soul Boy* Essuman was mentored by Tykwer. For subsequent projects, OFDF expanded its activities to run a filmmakers workshop, which they bill as a "two week classroom-like 'mini film school'" (One Fine Day Films 2016), with participants drawn from across the African continent before producing a film that would ideally include a crew chosen from workshop participants. The project's prominence, success at producing feature films in an environment where

[10] In addition to *Soul Boy* OFDF has produced *Nairobi Half Life* (Gitonga, 2012), *Something Necessary* (Kibinge, 2013), *Veve* (Mukali, 2014), *Kati Kati* (Masya, 2016), and *Supa Modo* (Wainaina, 2018).

that is a rare achievement, and its foundational transnational connections with 'Western' organisations, make it the ideal case study to test Diawara's assumptions about Tarzanist foreign intervention in African filmmaking.

When Nairobi-based filmmaker Judy Kibinge made *Something Necessary* for OFDF she had already been working as a filmmaker in Nairobi for more than a decade after having a successful career in advertising.[11] She approached the workshop as a competition where it "became let the first man or woman win because everyone needs to make that film that will then put you on a certain international platform" (Kibinge interview 2014). For Kibinge, the experience of participating in OFDF was worthwhile because she knows "what it is to be in the trenches" looking for money and making films, yet never having "enough to make a film that has the technical qualities you need to hit the big festivals globally," while at the same time wanting to reach that "larger platform" (Kibinge interview 2014).[12] In her assessment, the value of working with OFDF (and other transnational film projects) stems from the fact that "if you make a film that is good enough, [it] will quickly put you on a global platform. The same one that you've been trying to get to for various years" (Kibinge interview 2014). The possibility that working with OFDF could lead to a larger platform was aptly demonstrated by both *Soul Boy* and *Nairobi Half Life*: *Soul Boy* premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) where it also won the €10,000 Dioraphte Award and went on to show at "virtually every other festival worldwide" (Wenner 2015, 189) and, alongside a significant festival run, *Nairobi Half Life* was submitted as the Kenyan contribution to the Academy Awards (the first ever submission by Kenya). Kibinge wanted to reach larger audiences (particularly internationally) and saw participating in OFDF as a way to achieve that goal.

Yet, attempting to reach this larger platform through OFDF meant engaging in a process of negotiation. Kibinge participated in the OFDF workshop because she wanted to direct the film, but the screenplay was not revealed until after she was chosen and she was deeply disappointed that she would be making a film about the Kenyan post-election violence of 2007/2008, stating: "It's not the film that … I would have chosen to make" (Kibinge interview 2013). While she could not choose the film's subject she did still attempt to shape the film according to her own agenda and vision, and she was credited with adapting the screenplay by Mungai Kiroga in addition to directing the film. A serious issue she had to negotiate in working with OFDF was potential challenges to her authorship. Having the authorship of a film questioned simultaneously challenges its status and potential value because "auteurism has always been about cultural capital, staking a claim for cinema's status as art" (Tasker 2010, 216). As previously discussed,

[11] Before *Something Necessary* she had directed the fiction films *Dangerous Affair* (2002), *Project Daddy* (2004) and *Killer Necklace* (2008), as well as multiple short films, documentaries, and commissioned projects. Additionally, she ran a small production company called Seven Productions.

[12] The need for technical quality to make it into film festivals is forcefully demonstrated by the long time systematic exclusion of Nollywood films from festivals (cf. Dovey 2015a; Haynes 2011).

the discourse of 'auteurs' is alive and well at film festivals. Kibinge displayed a keen awareness of exactly this dynamic when she described the questioning of her authorial voice, presumably by critics and curators, as "the big minus about being part of an initiative like" OFDF (interview 2014). It "is really dangerous" as a filmmaker to look like "the figurehead on a workshop piece," and it was this risk that Kibinge weighed up when deciding whether or not to be part of OFDF (Kibinge interview 2014). She suspects that the reason why the film did not travel to the highest profile festivals beyond TIFF is "the cynicism that comes back when the caption comes up at the end" saying that the film was part of the OFDF development programme (Kibinge interview 2014). Of course, it is also possible that the curators of those festivals simply did not consider the film 'good enough' to show in their programmes. However, given the pervasiveness of a discourse that values authenticity, creativity, and auteur cinema in the operation of film festivals and world cinema critics, it is likely that even the possibility of impure authorship had a role to play in eliminating it from consideration. Hence there is a double standard at work: 'auteurs' are valued for their creativity, but Nairobi-based filmmakers, because they are African, are judged and valued for the authenticity of their films.

The same issues facing Kibinge in regards to *Something Necessary* also faced Gitonga and Essuman in regards to their OFDF films (*Nairobi Half Life* and *Soul Boy* respectively). According to one critic, "pinning down the particularly Kenyan contribution" to *Nairobi Half Life* is "difficult" (Hodapp 2014, 232) because of Tykwer's participation. This framing leaves open the question of whether the film is really *Tom Tykwer's* instead of Tosh Gitonga's while simultaneously questioning the national authenticity of the film. It thus participates in a discourse that defines African films based on the conceptually nebulous quality of 'African-ness.' In a discussion of *Soul Boy,* Berlinale film curator Dorothee Wenner wrote: "it was wonderful to watch this Kenyan success story unfolding. But the joy was not shared by all – some people in Nairobi were highly critical of the project and asked, on the occasion of the [African Movie Academy Award] nominations, whether *Soul Boy* was really an African film, given the strong German involvement" (2015, 189). Here we find ourselves on familiar, if tired, critical terrain where the question of authenticity and African-ness in film is paramount. A key limitation of the OFDF project then is not that it is Tarzanist, but rather that it is *perceived* to be.

The critics of African films that critique the involvement of foreign funds are also importantly ignoring the fact that co-production is simply a reality for independent filmmaking today and necessary for its survival. Adopting a staunch critique on the grounds of African-ness is thus a refusal to see that cinema is underpinned by commercial relationships. When Nairobi-based filmmakers recognise the value of OFDF in their media ecosystem they are demonstrating an explicit awareness of these relationships and a desire to be integrated into a wider economy of filmmaking. A part of projects like OFDF is bringing in "experienced filmmakers from more developed industries" and giving local creatives a hands-on opportunity to learn from them (Wanja

interview 2015). These initiatives offer a needed "injection of knowledge and know-how" that can help not just individual participants but the whole industry move to the next level (Kibinge interview 2014). Indeed, after participating in an OFDF workshop, veteran Nairobi-based filmmaker Appie Matere now encourages others – both her employees and anyone who wants to get into production – to attend the workshops as a way of acquiring knowledge "because the things you learn there, it's amazing" (interview 2015). Kenya is not currently home to a major well-equipped film school, and there are few opportunities for aspiring filmmakers to train locally (both employers and recent film school graduates made the same complaints about the inadequacy of the film training programmes that currently exist in Kenya (Kibinge interview 2014; Muhoho interview 2015; Ngugi interview 2015)). Intensive master classes like the OFDF workshop are thus seen as a vital stopgap measure. On the whole, the Nairobi-based filmmakers I interviewed do not perceive OFDF as a 'Tarzanist' 'foreign' intrusion in local cinema but rather as a collaborative project of great potential benefit to the local film industry.[13] According to *Soul Boy* director Hawa Essuman, a critical part of these projects is their collaborative dimension because with collaborations "there's a trade of intelligence. Not just expertise, but perspectives," and these resources are "just as important as money is, sometimes more important" (interview 2014). For those filmmakers with the necessary cultural and social capital to gain admittance into highly competitive projects, such as OFDF, the access to resources and skills can be transformative.

The case of One Fine Day Films suggests that what "we all know" about partnerships across borders (to borrow Diawara's expression [2010]) needs to be rethought and, at the very least, rendered more complex and nuanced. A more productive way forward is to recognize that in light of its cross-border collaborative approach to filmmaking *Soul Boy* "is not an 'African film.' It is simply a film in which many Africans have played key roles" (Dovey 2015a, 66) – the same of course is true of the other OFDF films. Categorising these films as African or not is to impose a closure on the texts that can easily stray into essentialism. "The longstanding homogenizing tendencies of capitalist modernity […] create a need for a compensatory and often dubious authenticity" (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, 190), but as my discussion OFDF has shown, this quest for 'authenticity' is a fantasy that neglects the fact that filmmaking is *both* a commercial and artistic endeavour. Indeed, "cinema can never exist solely in the cultural realm" because making and distributing films "presupposes some form of economic activity" (de Valck 2014, 45). Nairobi-based filmmakers are alive to these tensions and, as I have shown, they work to overcome them so that they can maximise the benefit they receive from projects like OFDF.

[13] While it is doubtful beneficiaries of the project would publically express a strong negative criticism it is still remarkable that the only filmmakers I interviewed with negative views of OFDF were from the older generation, such as Anne Mungai and Wanjiru Kinyanjui, and their criticism was in representational terms. Particularly in regards to *Nairobi Half Life*, and in the same vein as critics of Nollywood (Okome 2010), they worried the films were representing Kenya 'badly' to the outside world.

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the ways in which Nairobi-based filmmakers negotiate encounters with transnational distributions circuits and funding bodies and offered a challenge to prevalent interpretations in world cinema studies that see these relationships as inherently problematic. As Hesmondhalgh and Saha argue, "we need an account of indigenous, minority and other forms of cultural production that does not see their interaction with commerce as in itself a sign of aesthetic or political vitiation" (2013, 190-191). This paper has attempted to provide such an account through a case study approach based on an extended period of field work in Nairobi.

I have shown how a discourse of authenticity operates within world cinema shaping which films are seen as valuable, and the fact that this discourse is inadequate for explaining the filmmaking practices of contemporary African filmmakers. Much of the criticism has at its core a binary between 'Western' and Other audiences, but this structuring of global audiences "hinges on a hypothetical geopolitically monolithic spectator" (Xu 1997, 163). Yet, as I demonstrated, the boundaries between producers and spectators are much more fluid than this binary thinking allows, indeed, the frameworks necessary for interpreting films are "losing the national and cultural particularity they once had" (Ezra and Rowden 2006, 4). A full comparison is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is noteworthy that *Soul Boy* and *Nairobi Half Life* – to give just two examples – were, in addition to the international popularity already discussed, very popular with spectators in Nairobi across the socio-economic spectrum including residents of informal settlements such as Kibera and Mathare (Dovey McNamara, Olivieri 2013, n.p.; Dovey 2015b, 131-132, Overbergh 2015, 105). This further suggests the need to re-think critical frames that position African and other audiences as dichotomous.

Nairobi-based filmmakers are members of a transnational middle class with interests, experiences, and tastes that are not geographically bounded to Kenya. When we account for this class position it becomes ever more tenuous to interpret their filmmaking careers as 'less authentic' when they involve collaborations with non-Kenyans in either production or distribution phases. Throughout this paper I have attempted to demonstrate the utility of class as an analytical variable in understanding contemporary film production in Nairobi. Further research is required in this area to see how class shapes other African industries and indeed cross-border relationships between filmmakers, film funds, and film festivals globally.

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