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GLOBAL SCREEN WORLDS

CONVERSATIONS ACROSS CINEMA CULTURES

Edited by Lindiwe Dovey, Kate Taylor-Jones
& Georgia Thomas-Parr

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Global Screen Worlds

Global Screen Worlds

Conversations across Cinema Cultures

EDITED BY
LINDIWE DOVEY,
KATE TAYLOR-JONES AND
GEORGIA THOMAS-PARR

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showing Kenyan filmmaker Judy Kibinge directing a scene with Kenyan actress
Sheila Munyiva. See www.screenworlds.org to watch the film

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Introduction

Africa’s presence in and contributions to the worlds of cinema

This volume – although yearning towards the ‘global’ – began with the continent of Africa firmly at its heart. This is because it emerged out of a larger project – the ERC-funded ‘African Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies’ project (2019–25) – in which our main aim as a research team was to explore *Africans*’ contributions to the diverse, complex screen worlds that make up audiovisual cultures in our contemporary moment. This exploration was motivated by clear evidence that, until recently, Africa has been the most marginalized region within Film and Screen Studies, and has also sometimes been treated as belonging to an entirely different planet in the mainstream film industry and at the most prestigious film festivals (Dovey 2015, 2016). This particular volume thus took its initial inspiration from African cultural studies scholar Eileen Julien, who has called on arts and humanities scholars to put ‘literary, film, and visual arts by Africans in dialogue with the work of artists from Asia, Europe and the Americas’ so as to ‘recognize both African specificities and Africa’s presence in the world’ (2015: 26). Indeed, this book’s collective endeavour is to try to put African cinemas into conversation with other (primarily Asian) cinemas so that we can try to follow the contours of, and conjure, truly global screen worlds. Through this endeavour we hope, in one small way, to contribute to Africa being seen not as self-contained or as a separate world, but as fully a part of and a contributor to our world – in our case, to the worlds created through films.

The kind of comparative approach that Julien recommends and that we have tried to adopt here is quite well developed already in terms of inter-Asian film, media and cultural studies (see Ching 2010, Chen 2010, Ong 2011, Iwabuchi 2014, Yoneyama 2017, Neves and Sarker 2017, and Steinberg and Zahlten 2017 as some key examples of this widening field). This rich body of scholarship has to some extent provided a model and theoretical framework for our work, and, indeed, two of the chapters in our volume put distinct Asian cinematic contexts into conversation rather than bringing together African and Asian examples (see Thomas and Dickinson, and González-López and Hamid, this volume). Neves and Sarkar have called for a 'project to decolonize standardized epistemes and to understand global media in its unruly fecundity' (2017: vii). They write: 'Our aim is to move conversations about Asian media beyond static East-West imaginaries, residual Cold War mentalities, triumphalist declarations about resurgent Asias, and budding jingoisms' (2017: 1), and they say that they 'hope to situate Asian video cultures as crucial constituents of a "global media" phenomenology whose southern vitalities are too often dismissed or overlooked in media epistemologies' (2017: 1–2). Their work has built on scholarship by other Asian film and media scholars, such as Zhang (2006, 2010), Raju (2012) and Yoshimoto (2013), and has been continued by the work of scholars such as Yang (2020), Van Fleit (2022), Teo (2019) and Fan (2015, 2019, 2022). Steven Teo has called for the 'loosening of the grip of Eurocentrism in Film Studies' (2019: 4), and – in his groundbreaking work on Chinese film theory – Victor Fan calls for an 'interregional conversation' in which a binary positioning of eastern and Western must be dismantled (2015: 3). While we fully align ourselves with the important work of these scholars, our methodology differs in its insistence on the need not only for a comparative and conversational approach, but also crucially a collaborative approach – one that has been inspired by Paul Willemen and Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's conceptualizations of what Film and Screen Studies could be.

What are these 'worlds' in 'screen worlds'?

In his article 'What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?' published in the journal *Social Justice* in 1993, Stuart Hall reminds us that academic work must always be situated within its time. Ideas circulating in the academy are contingent and temporary, not permanent; 'moments are always conjunctural' and 'the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question' (104). By adapting Hall's question to our own – What are these 'worlds' in our conceptualization of 'screen worlds'? – we respect the time in which we are working, thirty years after Hall's article appeared. It is useful, however, to recall the global context in which Hall and others were working when he wrote that article, by quoting him at length:

> According to Cornel [West], the moment, this moment, has three general coordinates. The first is the displacement of European models of high culture, of Europe as the universal subject of culture, and of culture itself in its old Arnoldian reading as the last refuge. … The Second coordinate is the emergence of the United States as a world power and, consequently, as the center of global cultural production and circulation. … The third coordinate is the decolonization of the Third World, culturally marked by the emergence of the decolonized sensibilities. And I read the decolonization of the Third World in Frantz Fanon's sense: I include in it the impact of civil rights and black struggles on the decolonization of the minds of the peoples of the black diaspora.
>
> (1993: 104–5)

In terms of Cornel West's first coordinate, we could argue that the process of displacement of the high/low culture distinction is now complete. In our field of Film and Screen Studies, many books on world cinema now explicitly include not only film festival films but also films from the popular industries of Bollywood, Nollywood and Hallyu (for example, Deshpande and Mazaj 2018) and those which circulate via informal as well as formal means (see Baschiera and Fisher 2022).

In relation to the second coordinate, one perhaps sees the most dramatic change over the past thirty years – China and India could be said to have overtaken the United States as world powers, and the United States is certainly no longer the 'center of global cultural production and circulation' (Hall 1993: 104) when one considers shifting centres of gravity and the film flows explored in this book and beyond. As Gruenewald and Wang (2018) have argued, there has been a radical shift in global film markets as Chinese cinema aims to rival Hollywood in terms of the number of films produced and box office success. Both China and India have seen active governmental involvement in the development and promotion of the respective cinema industries as a means to achieve the elusive 'soft power' that Nye (2004) writes about (see also Su 2016; Athique 2019; Yang 2020). This approach is often mired in contemporary politics, nationalism and power and, as Yang notes, the 'practice of China–India co-productions represents a more diverse cinematic landscape and provides a broader view than those from the European or American context. It also indicates a new direction and new potential for the study of transnational co-production: a politically driven model, which differs from the existing approaches in the contemporary discourse on co-production' (2020: 183). However, this is not a simple act of displacement from one area of the globe to another. As Kokas articulates in her study of US–Chinese relations (2017, 2019), politics plays a vital role and the interconnectedness of finances and global market flows means what we are left with is not so much the displacement of Hollywood as an increasingly complex interlinked web of film, finance and politics.

The third coordinate is the most perplexing, and not least to us because this volume has emerged out of the Screen Worlds project, which was itself inspired by renewed decolonizing movements in Higher Education that began at the University of Cape Town in 2015. What does it mean, we could ask, that the decolonization to which Hall refers – and defined by him not simply as about the return of land to original inhabitants but also in Fanon's (and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's) sense of a decolonizing of 'minds' – has seen a resurgence over the past decade, not only through universities but in broader society, for example through the global expression of support for the BlackLivesMatter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020? This suggests that, despite certain recent calls to reject the use of the word 'decolonization' outside of very specific claims resulting from political liberation struggles (Táíwò 2022), there is a need to grapple even more with it and its related terms (decolonizing, the decolonial), to explore their complexities and contradictions, and to think about which cultural strategies in our own small domain 'can make a difference and can shift the dispositions of power' (Hall 1993: 107). These cultural strategies include discursive work and not simply conventional activism. After all, as Sally Potter says, 'thinking, watching, writing, speaking and listening' all need to be seen as 'actions' (Foreword to Gledhill and Knight 2015: n.p.), and therefore as capable of constituting activism.[1] This point is highlighted in the powerful and insightful conversation that opens this book, between Indigenous Tsotsil filmmaker María Sojob and Latin American cinema scholar Charlotte Gleghorn, where film aesthetics, language, gender, anti-colonialism and neocolonialism are seen to all intertwine in the creative and political process.

Charlotte and María's conversation encourages pluriversal discussion about what we mean by 'screen worlds', collectively thinking through what 'decolonizing' means in and for our field of Film and Screen Studies. Through playfully inverting the term 'world cinema', and broadening 'world' to 'worlds' and 'cinema' to 'screen' in recognition of our current political and technological moment, we have welcomed others – in this volume, and elsewhere (see Dovey, Agina and Thomas 2025) – to join us in our explorations. We see 'screen worlds' as a heuristic device, as a prompt and invitation to scholars in our field to try to step away from the now dominant concept of ‘world cinema’ to look at films and film cultures from new angles and through new lenses. We thus use the phrase not in a gesture of competition or academic one-upmanship, to ‘trump’ the term ‘world cinema’, but in a spirit of experimentation, seeing where it might take us.

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[1] This idea of action/activism is also interesting when placed in conversation with the recent scholarship on ecology and the anthropocene (see Fay 2018; de Luca 2022; Furuhata 2022). We were not able to include this as part of this specific project but it is clear that this is a very rich and vital area for future work.

One of the first uses of the phrase ‘world cinema’ is found in Geoffrey Nowell- Smith’s edited volume *The Oxford History of World Cinema: The Definitive History of Cinema Worldwide* (1996). Here the book’s subtitle reveals that ‘world cinema’ is intended to be defined inclusively as ‘cinema worldwide’. However, the focus is very clearly on the United States and western Europe. In this volume of close to 1,000 pages, one short chapter is devoted to ‘The Black Presence in American Cinema’ in a section titled ‘American Movies’, and five and six pages are given respectively to ‘The Cinemas of Sub-Saharan Africa’ and ‘The Arab World’ in a section titled ‘Cinemas of the World’. Asian cinema does not fare much better. When the term ‘world cinema’ was first used by film scholars whose intention was to challenge this biased cartography of the cinematic world, it was invoked as a cultural strategy to make a difference and shift power (Hill and Gibson 2000; Gamm 2004; Badley and Palmer 2006; Dennison and Lim 2006; Grant and Kuhn 2006; Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah 2012; White 2015; Deshpande and Mazaj 2018; Nagib 2020). Now books on world cinema also seem to aspire to address ‘cinema worldwide’ but tend to put Hollywood in its place, acknowledging its magnitude and muscle but deliberately parochializing it through a different kind of scholarly mapping practice in which the film cultures of other regions of the world are brought into the foreground. For example, in their book *World Cinema: An Introduction*, Deshpande and Mazaj argue:

> The technological, financial and aesthetic prowess of Hollywood make it very difficult to formulate a conception of world cinema in which Hollywood does not stand as the dominant center. However, such a reductive view reduces other cinemas of the world to a relatively inferior, negative space. As Lúcia Nagib has argued, this perspective encourages the idea of world cinema as a ‘restrictive and negative’ concept, defining *world cinema* as all cinema that is not Hollywood, existing at best on the periphery.
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> (2018: 21–2)

Deshpande and Mazaj respond to this problem by putting discussions of Hollywood at the periphery of their book, although they rightly stress that Hollywood ‘also cannot be written out of the larger map simply in the service of antagonism’ as this would contribute to ‘an incomplete image of world cinema in which the power of Hollywood goes unquestioned and its relative strength remains unchallenged’ (2018: 23).

While we find Deshpande and Mazaj's ambitions laudable and impressive, and we appreciate that theirs is a co-authored book rather than a monograph, the limitations of their book (and many others on 'world cinema') help to focus the specific issue that studies of world cinema still often exhibit, which is a methodological issue. If our definition of 'world cinema' is to be an inclusive one – covering 'cinema worldwide' and also grappling with Hollywood's place within that cartography – then how are we to engage in a meaningful way with it given the sheer volume of films and filmmaking cultures this category refers to? This problem is most apparent in the section on Nollywood in Deshpande and Mazaj's book since, to those whose expertise is in Nigerian film cultures, the inaccuracies are all too evident. The 'world' in 'world cinema' thus, too often, has depended on the reification of what our Screen Worlds team has come to refer to as 'lone ranger' research (with all its limitations) rather than collaborative methodologies that bring multiple knowledges and epistemologies into play.

Most of all, then, the concept of 'screen worlds' is a heuristic device that invites a *methodological* shift by turning 'world' from a singular adjective into the plural noun 'worlds', by which we have sought to respect decolonial Indigenous thinking that emphasizes that 'the world we want is a world in which many worlds fit' (Zapatista declaration cited by Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 1). This suggested shift is also animated by the pioneering work of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994), in which they clearly articulated a vision of polycentrism that would move away from binary divisions, removing the seemingly endless oscillation around constructions of centre and periphery, the 'West' and 'the rest'. As they write, 'the world has many dynamic cultural locations, many vantage points' (1994: 46) and '[n]o single community or part of the world, whatever its economic power or political power, should be epistemologically privileged' (1994: 47). Similarly, as Sara Ahmed suggests, while we of course inhabit only one, literal planet, our different understandings as people of what constitutes 'the world' have no ontology beyond our subjectivity and our relationality with one another – beyond what we try to communicate to others, and what we apprehend from others. She writes:

> [T]he world acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn. … Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our attention towards.
>
> (Ahmed 2006: 1)

If we take these scholars' ideas seriously, then the only path available for us to conjure the polyvalence and heterogeneity of cinema worldwide is not only comparatively, but also collectively and collaboratively, because it is only through considering who is involved in our work – not simply the 'subject' of our work (cinema) – that we can even start to see and hear these diverse worlds of films and film cultures, and to understand what they mean from different perspectives and in distinct spaces. Absolutely crucial to our approach has thus become ensuring that, while we are collectively interested in filmmaking, we do not present a survey of 'world cinema' that 'suggests a distant gaze, panoptically monitoring the foreign for our convenience and use' (Andrew 2004: 9). Our cultural strategy has become one of cross-continental conversation and co-authorship.

A conversational and care-full approach: Trying to 'turn together' in the world

If we adapt Marshall McLuhan's (1964) much-rehearsed Media Studies axiom that 'the medium is the message' to the practices and processes through which academic knowledge comes into being, we might suggest instead that 'the methodology is the message'. But to make such a point is to turn academic convention upside down to some extent, for it is typical in the introduction to an edited volume to foreground the theoretical/conceptual interventions the editors and authors hope to be making through the volume, and to treat the methodologies that led to the creation of the volume as a matter of secondary importance. We feel, however, that this renders the quotidian practices and processes of academia invisible and puts the emphasis on the final product. It disguises the fact that edited volumes are often produced through a process of elite pre-selection: already-recognized scholars receive a written invitation from an editor to contribute a chapter to a volume on a specific topic; they will receive some feedback from that editor and perhaps an anonymous reviewer and make some adjustments accordingly. After a couple of years, the published volume lands on their desk, in many cases without them having met the other people who contributed to the volume. There are, of course, some significant deviations from this tradition – for example, many stellar volumes that have developed out of intensive workshops and conferences (see, e.g., *Doing Women's Film History*, co-edited by Gledhill and Knight [2015], and *Asian Video Cultures*, co-edited by Neves and Sarkar [2017]).

In terms of this particular volume, we feel that the practices, processes and theoretical/conceptual interventions are indivisible and come together in a single word: conversation. This word comes from the Latin 'com' (meaning 'together') and 'versare' (meaning 'to turn'); in Middle English the word acquired connotations of 'living among', 'familiarity' and 'intimacy'. We wish to preserve in our use of the word 'conversation' the image of an attempt to 'turn together' in the world – the one, literal world we all have no choice but to inhabit collectively – while also acknowledging that, as Ahmed says, 'orientations shape not only how we inhabit space but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance' (2006: 1). We also want to put the emphasis on the idea of 'living among' one another in the sense not of romantic or familial relationships, but rather our collegial relationships in the academy, raising questions about our social relations with one another specifically as film scholars living in diverse parts of the world, and working in distinct institutions. Very specifically, we want to ask whether these are relations of competition or of care, a theme to which we will return later in this introduction.

Given the vast geographical distances between those of us who have brought this volume into being, the best way for us to explore 'screen worlds' was through entering into ground-up conversation with one another. Rather than starting with a top-down, imposed topic or message, we started with the idea of initiating a conversation among film scholars and seeing where that would take us. We ran a pilot study on one day in July 2018 at SOAS University of London, to which we invited several UK-based scholars of African and Asian cinemas to come together in dialogue with one another to seek out similarities and differences in film styles, production practices and spectatorship modes in our specific places of study within these broad regions – a conversation that eventually ended up as a special issue of *Open Screens* journal titled 'The Asian-African Film Connection: Cross-Cultural Imaginaries, Shared Sources, Parallel Histories'. In this Open Access special issue, which explores actual and imagined film connections between, inter alia, China and Ethiopia, Japan and North Africa, and Iran and South Africa, every article was co-authored by scholars who had not previously worked, thought or 'turned' together, and where the challenge was for us to try to correct one another's cultural and other blindspots through bringing our knowledges into conversation with one another (Dovey and Taylor-Jones 2021).

One of the most interesting insights that developed out of our wide-ranging and open-ended conversations in that pilot study was that, while *rooted in* our respective knowledges of films and film cultures in specific contexts in Africa and Asia, these conversations frequently were *routed through* many other places in the world, including Europe and North America.

This was a reminder to us not only of Deshpande and Mazaj's important point that we cannot jettison Hollywood from conceptions of 'world cinema', but also of the limitations of an Area Studies approach where, by training one's attention *only* on certain regions of the world, one can end up replicating a certain kind of ethnographic gaze that calcifies a false dichotomy between 'the

West' and 'the rest'. This kind of approach also risks falling into the trap of what Hall calls 'postmodernism's deep and ambivalent fascination with difference – sexual difference, cultural difference, racial difference, and above all, ethnic difference' (1993: 105). In contrast, in this project we wanted to try to work within a decolonial ethos by initiating conversations about films, filmmakers and film cultures informed by viewpoints from beyond the 'North Atlantic' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) but that did not overlook the global entanglements (differences *as well as* similarities) of these films and frameworks.

In using the phrase 'global screen worlds' in this volume, then, we invoke the 'global' as much in hope as in scepticism, as much in seeking similarity as acknowledging difference. We do so in the spirit of trying to evade 'the essentializing of difference into two mutually opposed either/or's' (Hall 1993: 110–11). We have been led by Mignolo and Walsh's invitation to try to follow and foreground the 'pluriversal and interversal paths that disturb the totality from which the universal and the global are most often perceived' (2018: 2) – an approach of 'pluriversal decoloniality' and 'decolonial pluriversality' (2018). They write:

> Such perspective does not mean a rejection or negation of Western thought; in fact, Western thought is part of the pluriversal. Western thought and Western civilization are in most/all of us, but this does not mean a blind acceptance, nor does it mean a surrendering to North Atlantic fictions.
>
> (2018: 3)

At the same time, as scholars of African and Asian cinemas ourselves, we are naturally more interested in what is 'being thought and constructed outside and in the borders and fissures of the North Atlantic Western world' (2018: 2). But how is one to do this when based in the North Atlantic Western world, as we three co-editors of this volume are? Indeed, as generative as our pilot project was as the first step in our experimentation with a methodology of ground-up conversation, comparison, collaboration and co-authorship – feeling out points of shared concern and convergence – due to a lack of resources we could not bring together in person scholars based outside the North Atlantic Western world. In a grant application to the European Research Council, we thus requested the funding to expand that pilot study as a specific response to Paul Willemen's conceptualization of, and call for, a far more global, polycentric, decentred, comparative film studies.

Willemen (1944–2012), a Belgian-born British film scholar and practitioner, initially worked for the British Film Institute in the 1970s and 1980s before writing important academic books that have had a lasting impact in our field, such as *Questions of Third Cinema* (1990). He was invested in 'an understanding of alternative cinema in all its formal and political diversity', and 'his dissatisfaction with the "national" was the spur to his interest in comparative film studies' (SCMS obituary online[2]). In 2005 Willemen published his groundbreaking article 'For a Comparative Film Studies' in the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, in which he proposes that the creation of knowledge in our field

> must necessarily proceed by way of a collaboration between intellectuals from different geo-historical formations. The precondition for such a collaboration is that the participants should be prepared to consider their own intellectual formations and thought-habits as symptomatic constellations shaped by the very same dynamics that animate historicity itself.
>
> (2005: 99)

In 2013, Japanese film scholar Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto continued Willemen's plea in his article 'A Future of Comparative Film Studies' in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (14.1: 54–61), in which he insists:

> We need to forge 'off-centered' networks of individual scholars, academic programs and institutions, and venues for publication internationally. *The final goal is not to create a globally unified discursive space of film studies, but to forge new networks and channels of communication.*
>
> (2013: 60, our emphasis)

Why do such 'off-centered' collaborations and networks matter? Because they allow us, in the words of Donna Haraway, to 'stay with the trouble' in a world in crisis, by which she means that we need 'each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become – with each other or not at all' (Haraway 2016, cited in Mendes and Weiwei [2022: 162]). This is not easy work, however. It is often difficult and frustrating and challenging, and requires a great deal of epistemic humility in terms of acknowledging what we do *not* know. It is work that tries to foreground the failures (the gulfs and rifts) as much as the successes (the experiences of resonance).

We were fortunate to be awarded the ERC grant in 2019 and this seemed as though it was going to offer us the opportunity we were seeking to fulfil Willemen and Yoshimoto's call: to bring together film scholars from all over the world – and particularly from Africa and Asia – for an in-person workshop, to converse, collaborate and co-author work that would put African, Asian, Latin American, Indigenous and other cinemas into conversation with one another. We wrote an open call which we shared widely through our networks in specific contexts, and we particularly welcomed contributions from early career scholars based outside of Europe and North America. In particular, we proposed the following radical experiment to potential applicants:

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[2] https://www.cmstudies.org/news/93243/In-Memory-of-Paul-Willemen.htm.

> Film and Screen Studies still largely situates itself within an Anglo-American, European framework. This workshop wants to contribute to work that takes the field beyond this geographical bias by developing new frameworks and methodologies that foreground how the specific histories, languages, politics and cultures of particular places shape and interact with narrative screen media. Rather than the top-down nature of a 'world cinema' approach – in which one, lone scholar attempts to be an expert on multiple film cultures – we encourage a grassroots approach in which we will seek to move towards more universal understandings of 'global screen worlds' *from* the specific and particular. The way we aim to do this is by inviting participants to 'pair up' with other screen scholars with similar interests but working from or on very different places to co-author work that brings 'screen worlds' from two or more diverse contexts into conversation without losing local specificity. We recognise that this is a highly ambitious undertaking and we will offer support with 'pairing up' to those eager to participate but who do not have scholarly contacts in other regions.

In February 2020, we were delighted to receive an abundance of submissions from all over the world and, in particular, from early career researchers. Then the Covid-19 pandemic set in, rendering our significant resources to run the workshop useless. This was a humbling experience, in which we were compelled to acknowledge that, if a large grant is required to create conversation and community amongst far-flung film scholars, then that conversation and community would not be sustainable in the long run. We thus turned to the internet, and, throughout 2021, ran nine group workshops on zoom with our selected participants, after everyone had had a chance to develop their ideas individually and/or with their co-authors.[3]

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[3] With this in mind, we would like to thank the following scholars whose input and enthusiasm helped develop this project even though they were unable, for a wide range of reasons, to participate in this final edited volume: F. Clémentine Dramani-Issifou, Fernanda Peñaloza, Ketaki Savnal, Peter Pages Bwire, Safea Latef, Tupur Chattopadhyay, Julia González de Canales Carcereny, Hongwei Bao and Marijke de Valck.

The co-authoring work and these workshops were opportunities for intense conversations, attempts to 'turn together' by 'thinking together', while also being made aware of our own limited understandings of the world through confronting others' 'orientations', others' 'worlds'. We tried to work within the spirit of conversation and co-writing articulated by decolonial feminist scholars Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva in the opening of their co-authored article 'Four Theses on Aesthetics' (2021):

> … in writing together, Da Silva and I have not so much pursued a theoretical synthesis as a reticulation, a raveling of the threads of our thoughts, which already twisted and frayed in one another's text(ilic)s. Four theses, another declension from the Hegelian triad. Our open proposition.
>
> –Rizvana Bradley

> A conversation can and usually is taken as an encounter, a convergence, but one that might just be – and the best conversations (which are also another name for collaborations) are – nothing more than that which takes place there, in that moment, under those circumstances, towards those particular ends. This conversation, our convergence, is not so much an offering as it is an invitation to the reader to join in and further it.
>
> –Denise Ferreira da Silva

Indeed, what began as a simple conversation in January 2017 between two of us – Lindiwe and Kate[4] – who had an interest in trying to bring specific African and Asian cinemas and film scholars more into conversation with one another, grew into an invitation for many others to join in and further it, such as our workshop participants, and then Georgia, who joined our editorial team in early 2022. In this conversational process, the very concept of 'authorship' was challenged, as we all shored up our knowledge, thoughts and experiences to share with one another; we tried our best to 'turn together' in all our diversity, reminding us again of the value of Ahmed's insight that 'the world acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn' (2006:1). Furthermore, what we appreciate about Ferreira da Silva's theorizing of conversation (2021) is the emphasis on contingency rather than a Bourdieusian notion of 'capital' – economic, social, cultural – in which the outcome is personal gain; there is no guarantee that a conversation will go anywhere, result in anything. This is a leap of faith, of course, and we appreciate the trust that our participants placed in us in being willing to take this leap with us, across our gulfs and oceans of separation and difference. As time went on with the writing, we also found that 'raveling' of 'threads' was a far more apt metaphor for the interweaving of our thoughts than a more dramatic, distinct process of 'cutting' or 'splicing', recalling Bradley's words above.

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[4] We would like to thank Griseldis Kirsch for introducing us.

We asked participants not only to produce chapters, but also to reflect on this conversational methodology and co-writing process – whether participants ended up actually co-authoring work (nine of the chapters herein, including this introduction), or drawing on the conversations and critique that emerged out of the group workshops to refine solo-authored work that is still deeply comparative (five of the chapters herein). In the spirit of Bradley and Ferreira da Silva's 'writing together' as 'a raveling of the threads of our thoughts', we want to quote at length the reflections of one of our participants, Kay Dickinson, on what her experience was of this conversational and co-authorship process (in Kay's case, with Pooja Thomas, whose own thoughts are also included below):

> I've co-authored work before, but always from a place where both of us share similar expertise. What this project enabled, for me at least, was the confidence to research inter-regionally in a way that has always attracted me, but which would have involved years, if not decades, of scholarship in order to acquire the necessary knowledge of a local context. It was fascinating to learn from Pooja, and also to gain confidence that there were, indeed, similarities and continuities that, in the end, enmeshed our argument. The process itself involved a significant stage which looked something like a two-person reading group, where we'd read the same text (focused on India or the UAE, sometimes both). We soon felt fortified by the compatible outlooks we were developing on these literatures. We wrote certain sections separately, but, of course, that doesn't mean it was easy to weave them together. What was particularly insightful for me were all the processes of smoothing these distinct portions into a whole, where we not only thought through the intellectual logic of our structure, but got to see close-up how we both wrote. I learnt a lot from the detail of how Pooja conveys her ideas at the stylistic and even syntactical levels. For me, this isn't surface detail; it's a deeply politically-formed dimension of how we write that is, amongst other things, expressive of our shared colonial and decolonial history.

For Pooja Thomas, Kay's partner in scholarship, the experience was also a highly positive one that allowed respite from the trials of Covid-19 lockdowns (indeed, a significant number of us in this project were home-educating young children during the pandemic) and opened up a supportive space for the development of her own ideas and work. As she notes:

> Covid had struck, we were all home-bound. Kids, books, and teaching on zoom – we were in some kind of dystopic simulation game. When Kay suggested that we each propose to the Global Screens project and aim to work together on it, it was as if she could hear the secret lives of my head-space. That was exactly what working with Kay was all about. Whether we were thinking through the essay together, reading things together, discussing the films that I had suggested or rewriting drafts in many colors, Kay was always listening to my silences, gaps, and to my writing with infinite patience, empathy, and a cultural intuition that was more 'native' than I could have ever imagined! While I was familiar with her work, engaging with some of the conceptual texts that informed it was an immensely valuable exercise and added to my theoretical repertoire significantly. I have never co-written before, so this was a transformative learning experience in collaborating with a senior scholar like Kay. Kay showed me how to build bridges, translate taken for granted positions, and hold to political ground in writing, fearlessly and pragmatically. Being part of the Global Screens work in progress sessions was also something that I greatly enjoyed. With all the limitations of zoom, it gave me a change of space, perspective, and access to a global community that spoke my language. This is an immense privilege, working as I do on interdisciplinary areas and in an elite corporatized institutional space.

While most of our authors had very positive experiences participating in the creation of this volume, there were also inevitably challenges. Our ethos of seeking to generate knowledge from a position of curious interest and through collaboration also required an openness to feelings of discomfort that the unknown naturally incites in us all. As our project drew together scholars from distinct areas to find similarities amidst differences, there was a palpable excitement to our experiment of moving beyond the familiar comfort zone of one's home discipline/region – dare we say one's own 'world' – into the specialist area or 'world' of another. We encouraged contributors to seek out whether there were affinities between their different specialisms as part of our recognition that global media exists in a web of dynamic inspiration as opposed to a static dichotomy of 'mainstream' and 'dominant' versus 'alternative' and 'different'. As our authors reflect on in their chapters, there were also significant gulfs and incommensurabilities that arose in this process, preventing any glib use of the word 'global'. And, indeed, in terms of the social issues our authors train their attention on, these are far from easy; the focus in many of the chapters is on exploitation, misrepresentation, conflict and dysfunctionality, and many of our authors put their analytical abilities to work in the service of a social justice agenda that seeks to critique our current moment of neoliberal late capitalism to try to contribute, as Victor Fan says, to rebuilding 'a world that appears to be beyond reparation' (2022: 9).

To rebuild our broken world requires not just conversation but also a contemplative, feminist approach to exploring decolonizing as a form of research and publication practice that bears an ethic of care (see Tronto 1993; Brydon and Pastor-Gonzales 2021; Askins and Blazek 2017; Gaudet et al. 2022).[5] We moved online and a whole new world of supportive and holistic scholarship was opened up. Although finding a suitable, mutual working time zone was complex, collaborators learnt from and supported each other in their scholarship. As one of our contributors noted:

> These meetings provided something of a lifeline in the middle of lockdown, where our regular zoom calls, usually characterized by connection failures or children joining us, meaningfully extended what had become a very narrowed experience of (scholarly) life. While these pandemic circumstances are hopefully out of the ordinary, the fact remains that we rarely have the means to spend sustained periods co-writing with colleagues in other countries. It was great to foster a way of doing so remotely.

On the submission of the chapters from contributors, as editors, we also experimented with a form of feedback that would be more care-full and personal, as much as it complemented our own move to the online space: we held virtual meetings on zoom to present our comments and feedback to collaborators in a supportive and dialogical two-way process before sending our written comments. In this way, the concept of 'screen worlds' also became part of our medium, reflecting our screen-saturated world and recognizing the various effects that the multitude of platforms, devices and ways of mediated sharing have had in shaping the direction of visual media cultures in the twenty-first century. Arranging video call meetings with contributors was inefficient from a time-saving point of view, yet it was precisely this continuation of the collective setting (and collective encouragement) that we wanted to employ, from the project's beginning to its end. This approach is part of what Carli Coetzee, Serah Kasembeli and Sandra Manuel note as a directional turn in academia towards 'slow, connected-up and supportive' modes (2022: 3) that challenge the conventions of research and publication, where decolonizing practices (re)consider existing structures, procedures and processes that may be normatively employed in research practice without question.

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[5] We also noted that 'care' was a central theme for both the British Association of Film, Television, and Screen Studies (BAFTSS) and Network of European Cinema Studies (NECS) conferences in 2023, as we were writing this introduction.

However, we want to end this section with a return to Willemen's call for 'forensic care' (2010: 362) in the undertaking of collaborative scholarship. While we believe that collaboration offers boundless benefits, we must always pay attention to the potential pitfalls and nuances of such an approach. The dominance of English remains a point of contention in debates around decolonizing. Indeed, despite the fact that almost everyone involved in this project is multilingual, the common language of scholarship that we all shared was English. As Yoshimoto notes, 'English as a means of communication should be treated very seriously as a political issue' (2013: 60). However, he also cautions that 'unless they fully recognize that the medium of scholarly output is at least as equally important as that of input, the native English-speaking academics who are competent in foreign languages can easily become "cultural poachers", who use their linguistic capacity to reaffirm a fiction of their sovereign autonomy' (2013: 60). A need to continuously check our privileges and power relations became a core part of the processes throughout the workshops and beyond, and being conscious of inequalities across our group based on people's identities (related to gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and disability) as well as people's situations (for example, whether our authors were in permanent or insecure academic positions, and whether they had caring responsibilities) was vital in not just focusing on outputs but also developing via this project 'a map to orient ourselves on the long march' (Willemen 2005: 99).

Intersectionality in a world requiring repair

María Galindo literally wrote on a wall: 'You can't decolonize without depatriarchalizing' (see https://mujerescreando.org/). This graffiti-call became a dominant narrative as the workshops and chapters of this volume developed. In our companion volume to this one, *Contemporary African Screen Worlds* (Dovey, Agina and Thomas 2025), we make the point that decolonizing means moving beyond binaries, and that decolonizing without an intersectional critique of gender and class is not decolonizing at all. Intersectionality grounds this volume, emerging as the focus of many chapters (for example, Jilani; Joseph; Salazkina; González-López and Hamid) and indeed, we recognize an intersectional framework as being a notable part of our process in creating this work. Throughout this process we saw that the call for collaborative working seemed to appeal more to those who identify as women or as non-binary. We were also very conscious that the processes by which cinema is forged are as heavily intertwined with gendered structures that have often ignored questions of LGBTQIA+ experiences. As Audrey Yue's (2017: 21) important work on queer Asia as method tells us, this alternative approach 'moves away from framing queer Asia as a static geographical site and regional imaginary' and argues for 'queer Asia' as a paradigm that not only queers the concept of 'area' but, more significantly, reorients the flows, boundaries and hierarchy of global queer knowledge production. In their striking analysis of queer Asian film festivals and their role in disrupting and offering alternative engagement with ideas of both Asia and Queer, Jia Tan comments that 'we should be more cautious about how parts of Asia are visibly referenced and others are obscured' (2019: 3). Whilst this final collection does not have a specific focus on this topic, two of the contributors who were involved in our workshops, Hongwei Bao and Julia González de Canales Carcereny, were initially planning to submit a chapter on the trans experience in global cinema. Unfortunately, due to other commitments, they were not able to complete the chapter; however, their stimulating presentation was important in the development of the wider discussions and sparked a substantial amount of discussion. We would encourage readers to seek out the vital scholarship of Hongwei Bao (2010, 2017, 2020), Ahmet Atay (2015), Harjant Gill (2021), Lindsey Green-Simms (2022) and Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi (2016) in this important area.

MAPPING THE VOLUME

Opening spaces

In the workshops that followed our call for papers, Charlotte Gleghorn and filmmaker María Sojob presented a fascinating and vital contribution on developments in Indigenous cinema in Mexico and the challenges of reshaping the funding and production landscape to affirm Indigenous worlds through the screen. María's work articulating and building a Tsotsil cinema, with all the challenges this endeavour implies, spoke to so many of the challenges, possibilities and openings that this project offered to us. In their transcribed and translated conversation, 'Dreaming in Tsotsil: Attuning Film to Community and Territory', Charlotte and María explore how María's return to Ch'enalvo', Chiapas, has prompted changes in her filmmaking practice that are inspired and informed by Tsotsil life and cultural codes.

Across gulfs and oceans: A new lens on cross-cultural industry and industries

In our original plan for this volume, we expected industrial and diegetic screen worlds to have equal prominence. As we wrote in the open call that we circulated seeking participation:

> In the workshop and edited volume we want to explore and compare diegetic screen worlds within films, and also how industrial screen worlds operate (i.e. modes of film production, distribution and exhibition). We seek proposals that aim to pay attention to diegetic similarities, differences and/or significant affinities across narrative screen texts from two or more particular contexts, and/or study actual screen connections (in line with critical transnational cinema studies, cf. Higbee and Lim 2010) or parallel screen histories (e.g. how two distinct regional cinemas that have *not* interacted have nevertheless had similar experiences).

However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic coinciding with the period in which our selected participants were going to undertake their research, our ambitions to have an equal balance between diegetic and industrial screen worlds were not possible, with the emphasis falling on the former. Nevertheless, as the three chapters in the first section of our volume reveal, there are sophisticated ways of studying industrial connections (cinematic or otherwise) between cities and countries separated by gulfs and oceans without necessarily engaging in conventional site-specific research processes.

Pooja Thomas and Kay Dickinson's chapter 'Urban Imaginaries between Dubai and Kochi: From Cinematic to Smart Cities' rigorously uncovers the permeability between 'real' and 'screen' worlds, thereby exploring how the idea of 'global screen worlds' can be mobilized not just as a methodological heuristic device, but also as a conceptual intervention in Film and Screen Studies. They set out to explore the 'economic, socio-religious, material, and symbolic' entanglements between Dubai and Kochi, entanglements which they show are not only evidenced in, but also generated through, the diegetic screen worlds of films made in these regions. They argue:

> Screen worlds are not only spaces of desire; they often help duplicate urban development models in material ways. By tracing continuities between what is construed as real, manipulated, or fantastical, between screened and built worlds, the economies and technologies that manifest them are also made visible.

Adopting tools from critical transnational cinema studies (Higbee and Lim 2010), they offer a critique of the neoliberal, late-capitalist incorporation and corporatization of filmmaking practices in places such as Dubai, where exploitation of poorly paid, precarious migrant labourers is what enables 'efficient industry logistics' and 'the easy availability of suitable South Asian extras'. All the contradictions of such commodification come into focus through their analysis of the creation of so-called 'free zones' and 'smart cities' which, they show, are not at all 'free' but rather fuelled by 'rapacious private property models [of real estate] whose lifeblood is impermanent, insecure tenancy and uncapped, unregulated rental expenditure'. The films they analyse – *The Diamond Necklace* (a Dubai-set Malayalam film) and *Kammatipaadam* (a 'Kochi film') – provide moving evidence of how some local filmmakers share Thomas and Dickinson's critique and 'raise questions of segregation and caste politics that dispel urban utopias of access and smart citizenship'. The result is a significant challenge to the idea of easy movement and cosmopolitanism in our current moment, an era of perpetual crisis, unprecedented environmental damage and exploitation of poor people's labour as inequalities expand. What is so powerful about Thomas and Dickinson's discussion is how it moves 'back and forth between Kochi and Dubai', reminding us that we live in a world in which old theories of unidirectional media imperialism and magic bullets no longer hold; to map quicksilver financial and technological flows that increasingly implicate people and places without their control or knowledge requires methodological dynamism, acuity and being alert to new orientations. In this process, Thomas and Dickinson remind us that screen worlds do far more 'than just quietly document[ing]' the world; instead, all around us, on a daily basis, they play a central role in 'fabricating the [worlds] in which we more concretely dwell'.

Xiaoning Lu's chapter 'Parallel Tracks: Documenting the TAZARA in the Age of the Belt and Road Initiative' also grapples with the implications of cross-oceanic infrastructural entanglements of the past and present moment, and the relationships between screened and built worlds. In this case, however, the entanglements are arguably even more complex, because they concern three, not two, regions: China, the United Kingdom, and the East African countries of Tanzania and Zambia. Lu offers a comparative analysis of two films – one made by a British director, Sean Langan (and funded by the BBC) in 2010 and one made by a Chinese director, Zhang Yong, in 2018 – about the TAZARA railway, which was built from 1970 to 1975 to provide Zambia with access to the port city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and funded by China. Far from seeing TAZARA and its mediated representations as insignificant to our contemporary moment, Lu contextualizes these activities within current political trends and tensions, and particularly Chinese President Xi Jinping's

Belt and Road Initiative – part of China's 'Going Global Strategy', which, Lu notes, has 'attracted considerable criticism from Western countries' due to its threat to 'the dominant Western liberal democratic market economy model'. Lu deftly shows how such Western anxiety about the new Sino-centred world order is also manifested in the BBC documentary *African Railway*, which she argues is ultimately 'driven by Langan's inquisitive concern about China's aims for global power'. She argues that observational Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yong, in contrast, offers us a new lens on and a more optimistic narrative about China–Africa relations by both 'countering the Western media's misrepresentation' of such relations, and creating 'a style distinct from the didacticism often associated with Chinese state media'. The strategies that she sees Yong adopting to achieve this include a far more open-ended structure and polyvocality, bringing multiple people and their 'worlds' into the film frame. Langan's documentary is largely suspicious and critical of TAZARA as an example of China's 'neo-colonial' agenda, while Yong's documentary presents the railway as an effort of collaborative solidarity. Lu's chapter thus reflects on how these different screen worlds – which are also 'orientations' in how distinct people see the world – become a space to project or placate the anxieties regarding China's global ascendency, negotiated through East Africa as a site of geopolitical interest.

Also seeking to apply a new lens to China–Africa relations through film, Luke Robinson and Mariagiulia Grassilli explore film industry and film festival connections specifically between China and South Africa, arguing that, despite attempts to find solidarity between the two nations, this is an unstable relationship. They explore how collaborative efforts between South Africa and China are mired in 'long-standing inequalities … that shape the screen and festival worlds of Sino–South African cinematic ventures'. Whereas Lu explores the role that the Belt and Road initiatives have had on Chinese–African relations, in the case of South Africa, Robinson and Grassilli comment that '[n]ot being geographically on the ancient silk road, South Africa is … excluded from this emerging new circuit of alliances and networks'. This need to deepen our analysis of the complexities of the interplay between China and specific African countries (in this case, South Africa) is a vital element in the comprehension of contemporary global cinema systems in the regions of both Africa and Asia (see Jedlowski and Röschenthaler 2017). As this chapter explores, there is a complex hierarchy of finance and labour that shapes both the production and transmission of specific screen worlds and, in line with respecting our distinct orientations to analysing the complexities of the world, Robinson and Grassilli conclude that 'it is important to keep our further analysis open depending on different perspectives, of who is watching, who is viewing, who is curating'.

Engendering comparative film studies

Although all singly authored, the three chapters in the third section of this volume are all deeply committed to an intersectional approach; furthermore, the first two chapters also add depth to our contemporary concerns by returning to a significant period in the past that reverberates with the present – the post-Second World War and Cold War era that also saw the decolonization and independence of many states in Asia and Africa. In keeping with the focus initiated in the second section of the book on cinema's relationship to world-historical events as well as quotidian experiences of oppression, solidarity, conflict, camaraderie and revolution, these chapters once again reveal the co-constitutive nature of film texts and the world itself; they reveal that film texts are not so much 'pro-filmic' (Metz 1990) as they are part of a 'shared representational regime' (Salazkina 2023: 243) that fundamentally affects how we orient ourselves towards, and thus see, the world.

Masha Salazkina addresses the problems with presentism head-on from the beginning of her chapter, arguing that by engaging with how cinema grappled with 'issues of global war in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in its gendered dimensions' we have a 'political and ethical opportunity' as scholars and citizens to reject 'historical amnesia and misidentification' and better understand our 'current moment, with its continuing escalation of militarization all over the world, and the return of the Cold War rhetoric' along with the erosion of 'women's rights all over the world, from the United States to Afghanistan'. Salazkina's work has helped to pioneer transnational, comparative film scholarship, and in this particular chapter she reveals what can be gained through putting into conversation the work of three women filmmakers from distinct parts of the socialist, anti-imperialist world, but who were nevertheless part of a 'collective imaginary of a disparate, but globally connected network of filmmakers and audiences' at a time when 'especially outside of the Euro-American sphere, film was a major medium for both informational and affective communication'. The 'affinities' that Salazkina finds between these women's films – Larisa Shepitko's *Wings* (USSR 1966), Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* (Angola 1972) and Assia Djebar's *Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (Algeria 1977) – are not, she argues, 'so much the result of intertextual influence but of a *shared worldview*' (our emphasis). In other words, these women filmmakers – although they never met one another – could be said to have been 'turning together' to some extent, sharing an orientation to the world that contributed to continuities in the screen worlds they brought into being. But this 'turning together', this 'different topography of solidarity', only becomes apparent through the carefully curated conversation that is offered by Salazkina's chapter. Far from only paying attention to the films as texts, Salazkina also considers their distribution and exhibition contexts, finding that the solidarity that these women filmmakers could have developed in their own time was severely constrained by the sexism of the mainly male film establishment in that era.

The historical moment Sarah Jilani explores in her chapter – the 1970s and 1980s – was one in which she argues that 'the Third Worldist political energies of the Bandung era' began to fade. She brings into conversation the films of two male directors – Malian director Souleymane Cissé's *Baara* [Work] (1978) and Indian director Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire* [Home and the World] (1984) – who use realism to scrutinize the failed promises of anti-colonial independence movements in their respective countries. Whereas Salazkina finds common ground in the 'shared worldview' of Shepitko, Maldoror and Djebar, Jilani instead considers how 'political consciousness' manifests itself in Cissé and Ray's films and in their protagonists, where – she cites from Derek Hook – one has an 'awareness both of how one is crucially a part of the world and its conditions, and of how one can and should attempt to change that world on the basis of a carefully considered political project'. Jilani's focus is on workers and women – 'those who are exploited most thoroughly' – to further a class and gender critique of the aporias of decolonization. In *Ghare Baire* it is the female character of Bimala whose own political awakening exposes the way that the male activists' nationalisms are 'contingent upon safeguarding' their 'class and gender positions', and Jilani argues that Ray buttresses Bimala's perspective through visual language that 'not only acknowledges "home" and "world" as mutually effectual, but undercuts any easy gendering of home as feminine and world as masculine'. *Baara* also erodes any lazy distinction between 'home' and 'world' by cross-cutting between a factory and a domestic space, bringing the public and private together in a fatal intimacy through Cissé's cinematic attention to 'space, power, labour and gender'. Here those without power in the hierarchy of production and social reproduction become victims to neocolonial capitalist forces.

Shohini Chaudhuri's argument that 'feminist film theory increasingly needs to look beyond Hollywood and to engage with broader traditions of international filmmaking' (2006: 123) is still highly relevant. The impressive work of diverse global women directors such as Dee Rees, Tanada Yuki, Yim Soon-rye, Andrea Arnold, Mati Diop and Judy Kibinge reveals the sheer breadth and possibility of female-authored work. In her groundbreaking work on Black women filmmakers of the past, Jane Gaines has lamented that 'even if there had been any work by women, it was [considered] inferior; that of such inferior work, no examples survived … we are studying an unfortunate object, misused and left alone, the subject of earlier neglect' (2007: 176). In the final chapter in this section, and via a focus on the work of Omoni Oboli, Nigerian film scholar and feminist activist Morountodun Joseph explores Nollywood from the perspective of Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of 'nego-feminism'. Her chapter, 'Lights, Camera, Action! Nollywood Female Filmmakers as Nego-Feminists', offers an important exploration of how this theoretical approach might help to unravel the complex positioning of women in a traditionally male-dominated industry.

Of rifts and resonance: Reimagining film studies through conversation

The 'global currency' of crime films allows Akshaya Kumar and Jonathan Haynes to find common ground, in what they call 'an unfinished conversation between an Indian media anthropologist and an American scholar of African cultural studies'. They compare film noir urbanisms in Mumbai and Lagos, bringing their respective, deep knowledge of each city to bear on their thinking and turning together. They argue that the versatility of this genre and its resonance with audiences in distinct contexts provide 'another gateway into a possible conception of "world cinema"' – not in the sense of something carefully curated by festival programmers but rather, like melodrama (see Grant and Kuhn 2006), so widespread and popular as to earn its 'world' status. At the same time, the rifts Kumar and Haynes reveal between what film noir specifically means in relation to each city, where screen worlds are shown to be embedded in their immediate material worlds in sometimes terrifying ways, undermines any unproblematic ascension of the films' grammars of gritty cynicism or glamorous aesthetics to what Iwabuchi calls the 'culturally odorless' global (1998). Indeed, the rifts identified here relate not only to Mumbai and Lagos, but also to different social classes *within* these cities and beyond, living in a state of what Kumar and Haynes call 'desacralized neoliberalism'. These inequalities manifest themselves in the venues – multiplexes – that the affluent middle classes in both Nigeria and India patronize to access the portals of screen worlds, increasingly dominated by the 'international standards' of players such as Netflix. Here, neoliberalism is 'not a uniform condition but a scattering of nodes plugged into the transnational economy and gated against the poverty that surrounds them'. But the gating does not always work when 'confronted by messy postcolonial urbanisms'; kidnapping – the primary crime of the Nigerian film *Gbomo Gbomo Express* (2015) analysed in this chapter – is precisely 'the crime the relatively affluent patrons of multiplex theaters have most to fear, the thing that might happen to them on their way home' from a night at the movies. A kidnapping case is also at the centre of the Hindi film *Ugly* (2013) that is analysed in this chapter (along with Hindi crime film, *Kaante* [2002], set in Los Angeles), and it is a case 'which triggers the conflict between policing and cinematic procedures', meaning that the diegetic screen worlds of specially crafted films intersect with the mundane screen worlds of urban surveillance. What emerges from this stylish chapter in the final analysis is that these slick Indian and Nigerian films are not an escape from local realities but rather 'windows into them', allowing domestic audiences 'both to contemplate what they fear from a safe distance and to imagine themselves in a position of dominance with respect to it'.

Irene González-López and Zebunnisa Hamid's comparative study of how urban space and human relationships are represented in a Japanese film, *Dawn of the Felines* (2017), and a Pakistani film, *Zinda Bhaag* (2013), has much in common with Kumar and Haynes' chapter in its attention to the ways that neoliberalism manifests itself in contemporary life in cities, not least through the 'underworlds' of marginalized people and through the surveillance citizens are subjected to through ubiquitous cameras. Here, as in many chapters in this volume, the authors show how the 'old-fashioned' form of the feature fiction film is mobilized by creators to parse a dizzying array of contemporary screen worlds. González-López and Hamid argue that the city itself 'is presented as being increasingly constructed through interconnected screen worlds', where '[m]obile phones, cameras, computers, user-generated content, and online exposés play a key role in advancing the plot through mediated interactions'. These interactions, they show, can be both exploitative and liberating, anonymous and authored, transactional and intimate; what they share is that they are over-determined by technology. Indeed, it is not surprising that in the film *Zinda Bhaag* it is a mobile phone that a working-class waiter is falsely accused of stealing from a wealthy guest in an elite private club; this waiter, along with his two male friends, desperately dreams of escaping the difficulties of his life in Lahore by 'trying to evade, subvert and negate global surveillance to cross borders undetected' – in other words, to fly under the radar of a certain kind of screen world. What is particularly interesting about González-López and Hamid's analytical approach, however, is that they bring not only their respective expertise on Japanese and Pakistani cinemas 'into dialogue', but also their 'shared interests in gender' to offer an intersectional critique that extends beyond class into a specific focus on how these city films represent dysfunctional masculinities as 'both consequence and instigator of the conflicting experience of modernity', and the source of a sometimes suffocating, scopophilic gaze – particularly in *Dawn of the Felines*, which focuses on three female sex workers in Tokyo. Here the previous chapter's interest in 'outlaws' is replaced by a fascination with 'outliers', which refers not only to the protagonists in each film, but also to the films themselves, which generically blur the lines between normative and non-normative cinemas, thereby raising crucial questions about how locally made films allow or resist their absorption into mainstream modes and channels, including the category of 'world cinema'.

In their chapter, Estrella Sendra and Laurence Green maintain the previous chapters' focus on cinema's representations of people in cities – this time, with a focus on Dakar, Paris, Kinshasa and Tokyo – but their chapter differs in that it draws together the work of two filmmakers not in a methodology of parallel analysis, but where there is an explicitly acknowledged connection through influence and homage. This connection is due to the profound effect Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu has had in shaping the themes, style and tone of Franco-Senegalese director Alain Gomis' films. Sendra and Green quote Gomis on this influence to prompt thinking about how we might define screen worlds in a more optimistic way, and the kind of conversational methodology that we have experimented with across this volume to try to bring such screen worlds into purview. We thus want to repeat this quote in full here:

> What I mean is that sometimes with films that come from a country which is very foreign to you, you can learn very profound things about yourself. And to me, cinema, like music, has that thing there. You may not necessarily be able to put it into words, but it can foster certain things in you which are links that cross continents, cross countries. It is precisely in that particular moment that I find cinema beautiful. Because for some time we can say 'us', and that is certainly one of the most beautiful words, I think, in every language, to be able to say 'us'. To me, there lies the beauty of cinema.
>
> (Gomis)

Harnessing Gomis' use of the word 'beautiful', Sendra and Green turn to Elaine Scarry's theorizing of the encounter with beauty as a 'radical decentering' (2001: 111), which also speaks to our idea of conversation as an attempt to 'turn together' in the world where – as Scarry says – we find ourselves 'letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before' (2001: 112). Not only do Sendra and Green undertake this radical decentring work through exploring the resonant 'meeting points' between Gomis' and Ozu's films – through a focus on family themes, the stylistics of space and time (including void spaces that are nevertheless filled with emotion), and humorous tonality; they also recognize that their own coming together across rifts in knowledge and subjectivity is an attempt to make certain latent screen worlds visible, where screen worlds are defined as 'affective time-spaces built horizontally, from an empathetic gaze' – whether by filmmaker-spectators such as Gomis, finding affinity with Ozu's films, or by scholar-spectators, such as Sendra and Green, who want to explore the ability of films (from countries foreign to each of us) to resonate beneath the surface and across borders, bringing into being a 'cinematic us'.

Chinese film scholar Xi Liu's chapter comparing the films of Chadian director Mahamet-Saleh Haroun and Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai itself resonates strongly with Sendra and Green's chapter by paying attention to the affective, emotional dimensions of films and, in particular, the ways that these two filmmakers give presence, thematically and aesthetically, to feelings of absence – homesickness, unrequited love and loneliness. The chapter offers a close reading of two films by Wong – *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and *Happy Together* (1997) – and two films by Haroun – *Dry Season* (2006) and *A Season in France* (2017) – and reveals how, through their similar approaches, Wong and Haroun can be said to 'cinematically build up global sensory connections', where these connections are neither economic nor political, but rather based on the 'emotional appeal between global screen worlds'. Here feature fiction films are not to be seen as old-fashioned modes of representation, but rather as sites of audiovisual and affective imagination, able to give presence to intense feelings of absence and loss, as in when Haroun says: 'I lost my country, so I try just to rebuild it by fictions with my movies' (Haroun 2007, cited in Liu, this volume). While analysing the ways that Haroun and Wong use the film medium to give materiality to their characters' inner worlds and emotions, Xi also contemplates how the personal and the national intertwine in the films' complex postcolonial locations, arguing that 'the ambiguous feelings of 1997 in Hong Kong and postcolonial period in Chad are all reflected in the complex, uncertain, unstable, and uncontrollable partnerships'. And yet – as with Sendra and Green, who are more interested in ambivalent, ambiguous psychological and palimpsestic spaces than national spaces – Xi hovers around these questions, wondering to what extent postcolonial and decolonial thinking can provide important cultural-historical information, and to what extent such frameworks, when applied to film, can also over-determine how we experience them, preventing us from seeing, hearing and, most importantly, *feeling* how they can 'echo and resonate across cultures'.

Cross-cultural fun and fandom across Africa and Asia

In all our attention to the difficulties of our world, we must not forget also to look to the fun and the laughter, otherwise – as Zapatista activist Comandante Marcos (2002) says – our world will turn square. Globally, Korean and Hindi television dramas, music and films are gaining vast popularity and arguably offer a challenge to US-dominated visual and aural cultures. Taking Korea as an example, the success of audiovisual narratives such as *Parasite* (2019), *The Handmaiden* (2016) and *Decision to Leave* (2022) has opened up the possibility of 'a new era of transnationalism' which, if it continues, may 'increase the representation of non-US work in all other categories' (Hoad 2020). Building on earlier work that looks at cross-cultural fandom across Africa and Asia (for example, Brian Larkin's [1997] research on the affinities between Hindi film and Northern Nigerian culture), these two final chapters add contemporary viewpoints, and also activate the full definition of screen worlds by embracing television drama, not just fiction feature films. Youngmin Choe recognizes Hallyu as being 'built on affective exchanges' (2016: 17), and this presence of affective exchange is apparent in these final two chapters as fans' creative practices and responses to the screen worlds of Korea and India are explored.

As Zoly Rakotoniera and Thongbam Saya Devi explore in their study of K-Drama fans, the rising global popularity and circulation of K-Drama extend to Madagascar and Northeast India. Their empirical study shows groups of participants from two distinct geographical locations being affected in quite diverse ways that highlight a tension between actual and perceived cultural proximity and aspirations or dreams of connectedness. Using the lens of hybridity, Zoly Rakotoniera and Thongbam Saya Devi look into the significance of Korean popular culture fandom as transcending the appeal of mainstream media as well as one's nationality, exploring participants' motivations for engaging with K-Drama content. As Korean screen worlds resonate beyond South Korea, both authors ask what visions of South Korea are represented in K-Drama, and how and why these appeal to viewers far removed from its country of origin. The answer, as Rakotoniera and Thongbam reveal, bears implications for the Hallyu phenomenon and its connection to globalization and to cosmopolitan identities. The popularity of Korean screen worlds is an ideal example of the complexities in the global screen market, with products that are heavily invested in their 'Korean-ness' while also operating as blank spaces into which Korean popular culture fans can write their own narratives and opinions. Also taking this idea of cultural exchange and circulation as a point worthy of study, Ernest-Samuel, Olawoye and Thomas-Parr explore Hindi media fandom in southern Nigeria, offering fascinating insights into where cultural difference, rather than cultural proximity, determines people's appreciation for and creative responses to media texts. Like Zoly Rakotoniera and Thongbam Saya Devi, they employ empirical methodologies, drawing on fans' views about their experiences with the Hindi television channel ZeeWorld. Ernest-Samuel, Olawoye and Thomas-Parr focus on the content of two TikTok creators who fantasize about, and perform as, fictional characters from ZeeWorld. Their work engages with ideas of situated and embodied difference, arguing that these screen worlds open up a complex exploration of how young adults in Nigeria perform and imagine lived and fictional Hindi experiences.

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SECTION ONE

Opening spaces

1

Dreaming in Tsotsil: Attuning film to community and territory

María Sojob and Charlotte Gleghorn

'Un viaje hacia la familia, un viaje hacia las relaciones afectivas, un viaje hacia mis raíces' (A journey towards my family, a journey towards affective relationships, a journey towards my roots).[1] With these words the Tsotsil director María Sojob describes her feature documentary *Tote/ Grandfather* (2019). The film opens with a dedication in Tsotsil to the director's two daughters, before cutting to a black screen as the female narrator's voice – María Sojob's – speaks in Spanish of her mother's expectations of women. In this way the film opens a tense middle space between two poles of belonging: the community, a rural and Indigenous space, expressed in Tsotsil, and the city, where Sojob spent much of her life. This opening sequence establishes several contentious aspects regarding the director's search for community belonging. The search to reinscribe her subjectivity in territory and re-belong to the community in question hinges on intimate experiences of spaces, shared conventions, and forms of social and ritual organization. In this way, the techniques and methods Sojob has learned at university in

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[1] María Sojob in conversation with film curator Amalia Córdova and Emmy-Award winning filmmaker Sebastián Díaz. Introduced by Ron Gregg, Film and Media Studies, Columbia University. Presented as part of the 2021 Mother Tongue Film Festival, Smithsonian. https://youtu.be/mipZdzvghF8?si=c9stLY2n8diwck4w (Accessed: 15 July 2024).

Chiapas and in Santiago de Chile are cast anew to accommodate, interpret and inscribe Tsotsil communicational worlds.

Charlotte Gleghorn: Many thanks María for this opportunity to talk more about your work. You have now almost finished a trilogy of films in Chiapas and when I went back to seeing *Bankilal* (Elder Brother) (2014) and *Tote* (Grandfather) (2019) and the fragments of *Riox* (postproduction) you shared, I was struck by the fact that the films chronicle your return, your rapprochement with the community and a changing relationship with your approach to film. Could you perhaps start by talking about that process, your trajectory, and the shift it reflects in style, from a more observational approach in *Bankilal*, to something much more intimate and personal in *Tote*, and ultimately spiritual in *Riox*?

María Sojob: Sure. With *Bankilal* I had the idea of a return in mind, but at that stage I wasn't living in the community and the film ended up being more observational in approach. I was more cautious then and had more insecurities about filming in the community after so long living away. When you go back, you're like a stranger. You're seen as someone from outside, you don't know the people from your childhood anymore and they don't recognize you either. And while you share a language, and are from the same place, there are structures of community organization and ways of life there which you aren't able to participate in when you're not actually present. So that was the reason I wanted to return.

After making *Bankilal*, I start to question why I feel on the outside. Why do I feel like a stranger to these spaces? *Tote* wasn't filmed in the same community as *Bankilal*, it was made in Huixtán, in my mother's community, specifically in the community of Los Ranchos, where my maternal grandfather is from. *Tote* represents a yearning for territory, a return to roots, a search for and the rebuilding of, memory. I wanted to record my grandfather, but over the course of my multiple visits to his home to convince him of the value of the project, I started to confront my own experience, my childhood, my roots and that's really how *Tote* was born. And at that point I confronted a dilemma – to be in front of or behind the camera. I really wasn't clear at that stage about how I could direct and be on camera at the same time. In the end the process determined that I should be in front of the camera, which led me to realize that the film wasn't only about my grandfather, but was also about me, my conflicts, my thoughts, my identity (Figure 1.1). The story gradually emerged and the film turned into a pretext to return to my roots, and to weave a family story.

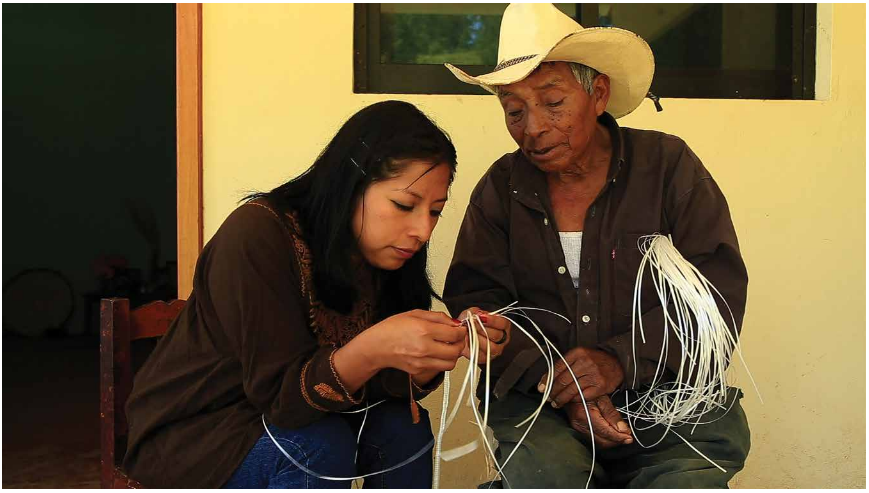

FIGURE 1.1 *Still of the director María Sojob with her grandfather, learning to weave.* Tote *(Grandfather) (2019) Photo: José Alfredo Jiménez. Courtesy: María Sojob.*

Now with *Riox*, the idea of return is even clearer: it's my search, a quest to belong to the community, a search to belong to the community where I grew up. When I returned to Ch'enalvo' my partner [Benjamin Fash] and I started a film exhibition project called Cine Bolomchon, but I felt it still wasn't enough. I said to myself, 'I want to go beyond making or screening films, do something that really contributes to the community.' *Riox* began with a dream and it feels the right way to return, through dreams. Dreams are really important for us Tsotsiles. When you're outside the community you stop dreaming about things that are happening in the community, even the language you dream in is different. But when I went back I started to dream in Tsotsil again. In one of those dreams 'Riox', a ceremonial chant, came to me, and with Benjamin, who is also the Executive Producer of the film, we started to have long conversations about what to call 'Riox': is it a ceremonial discourse? A sung poem? A canto? I'm just not sure how these terms will connect with people outside of the community who don't have the context to understand its purpose. It is a song and it is a poem, words woven together that are pronounced in a ceremonial space to prepare the person who will complete their period of community – and spiritual – service.

Charlotte: Oratory has something of music and poetry, and also carries a more formal linguistic charge …

María: It's just really tricky to try to explain what 'Riox' is in another language. Within the community we all know what it is because we use it all the time in traditional *fiestas*. When I heard 'Riox' in my dream, I said to myself 'I want to know more about this song'. And then I found out that some women sing and recite this discourse too. I knew men did, because they're the ones who feature publicly, in the traditional *fiestas* and in the community service roles they occupy. It's the men who dance, who lead the processions, who are outside and the women stay inside, which is also an important space of empowerment. The kitchen, for instance, is where women weave collectively, a site of cultural resistance. But from the outside our staying inside the ceremonial house or in the kitchen might be construed differently, as something *machista*. And with that I don't mean to say that machismo or patriarchal structures don't exist in the community, but rather that we shouldn't minimize the really important role women play in maintaining ceremony, in preserving our languages and our cultures. Traditional community service roles are carried out in couples; the man delivers ceremonial songs for men, and the woman recites for the women. I discovered that there is just one woman who knows how to recite 'Riox' and who sings the discourse publicly. One woman in the whole community who can deliver 'Riox'! I asked around and finally I went to find her to tell her I would like to learn that song.

When I looked for her, I hadn't developed the idea of the film yet. I simply told her that I wanted to learn, that I'd love to be able to sing 'Riox', to recite it. Because it's extremely complex. It uses words that are not in daily use and that are extremely metaphorical. 'Riox' serves as a spiritual and psychological preparation for those who are going to assume a community service role for one year. There are aspects that derive from Christian concepts, that came with the colonial invasion and which stayed here, like the roles connected to particular saints, the patron saint *fiestas*. But ultimately the saints are the least important component of our *fiestas*. These are forms of organization for a community ritual where lots of people are involved without any financial remuneration. 'Riox' is peppered with metaphors that connect to the meaning of community service and the emotions you go through when you assume one of these roles.

Charlotte: I remember that in *Bankilal* men visit the 'the elder brother', the *bankilal*, because they are getting ready to assume their community roles. They ask what steps the women should go through in preparation too, if they have to fast or dress in a particular way. And I recall seeing in the subtitles of the teaser you shared for *Riox* that this woman is referred to in a similar way, as an 'elder sister'. Is there a particular term used to refer to women who exercise this role? Or is *bankilal* used also?

María: The women are called *Jtak' Riox*, she who responds to the discourse. They function as mediators for those who will take on a *cargo*, a community service role. It reminds me of the figure of the *palabrero*, or word messenger, in the Wayuu culture, that we saw in the film *Birds of Passage* (Cristina Gallego and Ciro Guerra 2018). Effectively those who sing ceremony intervene on behalf of those who are preparing to take on a role, they speak for them, that's basically the role of the *Jtak' Riox*. They're like mediators who also have the skill to recite this kind of poem.

This woman I met is very impressive, with a huge wealth of knowledge, but very small in stature. She's shorter than me! And from the very first words she spoke I thought she'd make a great character for a film. I realized we should make a film about her life, about how she learned this type of ceremonial discourse, because she doesn't conform to the idea the community has about women and their duties. She doesn't conform to those expectations, nor do I, because I grew up in the city. So, the film *Riox* is an encounter between two women who grew up and live in different worlds. She has lived all her life in the community and I've lived a large part of mine in the city. In that way there is a conflict but also our two worlds unite around a single objective. She's growing too old to continue to deliver ceremony for these *fiestas*, and needs someone to replace her as orator of the 'Riox'. Her aim is to find someone soon, and my aim is to learn that ceremonial song and in so doing feel that I contribute something to the community, feel part of the community (Figure 1.2). That is basically the blueprint for the film. We each have our own aims but we work towards the same end. And in the process the film charts our cycles of community organization, how the roles and responsibilities work and how we maintain a complete structure of organization in our communities that is based around the traditional and patron saint *fiestas*.

But I haven't managed to learn 'Riox' yet. I go to her house all the time, and she always says, 'Try harder. I don't think you really want to learn. I've told everyone already you will replace me, so you'll be ashamed if you don't learn it properly.' So, I've embarked on a very complex journey. According to many people, you have to go to a sacred cave to make a plea to be conferred this role. And that's a challenge for me because I don't believe in some of the things she believes in with conviction. We clash all the time over our beliefs, our ways of seeing the world. In the film these two worlds intersect.

Charlotte: What you're saying reminds me of a short fiction film made by the Mapuche director Jeannette Paillán when she was studying in Spain

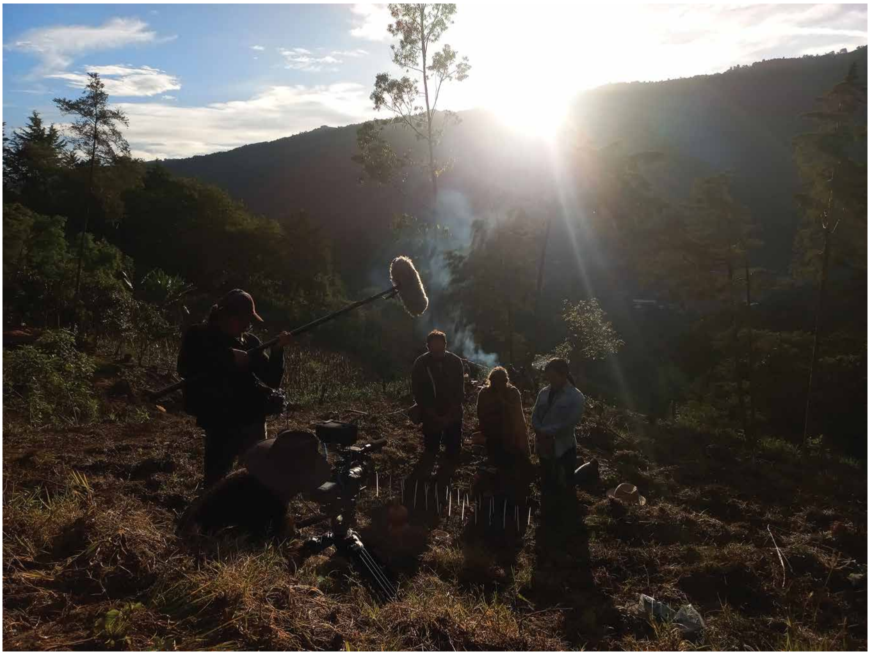

FIGURE 1.2 *Production still of* Riox. *Photo: Ana Ts'uyeb. Courtesy: María Sojob.*

some years ago. It's called *Perimontún* (Premonition) (2008) and is about the dreams that come to people who are called to take on specific roles or spiritual guidance in the community. In terms of creative process, I wonder about the connections and different approaches to these spiritual aspects in audiovisual language. In your reflections on your filmmaking you've spoken about a *cine con ch'ulel*, a cinema with soul, or with *palabra florida*, a sacred flowery discourse.[2] I wonder if you have noticed a change in the way you approach these aspects of Tsotsil cosmovision audiovisually.

María Sojob: Definitely, yes, from the moment I returned to the community. In *Riox* I'm much more conscious about the process of filming, and of sharing with the people with whom I'm working. It's not just a question of arriving with the camera and off you go. It's been a long process because it has to do with changing the modes and forms of production, prioritizing the people who we film, because there's a way of seeing and understanding the world that is shaped by our history and context. I've tried to take the time to consult with, and explain to, the people we're filming, to do everything according to our community protocols. To ask for something or a favour demands a whole protocol that we're trying to translate to the way we produce films.

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[2] Sojob (2019: 231–9).

I've also become more aware of the soundscape since a specialist in sound, Eloisa Diez, spoke to me about that aspect. We're trying to be really attuned to the sounds of the spaces where we film; certain birds might have a particular song or announce a change in the weather, that the rains are on their way, for instance. I'm trying to be more conscious of all this knowledge that is embedded in the community to translate it to our filmmaking. Already with *Bankilal* I was thinking carefully about the visual elements, about which shots to use and which camera movements. That's been a constant for me in *Bankilal*, *Tote* and now in *Riox*. How can we translate the traditional *fiestas* audiovisually and how can that rhythm and structure of organization be transferred to the ways in which we make film? Now we're thinking more about the sound, the shots, the editing and how that affects the story, all of which connects to the experience of time in the community. We're considering the spoken language too, not just the visuals and sound, but our communicational codes in Tsotsil. I try to transfer all that to my films. Ultimately, I'm aiming for a film to have *ch'ulel*, a conscience, a soul, a spirit, a life of its own. Because if you have *ch'ulel*, then you are alive.

Charlotte: This idea connects with the life of the films after they're finished. How do you envisage their circulation? Once the film is finished, as it takes on a life of its own and participates in screenings around the world, how do you conceive of its relationship with audiences?

María: It's interesting because *Bankilal* was a film I had to make to graduate from my Masters programme, but I was already feeling the need to return to the community and it gave me the opportunity to go back with a motive. So, of course, my aim was to make the film, graduate, etc., but I had no idea that *Bankilal* would end up circulating in festivals. Back then I knew nothing about the festival world really, how many festivals there are, where they are, etc. So, it was a huge surprise to me that *Bankilal* was selected for the Berlinale, or the Edinburgh International Film Festival, or all those other countries and spaces where the film was shown. And with *Tote* I wanted to make a more personal and intimate film, leave an audiovisual record of my grandfather. The need to leave a record transformed into a story that I wanted to tell. *Tote* started to circulate in festivals and screenings too, and to win awards, even though it didn't start out with that intention. Now with *Riox*, well, it has another pace, we're taking our time, trying to integrate the different community processes and think more about the audience. Who am I making this film for? The most important thing for me is that the film is shown in Tsotsil and Tseltal (Indigenous) communities (in Chiapas, Mexico) because I get the impression that a lot of our films make it to international and national circuits but are seldom shown in the communities.

It's a challenge because in the community people watch films, but not everyone. If they do have a television then generally the offering is commercial films, or television series or *telenovelas*. The challenge is to make a film that really connects with the community, with a local audience. I'd love people to say afterwards, 'Ah, I really identify with the pace of the film or with the structure.' I would love people to feel that it is a Tsotsil film. And why is it Tsotsil? Well, not just because it's made in Tsotsil language, but also because we use certain visual and sonic codes that are embedded in our community, because the film reflects a whole system of communicational codes. Sound, colour, structure, rhythm. That's the aim and the greatest challenge for me, and I'm not alone in questioning these things. Many peers are also thinking about what makes a Tsotsil film. You can't say 'right, we've got it, the recipe for a Tsotsil film. And you have to edit it in such a way as to make it Tsotsil'. No. Cinema is really very recent for our communities, and I think that so long as the people who are involved in these films, in the photography, sound, editing, postproduction, belong to that world, share a way of looking at the world and understand life in the community, then the film can reflect that process.

Charlotte: I recall that with *Tote* you had someone for the colour correction who worked closely with someone in the community to ensure you passed on that skill locally. Can you tell me a little about who you work with and how you view the issue of training among Indigenous filmmakers?

María: Yes, that's right. With *Tote*, someone came from another community who is already really good at colour correction. If we have cinematographers, colour correctors, editors, sound designers among us, then that really strengthens our approach and process. For instance, a sound designer who doesn't know or come from the community might be preoccupied with other aspects of the production process. 'Ay, I need to record this conversation, or focus on what they're saying', for example, while someone from the community might realize that a bird is singing in that moment and they understand that it's announcing something so they stop what they're doing to go and record that bird. Or a cinematographer who shares the same concern with observing sacred spaces and spiritual energies, and not transgressing them. The other day we were talking about how we're going to approach the sacred cave in *Riox*. It's very dark in there at the time we'd need to go and film that scene so shall we fill it with lots of lamps to brighten the space and privilege lighting? We were in this dilemma when a huge moth landed on my skirt. We all reached the conclusion that this was a message that we should not put lights in the cave. So, we won't interfere with the sacred space, we won't prioritize lighting for a good shot over the sacrality of the cave. A cinematographer who is Tsotsil, with whom I worked on *Tote* and on *Por la vida* (For Life) and now on *Riox*, he really gets that. He understands this kind of sign and we understand each other. It just wouldn't be the same, say with an amazing cinematographer from Mexico City. Someone like that might come and say, 'Everyone fill the cave with lights.' So as a team we talk over how we're going to resolve and approach these issues.

Charlotte: I can see how it could be really suggestive to just reach the threshold of complete darkness also …

María: Yeah, that's kind of the idea and we decided that based on the world and context in which we've grown up and to which we belong. I think that's why it's really important to train a crew who perhaps might not be from the exact same community, but who know similar communities with whom we share this way of seeing and understanding the universe, the world, life.

Charlotte: Since we're on the subject of training, in the last five years or so there have been some changes in the incentives and funding schemes in the state film agency, the IMCINE, and at the Morelia International Film Festival, for instance. Do you feel the panorama and opportunities have changed for Indigenous filmmakers in Mexico?

María: Of course. You know in the late 1980s and 1990s there was the state-led media transference programme, organized by the National Indigenist Institute (INI), and then in the late 1990s and early 2000s came the Promedios Project with the Zapatista communities. But in terms of more specialized and formal training I remember that when I went to study my Masters in 2011 in Chile, training opportunities in cinema were still very centralized. That made things difficult for us as Indigenous communities, because we were obliged to leave our community to study, and on top of that study something that is relatively new for some of our communities, cinema. So, if it hadn't been for the Ford Foundation grant that supported my Masters in Chile, I would not have been able to undertake serious training in film. However, when I returned to Mexico in 2013, I noticed things had changed. I started to hear about training programmes delivered in community contexts. I'm thinking here of processes like Ambulante Más Allá, or CCC con Patas of the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica, and then came the CAI, el Campamento Audiovisual Itinerante (Itinerant Audiovisual Camp), which also sought to decentralize cinematographic training.

In terms of funding, there used to be small funds offered by the Instituto Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas (National Indigenous Peoples' Institute) (INPI), or the Gabriel García Márquez Fund, but they weren't sufficient. Then in 2019 the Estímulo para la Creación Audiovisual en México y Centroamérica para Comunidades Indígenas y Afrodescendientes (Incentive for Indigenous and Afrodescendant Audiovisual Production in Mexico and Central America) (ECAMC) was launched and things really started to change. In 2018, the new government appointed a new head of the IMCINE – the renowned director María Novaro – who had a different vision, a broader idea of what cinema and cultural diversity could mean. She was invited to meetings with mediamakers in Oaxaca, for instance, with Ojo de Agua, and there she got to hear first-hand our concerns. Then we invited her to Chiapas so she could hear our views too. She was really open to hearing our suggestions and experiences about the reality of film production in states like Oaxaca and Chiapas, where there is a concentration of Indigenous media efforts. I think our demands really shaped the emergence of the ECAMC. And from that moment on there is also a focus on training and mentorship in the funding programme. They increased the amount of funding allocated to the award but also saw that it needed to be accompanied by training: we needed sound designers, cinematographers, editors, producers, because by this stage we knew much more about the logic of film production. So, we started to build connections with other professionals who would not necessarily belong to Indigenous or Afrodescendant communities. And in that process, we realized that we really need to work on training initiatives within the communities.

I feel that we're only fully entering the film world now. I think at first, we did it out of necessity, because it was a tool that enabled us to denounce things. Then we wanted to tell our own stories instead of someone else capturing our *ch'ulel*, or spirit, in their camera. Then we moved on to the need for training. We realized that to tell our stories filmically we would need training, and much more recently we've started thinking about distribution. It's been a long process. You realize that not only the community is interested in your films, but other worlds and audiences want to know more about that community vision also. So, we're consolidating our processes right now. There is more funding, there are more training opportunities, and the ECAMC, for instance, aims to accompany our processes but I still feel that as directors, filmmakers, we're very very passive. It's probably to do with the fact that it's quite recently that we've begun to appropriate these tools to tell our own stories. But I hope to see a moment in which we're producing our own narratives based on the world that surrounds us, and the cosmovision we share. Because one thing is learning the formula and making films with that formula and another is to really reflect upon how I am filming, which shots I'm using, how I give meaning to my way of seeing the world, time, space, territory.

Charlotte: These programmes we've been talking about, the CCC con Patas, Ambulante Más Allá or the ECAMC, which have clearly contributed towards the decentralization of film training in Mexico but have also been designed according to principles of national identity and integration, how do they compare with other kinds of training, like the Campamento Audiovisual Itinerante (CAI), with a more organic communitarian focus?

María: I think that every initiative and training process comes with its own formula of how to teach film. Many filmmakers from Indigenous communities have participated in these processes and the training has in turn let their stories bloom. In the case of the CAI, for instance, everything is conceptualized according to communitarian principles and processes, and includes all phases of film production. It includes photography, sound, the design and proposal of film projects, organized into folders. These are things that you have to consider when you are applying for funding. I think the CAI has been a really important process because it was genuinely organic and was born of a communitarian effort. You are not going to get someone from Mexico City to come and give a training workshop in Ch'enalvo' who will manage to grasp the full context and community processes, because they have not participated in them. So, it really falls on us to do this work, because we are the ones who are embedded in these contexts.

Charlotte: So, if Indigenous filmmakers don't want such vertical, or centralized, or even paternalist initiatives controlled by the Mexican state, you believe you have to get organized to make your demands?

María: I feel like there is a logic of inclusion in some of these initiatives, like 'I'll include your film, or organize Indigenous cinema showcases and therefore I am including your vision, your cinema, and your community context but so long as you follow the rules'. So long as we don't question these forms of making film, or production, well, we might well feel that we are included but it's according to these capitalist logics of competition. I think we need to unlearn these dominant practices and relearn our community processes, and our structures of authority. Of course there are hierarchies also within community processes. But generally, we operate according to different systems of organization. The roles rotate, work according to a different logic. And I think we're really struggling to just say, 'Let's get together, at least all the Tsotsil filmmakers, and work up our own proposals.' We should be proposing how we see the funds working, because at the end of the day, the people who are in control of the purse strings, coordinating and conceptualizing how a fund should work for Indigenous communities, they're not Indigenous. They come from another context, from a different way of seeing the film industry, and their experience has often been very different to ours. It's up to us to demand a change, propose something new.

Charlotte: So, who are your companions on this journey?

María: I would love to meet with every single person who is in some way involved in production processes, directors, sound design, colour correction, everything. We're all part of a community. In the end we use the labels Indigenous cinema or Tsotsil cinema. And if we're accessing these funds, it's because somewhere along the line we've appropriated the discourse of inclusion to articulate our right to that fund, but we also recognize that we have a right to these funding schemes that have been historically denied us. So those of us who self-identify as Tsotsil or Indigenous filmmakers, I think we have a huge responsibility. If we don't understand that then we too are falling into an extractivist dynamic in what we're doing. We have to organize and think collectively about the purpose and direction of our films.

Charlotte: In the process you've been explaining, you've talked about trying to attune cinema to Tsotsil contexts and culture. You've talked also about formal aspects of your cinema, for example, you prefer to avoid extreme close-ups, and you privilege the process by which the community takes ownership of the production and submits it to local protocols, beliefs and spiritual energies. So, I wonder if with your peers, other Tsotsil filmmakers perhaps, you have discussed the idea of a Tsotsil cinema?

María: Cinema, as I said, is really recent for us. So even though you might say that I've been working with audiovisual media for ten years or so, and that there are many other filmmakers who have also been working for a while in the sector, to speak of cinema for us is quite new. It's new because we have only had contact with cinema, with films, with different productions and with film language in the past few years. Many of us have now learnt how to make films, and these films might be successful and get selected and screened at international and national film festivals. But I think that we need to work more on showing our films to our communities, and with the people with whom we've worked. Right now we're taking stock of where we're at, and really thinking about how we can transfer the knowledge we have and we've gained about making cinema to community contexts, to the sound landscape, to our space, our territory. How can I make a film that is also resonant with other communities with whom we might share a vision of the world? I think we still need to get together as a group and think about these questions collectively.

It's curious because filmmaking is a collective process. You can't make a film alone, you need someone to do the cinematography, the sound, maybe it's a small production or a large-scale production but at the end of the day it is collaborative. I think we're still at the stage of looking to tell our stories through cinema, we want to learn film language and different ways of making cinema, build small communities with others among us who have perhaps more experience. So, we gather to make films together. For instance, I support another filmmaker who is working on her own production, she supports me, the sound designer might also be working on other Tsotsil projects, etc. I think that's our way of thinking collectively. The next step is to reflect together about what happens to the films when we've finished them. Festivals are really important spaces that have historically been out of our reach, because people think our work is a minor cinema or of little value for film markets, but the priority should be screening our works in our communities and making an impact. There are important examples of festivals like those organized by the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas (Latin American Coordinating Council of Indigenous Film and Media; CLACPI) that try to bring together filmmakers and also share the works among different Indigenous communities.

Charlotte: Yeah, the awards given at the CLACPI festivals are quite different, they aim to recognize social processes and dignify representation, so they're often less focused on the final production. It would be nice to try to create a space, at least in the South of Mexico, to bring together filmmakers tackling these questions to think about them collectively. But it's a challenge when the sustainability of these processes is so complex. It's clear that cinema is a very difficult enterprise in terms of sustainability. It's a struggle for everyone who is involved in trying to secure funds because a production, large or small, feature fiction film or intimate documentary, requires funding. Do you have any thoughts about how to achieve sustainability in the field?

María: Well, we are really at the behest of the funding. There are some exclusive funding schemes for Indigenous peoples and then there are other funds, not only in Mexico but abroad, which support the work of Indigenous or Afrodescendant communities, for instance the William Greaves Fund from Firelight Media. I was awarded a year's funding from that fund and it really was fantastic to have the support, because as you say, the creative process and everything it entails need money, and is subject to these logics of competition. For instance, festivals these days require submissions in 4K at least so the camera you were using five years ago is now obsolete. If you want to continue developing your work and showing it, you need to get a new camera. So, the question is how can we make our filmmaking sustainable? Perhaps we haven't thought enough about the market and the commercialization of our projects, that's why I think initiatives like Mullu TV in Ecuador are really interesting because they're focused not only on the community processes in making the films, but also on the distribution and commercialization of the productions. This year, in 2024, they're taking several Indigenous filmmakers from Abya Yala to Cannes.

Charlotte: And do you like the idea of participating in prestige places for the film world?

María: I think it is important we have a presence there and that it is a political strategy, though it shouldn't be the endgame of our processes. But I think it's important that we decide in which spaces we would like to be, with which productions. We don't want to give other people the right to decide to include us in their programming. So, I think it's really important that we demand the right to be in such spaces for the sustainability of our creative processes.

Charlotte: And in terms of collaborating with the ECAMC fund, which is also for Afrodescendants and is at the regional level of Central America, does the scheme organize spaces where Indigenous and Afrodescendant producers can share strategies regarding audiovisual production?

María: One of the things the ECAMC does is it organizes a residency for the awarded projects which is in San Cristóbal, in Chiapas. This initiative was part of a bigger project that had been envisaged for a postproduction centre to be set up in San Cristóbal. But that never materialized. It was an interesting initiative, another aspect of the decentralizing of facilities, so that not all postproduction happens in Mexico City. It was a huge effort to get off the ground, people from the Ministry of Culture came, the Governor of Chiapas, María Novaro the Director of the IMCINE, lots of filmmakers and they all committed to this new postproduction centre for the South of Mexico. But then the pandemic came and all of the resourcing was cut. The very same building that was destined for the postproduction centre turned into a Covid testing centre.

Charlotte: And so spaces like the Morelia International Film Festival, that have run the Forum for Indigenous Peoples for some years, and more recently a development lab, what's your experience been of the festival?

María: I've only participated once in the festival, with *Tote*. Right now, with my partner we're collaborating with the Festival but on an exhibition project. We were awarded funding for Cine Bolomchon, our ongoing screenings project, and that fund has helped us to show films featured in the Morelia festival here in the community. I think the most important and enriching aspect of all these spaces is meeting with other peers, from other communities, who are also on the same path. It's really important to acknowledge and recognize each other's work and spaces such as the Morelia International Film Festival have facilitated that. It's important we continue to develop our practice by sharing with others; that way we can understand more about the film industry.

Charlotte: Beyond Chiapas have you had many opportunities to share with Indigenous filmmakers in northern Mexico?

María: In Oaxaca and Chiapas we know each other quite well, we meet in festivals or residencies, but I know very little of initiatives taking place in the North of Mexico, maybe because geographically it's so far away. In Chiapas, the Tseltales are the largest Indigenous group, much larger than the Tsotsiles. But Tsotsiles are more visible in cultural processes – cinema, literature, painting, plastic arts. And I don't really know why, perhaps it's something to do with the centralization of the training, perhaps the workshops don't reach some of the other communities.

Charlotte: It's interesting what you were saying about the visual culture and codes in your community and the film offering, commercial cinema and *telenovelas*. Do you feel these categories of fiction and documentary are pertinent for you or your community? Would you like to move into fiction?

María: Our exhibition project, Cine Bolomchon, has been really important for us to gauge and understand what the community likes or doesn't like, and we've realized that for many people here, there is no difference between fiction and documentary. Everything is documentary and people talk about fiction films as if they recounted real-life situations. We've also realized that people in the community seem to like quite observational cinema, without many interviews. They get a bit irritated when there are a lot of interviews. But above all they like films that are in their language. I imagine that at some stage I'll probably want to make a fiction film because producing documentaries in the community is actually really complex. It's a small community and we have a lot of beliefs like *il k'op*, a kind of negative energy deriving from envy, so it's easy to upset someone. People are concerned about what others will think or say if they appear in the film, or they question why you've included someone else and not them. These kinds of tensions can lead to illnesses. If someone has ill feelings or envy towards you then that can harm you and make you sick. And we're afraid of that too, because we've experienced it. A lot of people were upset about us holding this community service role last year. They said things like 'Why are they doing it? Benjamin [María's husband] is from outside the community, why does he have to come and take on community service?'

I think it has to do with a kind of energy. And that is part of the complexity of making documentaries, even more so if you are part of the community because you can't just show up, film and leave. The decisions are taken as a community, in assemblies, and you have to ask for permission from the community as a whole. So sometimes I think it would be easier to work in fiction. What is clear to me though is that we want to make all our audiovisual projects with the community, and according to community logics and guidelines because the very fact that the community fabric is maintained through these organizational principles is an act of resistance.

Charlotte: Fiction and documentary also operate according to different logics. With fiction even if there is a script the shooting order might change, or dialogues might be improvised, and the crew is generally much bigger than with documentary. In documentary the crew tends to be smaller. And yet all cinema, irrespective of the scale of production, is collective and collaborative. How do you see the question of authorship in cinema?

María: I think films are made collectively, not only in terms of the crew – the cinematographer, sound designer, producer, etc. – but also with the people who tell their stories, who open not only the doors to their homes, but also their minds and hearts to share with you and with the audiences who will eventually see the film. In some respects, at least in the films I make, the characters turn into co-directors, co-producers of the films. But though we take decisions collectively, through community assemblies, ultimately someone is in charge of the production, an agent or sponsor so to speak, who organizes, coordinates, shapes the agreements, makes suggestions, and who has the support of the community assembly. I think authorship is complex because it is connected to the question of intellectual property rights. Who does the film belong to? I would like for everyone who appears in the film and who takes decisions over the work to have a share of the copyright, but it's complex because within the community there are often no authorship rights as such. For example, traditional music and textile designs or weavings, all of these practices and knowledges form a collective right. So that's why the question of property and authorship rights are in tension.

Charlotte: So in your process of filmmaking there is a consensual vision that transmits these negotiations and the protagonists have a say in what can or cannot be filmed. Do you tend to share early cuts of your films with the community before the final version?

María: We're not quite at that stage yet with *Riox*. People know that we are going to share with them the materials that we filmed and we try to explain that this won't be in a couple of months but more like in one-to-two years. It's difficult to manage expectations. We have to provide a thorough explanation as to why we can't show the material yet. Currently I'm reviewing all the footage, which is taking a while, because doing the shooting alongside the community service made it difficult to progress to the editing phase. Budgetary constraints and timeframes added to that pressure. This year I've decided I don't want to apply for any more funding, I just don't want to be chasing deadlines all the time. We've been filming since 2021 in different phases so I want to take my time going over the material. And then I'll aim to put together a first cut, one that I'm satisfied with, and that we can share with everyone with whom we've worked. Because even though everyone knows we're making a film, there are still perhaps things that people would prefer aren't included in the final version. It's a bit scary because in many ways the most straightforward thing would be to go ahead with my vision and stick with that, show it in festivals outside of the community, etc. But the principal audiences for this film are the people in the community and those with whom we've worked so we have to ask for their permission first. Even if they've already signed a waiver saying we can use their image, often people aren't fully aware of what they're saying in front of the camera or of the repercussions it could have in the community.

We've been trying to tackle the question of permissions recently. There is understandably a great deal of mistrust in the community regarding signing contracts and waivers. They ask why they have to sign, and many people do not know how to read. So, we need to take the time to explain properly what the film is about, the reach it might have and how it could benefit the community. It's a huge responsibility and commitment. You can't go and make a film and show your work around the world without returning the image to where it originated.

We explain the process as we're making the film, but afterwards there is the distribution phase and that's when the issue of authorship rights and economic benefit comes up. We would really like everyone who features or who has worked on the film to have a portion of the authorship rights and I think that is a possibility but I'm just not sure how it works. We haven't considered the question of collective rights in our cinema enough. If we are talking about collective rights within the community, for example, there is someone who plays a certain music or a traditional instrument and they have done so for generations, they don't have copyright. They don't say 'this music belongs to me'. That's just not how it works in the community. So, it's a process, we're trying to work out how best to approach it, especially the question of the royalties or profit because it's not like the film *Riox* will make millions but it will generate some income. So how do we ensure that some of that goes back to the people who gave life to the film and the story? At one point we suggested giving an equal share of the authorship rights, but then if the film is picked up and distributed each and every person who has a share would also need to give their explicit permission before going ahead with a distribution agreement. I don't think it's impossible but at the moment we haven't found a way to work like that. It's perhaps better to make sure that we generate projects within the community from the profits. That's how we ended up with the idea of a training programme in audiovisual media because it could be a way of doing something tangible with the money and returning it to the community.

Charlotte: I guess it's a question of benefit sharing, which is quite complex in cinema because films have authorship rights, as original works, but these questions of intellectual property derive from Western legal systems. Then there is the question of how long copyright lasts – seventy or eighty years say – before it could get digitized, uploaded to the internet and then anyone can use it as it enters the public domain. The example you gave earlier María, the Wayúu word messenger in the film *Birds of Passage*; the film also features a Wayúu *jayeechi*, or sung narration. They share a characteristic: they are examples of oral culture which are generally not attached to individual property rights. But each of these expressions, as captured in cinema, might have their own legal framework or protocol. How do we guarantee rights over music, testimony, oral narration, clothing, in terms of authorship as captured in cinema? It's very complex.

María: In the case of *Bankilal* and *Tote* both films are intimate portraits with few characters, so it was less complicated. In the case of *Bankilal*, for instance, I didn't envisage the reach it would achieve, it was basically a film I needed to make to graduate from my Masters programme, and that's how I explained it to the protagonist. But then people started to ask for the film and it was shown both in Mexico and internationally. The protagonist in the end felt that the film didn't go into enough detail, I'd recorded so many hours of footage but of course it didn't all make the final cut. Apart from that he had no other criticism. And afterwards he took charge of sharing the film with the other people who participated in it, as I wasn't based in the community and went quite infrequently.

We screened *Tote* first with my family. My grandfather doesn't show his emotions much, but he did laugh a few times, and my grandmother didn't even recognize herself, perhaps she wasn't used to seeing herself on film. The film was important for me to get to know my grandfather's life and to generate understanding inside my own family. His parents died and his children didn't know that he became an orphan very young. So it was good to bring to light some of his past as the family didn't know many things about his life. And then my grandfather was proud that the film would be seen in different places. He was excited about that, the fact that audiences elsewhere would see him and how he lives and works. But as the film was released during the pandemic, we weren't really able to go to any screenings. It premiered in the Morelia International Film Festival in October 2019 and then the pandemic came. Lots of screenings were outright cancelled and then others moved online. So, *Tote*'s fate was that it was mostly distributed through festivals online.

Charlotte: To close our conversation (Figure 1.3), I wonder if you could explain what the notion of a 'screen world' means to you? This book engages with the idea of global screen worlds, so I'd love to know how you view this concept.

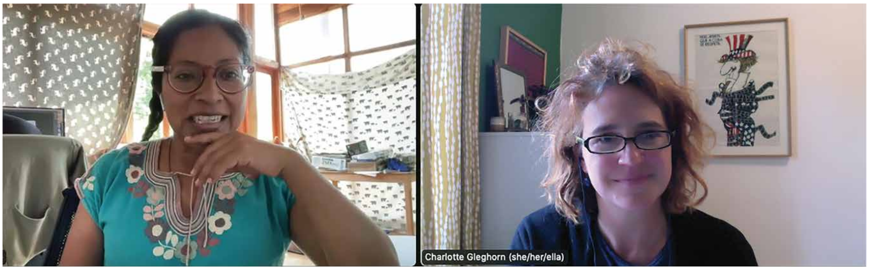

FIGURE 1.3 *Screenshot of one of our conversations, María in her office in Ch'enalvo', Charlotte in her office in Edinburgh.*

María: A screen world? Well, I guess I think it is a visual and sonic dialogue between worlds. This community, this story, is a world and the cinema enables this dialogue to exist. And the fabric woven between worlds audiovisually, that's what I think of when you say 'screen world'.

Charlotte: Thank you, María.

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SECTION TWO

Across gulfs and oceans: A new lens on cross-cultural industry and industries

2

Urban imaginaries between Dubai and Kochi: From cinematic to smart cities

Pooja Thomas and Kay Dickinson

The opening sequence of *Annayum Rasoolum* (Rajeev Ravi 2013) features a song of ironic jest, singing of Kochi and the ways the port city has served as a gateway to the region's plenty. The irony comes to life in the fact that the people of Kerala have historically migrated out of the region in search of employment, security and prosperity – especially to the Gulf countries. Kochi and Dubai, in this regard, become mediating environments of the economic, socio-religious, material and symbolic linkages between these two regions. Entanglements like these are evidenced on film; a close look at the gantry cranes featured in this sequence would reveal the signage of DP World, an Emirati logistics company and port operator that manages not only Kochi's port but many others around the world. By launching from the sea and the port, *Annayam Rasoolum* cannot help but capture an Emirati presence as backdrop. In this essay, we attempt to chart ideas of modernity, 'development' and urbanization moving back and forth between Kochi and Dubai, signified through the built environment, but negotiated within the diegetic spaces of cinema. Kerala's Malayalam-language films are frequently explicit in their inclusion of Dubai as a touchstone for urban design and as an encroaching physical presence in India itself. In so doing, these films expose how cinema actively participates in processes of influence and ownership, as a powerful creator of imaginaries, a critical voice and as an infrastructure for revenue generation. We suggest that the screen worlds explored in variegated ways throughout this volume are not just the *mise-en-scène* hosting filmic narratives; they are composite elements within city space itself and help generate it. Screen worlds are not only spaces of desire; they often help duplicate urban development models in material ways. By tracing continuities between what is construed as real, manipulated or fantastical, between screened and built worlds, the economies and technologies that manifest them are also made visible. In what follows, we investigate, firstly, the ways in which Malayalam cinema establishes its urbanity materially and rhetorically through migration to Dubai. We then consider the 'Kochi film', situated more squarely within this city itself, as the product and producer of a particular kind of urban modernity in conversation with a number of sites elsewhere, including, by more subtle implication, Dubai. Lastly, we turn our gaze, which has concentrated on urban infrastructures throughout, to how a smart city development, built on the foundations of these imaginaries, is now taking simultaneously concrete and shaky form on Kochi soil, conceived, financed and managed through ongoing and mutating Kochi–Dubai relations.

Dreaming Dubai and its discontents

The film industries of South Asia, more than any others, regularly avail themselves of Dubai as a resonant and loaded setting (Leotta 2015: 28). 'Brand Dubai' – through state-funded PR, as well as through personal migrant narratives – travels the world. Cinema too regularly crosses the Indian Ocean to examine, critique and participate in these hopes that take shape as commodities and as social relations. Nuanced, frequently suspicious of the Dubai fantasy, this body of movies still participates in such world-making, speaking to audiences living in the Gulf, returnees and any number of viewers negotiating the modernities presented therein.

Diamond Necklace (Lal Jose 2012) serves as an exemplar of this type of Malayalam drama. It follows Arun, a Dubai-based Keralite doctor whose unaffordably lavish lifestyle and entanglement with various likeable Indian women sees him resorting to stealing the titular jewellery from one of them, Maya, as she lies fighting for her life in the hospital where he works. The film is at once a sophisticated purveyor of luxurious opportunities for migrants – teetering in the realms of product placement – and a critique of the consumerism and overreach that this lifestyle encourages. Its opening credit sequence expresses its gratitude to contacts from Dubai Holding, Dubai World, Dubai Mall, Emaar, Marina Tourism and Burj Khalifa (all prime actors in the UAE's global real estate scene), as well as Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Such prominent thanks will certainly have been a condition of location shooting in these businesses' properties, yet it cannot go unnoticed that they are also the beneficiaries of exposure in Malayalam cinema. Some of these corporate names will recur within our later analyses, because they are active in the transformation of Kochi's own urban fabric. Screen worlds, then, within this context, extend well beyond the mere representation of these cities on film. They are part of the fabric not only of migrant desire, but also how these models for urban development are duplicated in real terms around the world, along with the incumbent foreign direct investment, ownership stakes and, often, debt they bring. It is not by singular narrative whim that Arun resides in Dubai's ritzy, flagship skyscraper, Burj Khalifa (the world's tallest, no less, and operated by Emmar Properties). Such buildings, ascending by the day across the UAE's international acquisitions and management portfolio, have come to represent for Arun and millions of others a potent aspiration for the future. This is where many dream of living, certainly, but, more broadly, these architectures' forward-facing design seems to stand for progress and thus some sort of fix for local economic stagnation. The film's song and dance sequences, as they typically do, play up a vibrantly exotic existence amid the recognizable markers of 'Brand Dubai'. The second to feature, 'Thottu Thottu', visualizes Arun's wooing of his colleague (Tamil nurse Lakshimi) by cross-cutting between expected Dubai landmarks, interiors within his Burj Khalifa apartment, a Dubai Mall shopping trip with a gold credit card, and idyllic shots, including aboard a tractor, back in rural India.

However, any easy passage between the two worlds is complicated when Arun's less affluent Keralite friends pay a surprise home visit. Burj Khalifa security refuses entry to 'their type' without clearance. Arun, cowering in the lobby, speaking to them on his cellphone and hoping not to be spotted, claims to be out of the building at work. With this action, he signs up for the aggressive social stratification that places him, very literally, on the inside with them excluded. He will learn who his true friends are soon enough, a diegetic turn that situates Keralite kinship and communality as ultimately paramount. To reach this point, the plot details how he is living beyond his means in the United Arab Emirates and will quickly fall short on its exorbitant rent.

While the film's exteriors capture 'the real Dubai' (although partial and frequently touristic), several scenes within the apartment are noticeably studio-shot, Arun's floor to ceiling windows filled with almost still-photographic reproductions of the skyline (see Figure 2.1). These moments insinuate the blurring of the actual, the fantastical and the manipulated, a cinematic mirroring not only of Arun's own delusions about his status and possibilities in Dubai, but also those of any number of migrants, wherever they end up. The import

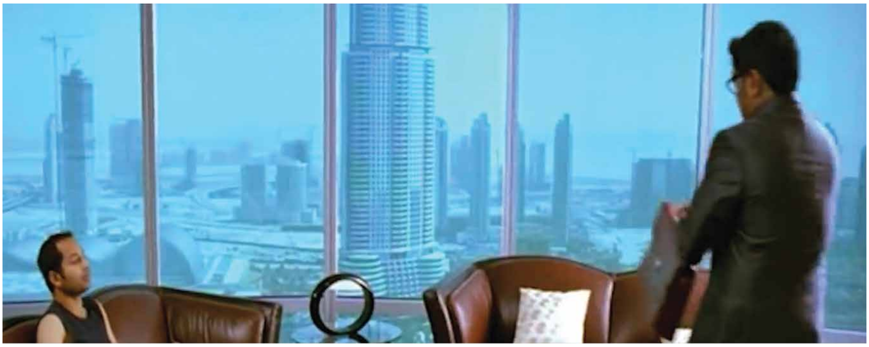

FIGURE 2.1 *Living the high life, 2012.* Diamond Necklace *directed by Lal Jose © LJ Films 2012. All rights reserved.*

of these complexly composite spaces does not remain within the diegesis as merely a reflection of any given character's social or emotional state. Rather, the building of the 'real world' is regularly informed by the 'screen world', charged by the desires it provokes and the economies and technologies that incarnate it.

For certain, not all scenes are shot in this way; publicity for *Diamond Necklace* made a fanfare of the shoot's access to this iconic site, itself trading in the opulence the skyscraper connotes (Radhakrishnan 2012; Gulf News 2014). At a cursory glance, in fact, the scenes that actually were filmed within the Burj Khalifa are almost indistinguishable from a computer-generated vista, so template-fantastical is the view over Dubai from this spot. When such techniques feature in films like *Diamond Necklace*, they simultaneously register as visibly obvious cost-cutting measures, foregrounding the expense of actually shooting at length within the Burj Khalifa and, by association, the cost of becoming a resident.

Thus, the film indexes, as well as helps perpetuate, a means of profit generation that ties these two port cities, highlighting Dubai as a site geared up for the exploitation not simply of migrants' labour, but also their desires, salaries and post-migrant existences. In cinematic moments like these, the vision of prosperity and luxury that buildings like Burj Khalifa palpably embody cohere them to Llerena Guiu Searle's notion of 'congenial spaces for the extraction of revenue' (Searle 2016: 5). Rental earnings, along with consumer spending and re-exportation (a legacy of Dubai's longstanding port economy), prevail as Dubai's top non-oil economies (Kanna 2011: 40). Here sovereign wealth in tandem with a nepotistic underwriting of the private construction sector has accelerated large-scale urbanization projects, and not just in this nation-state itself, but across the world, including in India. The need for spaces to comfortably live and work gets subsumed by rapacious private property models whose lifeblood is impermanent, insecure tenancy and uncapped, unregulated rental expenditure. For millions of migrants like Arun, this relationship to the built environment is temporally complex, necessitating hard work and compliance in the present (being able to afford to keep a roof over one's head), while positively breeding profit-garnering aspirations for the future. As this chapter will go on to chart, now more than ever, Emirati investment as well as Emirati financing to businesses and individuals make such environments increasingly within the grasp of returnees to homelands like Kerala too.

A Dubai-set Malayalam film, however, is more than just an exploration of the built environment at the discursive level. Such filmmaking also participates as a specialized customer of media services on Emirati turf. It partakes of everything from efficient industry logistics to the easy availability of suitable South Asian extras. In Dubai itself, these infrastructures have amassed under the rubric of the free zone: a boundaried area that confers upon its clients exceptional ease of trade unfettered by the everyday restrictions on business usually upheld by the nation-state. While free zones are typically perceived to be industrial manufacturing precincts, Dubai has made it its mission to find scores dedicated to other activities, including a number that are media-focused. The Dubai Creative Clusters Authority, which encompasses Studio City, Internet City, Media City, Knowledge Park, Design District and International Academic City, offers specialized facilities for the production and circulation of media. Dubai's media industry free zones play host to multiple transnational corporations such as Twitter, Star and Reuters, furnishing them with a convenient and reliable regional base. Film projects pass through, from blockbusters like *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird 2011), *Star Trek Beyond* (Justin Lin 2016) and *Race* (Abbas Mustan 2008) to somewhat more modest Malayalam endeavours, like *Casanova* (Rosshan Andrrews 2012) and *Varathan* (Amal Neerad 2018). The appeal is the emirate's organizational support, up-to-the-minute infrastructure, logistical expertise and tax-free financial climate. Both types of presence, abiding and fleeting, attract smaller specialized outfits to also set up shop in the free zones, hoping to earn livelihoods from contract work, and, in order to do so, paying rent, as the multinationals also must, to the leviathans of Emirati real estate. It is through real estate, rather than homegrown creative output, that Dubai is amassing media-related profits (see Dickinson 2020).

The confluence of free zone logics, exclusive real estate and foreign acquisition begs attention, most particularly in how this constellation intensifies and exports a social stratification of urban space and often through force. On the surface, free zones like the Dubai Design District deliver smart city capacities amidst the restaurants, hotels and other hospitality and leisure enterprises that tempt in moneyed creatives. Yet Neha Vora's research can alert us to how such quarters deepen already-existing segregation in the Dubai housing market, as expressed by *Diamond Necklace*'s exposure of the Burj Khalifa's door policy. Vora explains how such racialized classism commences even before the moment of migration:

> Often, companies offer [European] expatriates free accommodation and other perks in addition to their salaries in order to lure them to Dubai, but Indians and other Asians usually have to pay their rents out of pocket. This contributes to a lower proportion of Asians in the expensive communities of New Dubai and the ghettoization of older, more congested parts of town.
> (Vora 2008: 384)

At the most disadvantaged end of this scale dwell the blue-collar migrants, often in labour camps, as witnessed by several scenes in *Diamond Necklace*, which, notably, encode these sites as ones where Keralite community, care and generosity still hold strong. Off screen, it is workers like these who have built the skyscrapers and the film sets alike. They clean, they cater, they drive – all crucial and under-appreciated contributions to any film shoot.

Yet, as Chad Haines is quick to point out, 'Dubai does not want to be a place of permanent residence and is constantly shifting labour markets from where it draws migrant labourers'. Haines even goes so far as to rationalize that Dubai 'needs to develop global cities in India and Pakistan to attract migrants back home' (Haines in Roy and Ong 2011: 165). The stories of Malayalam cinema are increasingly populated by this potential returnee clientele. The newer cosmopolitan disposition they represent constitutes the market for a glossy, high-tech, aspirational Kerala whose reference points for progress and wealth look distinctly Emirati. The final portion of this essay examines the translation of such aspiration into work-life spaces emerging in South Asia. Before then, it is crucial to outline the historical and existing urban fabric of Kochi that hosts these new developments as they have been brought to screen and as they have bolstered a regional film economy.

Kochi: In film and space

Kochi, now an urban agglomeration of roughly 1.5 million in an area of 400 square kilometres, came to life as a natural harbour and grew into an urban centre of some historic-mythic scale known as Muziris. As Muziris, Kochi is celebrated in mythic imagination as a cosmopolitan gateway of trade for the south of India and Persia, the Middle East, North Africa, and the (Greek and Roman) Mediterranean region.[1] Kochi's ongoing reliance on maritime trade and, consequently, the migratory entanglements of people, ideas and capital between Kerala and the Gulf are explored through the complex themes of labour, work, opportunity and aspiration in several Malayalam language films such as *Nadodikattu* (Sathyan Anthikad 1987), *Arabikatha* (Lal Jose 2007), *Ustad Hotel* (Anwar Rasheed 2012), *Pathemari* (Salim Ahamed 2015) and *Jacobinte Swargarajyam* (Vineeth Sreenivasan 2016). However, in counterpoint to the unabated cityscapes of the films set in Dubai, for a long time in Malayalam cinema, the urban was not represented as a spatially recognizable geography within Kerala. As Ratheesh Radhakrishnan notes, the urban was a conceptual/moral geography and rarely depicted in spatial terms. The attempt 'to spatially imagine the city, through iterative images, as a visible space that was distinct, and distinctly situated within the state of Kerala', only happened in the 2000s in which, 'Kochi, located in the central part of the state, seemed to provide the economic and cultural imaginary for this enterprise' (Radhakrishnan 2017: 174). While films from 2007, like *Big B* (Amal Neerad) and *Chotta Mumbai* (Anwar Rasheed), were set in Kochi, Radhakrishnan argues that it is only in 2011 that Kochi became more than setting or context, and is recognizable as a distinct urban space in cinema.

Interestingly, an early dominant representation of the urban in Malayalam cinema was to see it in moral opposition to an idyllic rural. However, in several films in the past few years, there has been a decided shift in this portrayal, with the rural now projected as a site of violence, sexual and otherwise. It would seem that the rural is currently offered as the counterpoint to Kerala's urban cosmopolitanism, and is deployed in these films as the subconscious terrain of the region's patriarchal society (*Varathan* [Amal Neerad 2018], *Joji* [Dileesh Pothan 2021], *Aarkariyam* [Sanu John Varghese 2021]). Given that the dominant image of Kerala in its tourism campaigns continues to draw from its rural and natural habitats, this recent valence of the rural in Malayalam cinema suggests the underlying momentum that situates Kochi as a tangible signifier of urbanity.

Why Kochi? One of the reasons could be its eventual strengthening as a hub of film production. The film industry in Kerala was dependent on Chennai, capital city of the adjoining state of Tamil Nadu, as a film production site for a long time. In the region's film history, this has often been perceived as a cultural crisis. When seen against the backdrop of debates within the region's film intelligentsia and the various attempts by the Kerala state government in the 1970s to enable film production within the state (Radhakrishnan 2009: 223), the gradual emergence of Kochi as a spatial anchor for Malayalam film business is extremely significant. While remittance money from the Gulf actively supported and invested in Malayalam commercial cinema from the 1970s until about the mid-1980s, in both legal and illegal ways, with some Malayali Gulf expatriates involved in it as first-time producers and distributors, this capital was not effectively channelled at the time to strengthen its production base within the region (Nair 1999: 60; Radhakrishnan 2009: 219, 233, 238). It was only in the 2000s that Kochi began to evolve as a film production centre (Krishnakumar 2013).

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[1] The reference to Muziris was primarily cemented by the Kochi Muziris Biennale, a contemporary and international art exhibition that has showcased Kochi's historic cosmopolitanism, thereby attracting cultural visibility for the city and region.

In recent years, Kochi has become self-sufficient in terms of offering facilities for post-production work and is seen as a viable alternative to Chennai or Hyderabad by many filmmakers. This particular moment of self-reliance has also been mapped onto the rise of a new generation of young film directors, writers and actors – inheritors of the various entanglements that Dubai signifies for Kerala – who have come into their own with storytelling dynamics that have challenged the consumption of mainstream Hindi cinema as well as the production of mainstream Malayalam cinema itself.[2] While this moment grows out of broader infrastructural developments, ones that both refer to and negotiate with Dubai, including perhaps invisible and illegitimate sources of financial investment in the film business, it also gestures towards institutional and a new kind of developmentalist interest in leveraging the city's visibility to the world outside. Such interest is premised on the idea of the city as a growth machine, one that can potentially attract global and creative capital and thereby ensure prosperity for region and nation (Molotch 1976). Within this discursive imagination, one in which welfare has transformed into entrepreneurship (Harvey 1989), the governance mechanism focuses on infrastructural and promotional activities that frame the city as having the capacity for global habitude. Therefore, Singapore's experiments with redevelopment or Dubai's transformation into a 'world city' are frequently viewed as models for Asian or non-Western cities aspiring to be seen as 'global' (Yeoh and Kong 1996).

It could be said that Kochi's historical cosmopolitanism, the steady investment in its infrastructure over several years, especially by the

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[2] The new wave of Malayalam language filmmakers of the recent decades may be understood as products of the socio-economic, cultural and religious linkages between Kerala and the Gulf countries, and as benefactors of a globalizing world. Some of them including actors have had educational as well as professional experience in the Global North, and, in the process, have acquired the kind of social and cultural capital necessary for an evolved address to film viewers beyond the linguistic region.

Gulf-based diaspora, local businesses and entrepreneurs have laid the foundation for the more recent interest in the city's potential to be re-made in the 'smart/global city' mould.[3] Kochi has been on the receiving end of an institutional gaze. It came to be the chosen city for Kerala governments' metro project.[4] It is also the city that was proposed by the region's government and then selected under the nation-based National Smart Cities Mission in 2015, an essentially revamped urban redevelopment project with the added qualifier of 'smartness', which will become a topic of scrutiny towards the end of this essay. In the recent budget announcements of January 2021, there is financial allocation for a proposed film post-production centre to be developed by state-owned Chalachitra Academy in Kochi.

With Kochi as the locus of this recent administrative gaze accompanied by attention to its 'smart' development, the 'Kochi film' has been read as one of the signs of the region's articulation of the urban (Radhakrishnan 2017: 178). Radhakrishnan analyses the 'Kochi film' as genre itself, or more specifically, as a body of films that depict Kochi and its suburbs in ways that signal Malayalam cinema's, and by extension the region's, changing negotiation with urbanity. We would reframe the term 'Kochi film' to align it closely with the previously mentioned rise of a new cohort of filmmakers, popularly hailed as the next 'new wave' in Malayalam cinema. Their output is cinematographically astute and technologically deft. It is characterized by experiments with contemporary storylines that raise significant questions about region, gender and identities, as well as by the deployment of aggressive social media promotion, releases on OTT including global platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime, and other digital platforms and thereby possibly by their address to a new and emergent linguistically complex audience in India and beyond. Some members of this clutch of filmmakers were also involved in investing in and setting up film businesses in Kochi in the last two decades.[5]

In popular and cultural memory, the film that announces this shift in production values as well as a new emergent aesthetic, especially to audiences beyond the region of Kerala, is *Bangalore Days* (2014), written and edited by Anjali Menon, co-produced by Anwar Rasheed Entertainment and Weekend Blockbusters in Kochi. Menon grew up in the UAE and studied filmmaking in London. While Menon's global moorings are not literally representative of the younger generation of filmmakers and actors associated with what is known as the Kochi film (most of them are Kochi based), she is certainly an indicator of the ways in which global flows of media and economy, especially ones centred on Kerala's relationship with the Gulf, have shaped their aesthetic perspectives and skills. *Bangalore Days* is the story of young people from Kerala caught between modernity and tradition. The city of Bangalore signifies freedom from judgement, independence and individuality encoded in a consumerist modernity. It is also an escape from their conflicted relationship with Kerala society. A coming-of-age story in many ways, the plot follows three cousins as each discovers life, love and themselves in Bangalore. Even though much of *Bangalore Days* is located in the titular city (which is not part of Kerala region), it is certainly a 'Kochi film' insofar as it encodes the recognizably generic, stylistic choices and thematic preoccupations of new-generation Malayalam cinema.

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[3] This included the construction of an international airport in the 1980s, which was almost entirely funded by private investment from Kerala's non-resident and Gulf diaspora.

[4] Metro projects often have less to do with solving urban transportation problems and more to do with urban aesthetics, especially in aspirational contexts (Sadana 2018).

[5] Ashique Abu (OPM production house, launched in 2012); Anwar Rasheed (Anwar Rasheed Entertainments); Asif Ali (Adam's World of Imagination) all located in Kochi are some examples.

The film amassed a large fan following for two reasons. First, the lead actor Dulquer Salmaan, who portrays young urbane rebelliousness in the film, is also a signifier of the cosmopolitanism that is aspirational for many young people in Kerala and beyond. Educated abroad with a 'global' taste in fashion marking his personhood, Dulquer Salmaan is also representative of the young elite in Kerala, many of whom are, in one way or the other, products of Kerala's migratory movements to the Gulf and beyond. Second, the appeal of the film also lay in its negotiation with the fantasy of Bangalore after the extended city's emergence as an IT hub and outsourcing node for the world. This fantasy is the promise of global modernity encoded into the architecture of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, one that the film in part satirizes as consisting of pizza delivery, a plush modern apartment and a sexually liberating relationship. Bangalore is also the fantasy of the escape from the rural conservatism that Kerala is associated with in popular culture. The city has been part of the collective dreaming of what it means to be urbane, cosmopolitan, modern, individualistic and free in India. Its aesthetics of closed reflective glass in business complexes belong to stock landscapes of global urbanity that promise luxury and a cosmopolitan lifestyle, as invoked by the scenes of New Dubai in *Diamond Necklace.*

This fantastical space is also created in another prominent Kochi film, *Kammatipaadam* (Rajeev Ravi 2016). The film revolves around a gang of young men, Balan and Ganga, who are Dalit, and Krishna, their upper-caste brother in arms, who work for Surendran, a shady property developer and crime lord. The film's tragic thesis centres on the fact that they help Surendran with the forcible sale of and evictions from land in their own neighbourhood. Surendran's own glass-walled security-guarded penthouse is built on these coercively acquired saleable plots of Bangalore/Dubai dreamin' in Kochi, and is shown in several scenes as directly overlooking the changing terrains of Kochi city. These scenes, one must, through cinematic memory, juxtaposed against

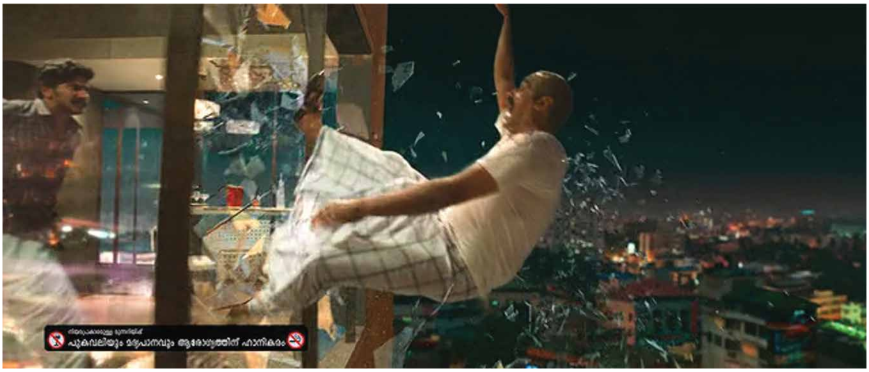

FIGURE 2.2 *Surendran falls to his death, 2016.* Kammattipaadam *directed by Rajeev Ravi © Global United Media 2016. All rights reserved.*

Kammatipaadam's opening shots of green and lush lands that belonged to the Dalit (Pulayar) communities that now live at the slum edges of the city. The film also indirectly reconstructs the transformation of Kochi – from that primordial scene in which it was assumed that land could not be owned or possessed by humans – to the shots where one of the protagonists, Ganga, sits on the wall that hides the slum-like shanties in which his family and other Dalit live, with the vertical city beyond him. In the film's narrative, Ganga and Balan, the two brothers, are avenged when Surendran is thrown through his glass walls, his vertical protected space (see Figure 2.2).

Surendran represents the real estate mafia in the world of the film and beyond, a group of people who have forcibly, often violently, taken the lands that once belonged to these Dalit or Pulayar communities. The boys in the gang are caught in the tide of history that they have read accurately for signs of change. In a significant sequence, Balan rebukes his ageing father for not understanding the economics of the new world, for not grasping that the world has transformed, and for not accepting that their old way of life in Nature and ties to community must disappear to make way for newer ones. Balan flexes his moneyed muscles in these scenes and presents himself as all-knowing. However, as his, and later Ganga's, deaths signify, they will never be allowed to be a part of this 'new' world. While Krishnan enters Surendran's apartment complex illicitly, it is Krishnan's upper-caste identity that allows Surendran to address him as one among his own, asking Krishnan why he aligns himself with Ganga, an 'untouchable'. Krishnan eventually avenges the death of his friend, Ganga, who has been beaten to death, just as resonantly at the symbolic level, with a golf club. While *Diamond Necklace* coloured this segregation as moral failure in its protagonist and as the breaking up of community and kinship in a far-away land, these cinematic continuities in

Kammatipadam reinforce the ways in which caste and class-based segregation pervade the rarified spaces of such urbanity.

'Kochi films' like *Kammatipaadam* offer critique of real estate politics and the financial underbelly of urban transformation in cities like Kochi. They also raise questions of segregation and caste politics that dispel urban utopias of access and smart citizenship. The next section will point towards the infrastructures of such urban utopias, and pull apart the specific forms and discourses in which these screen worlds of urban fantasy unravel on ground.

Infrastructures of extraction: Mediating smartness

Ventures like Surendran's point across to the Gulf by way of aesthetics and lifestyles. But it must be stressed that Dubai companies actively finance and own a mounting number of these urban developments. For certain, Kerala's built environment owes much to returnees' remittance and investment, as well as to how their dreams travel, including through the conduit of cinema, to then take shape on Indian soil. However, just as much as people and films cross borders in order to build new places in and through these images, so too does foreign money migrate. Kochi's port management and Tecom's investment in SmartCity Kochi represent two of many direct injections of Emirati capital into Kerala. Just like its counterparts in Dubai, the still-in-progress free zone of SmartCity promises state-of-the-art domestic and commercial accommodation benefitting from top-of-the-range digital infrastructures. Once completed, SmartCity Kochi would probably be India's first such development. We argue that this project instantiates both *Bangalore Days*' hi-tech dream and *Kammatipaadam*'s dystopias of dispossession.

The initiative is 84 per cent owned by Dubai Holding, leaving only 16 per cent under the administration of the Kerala government (*Asianet News*, 'Kochi Smart City Special Programme' 2016). Dubai Holding was one of the companies directly thanked at the beginning of *Diamond Necklace* and Tecom, its subsidiary and the guiding force behind SmartCity, owns and inaugurated Dubai Studio City, Dubai Media City and other colocated Emirati creative industry-free zones. In short, the companies that have technically and hegemonically facilitated a captivating and transportable image of Dubai now claim a majority share in potentially lucrative initiatives across the Indian Ocean. The Dubai model, so deftly brought to life through Malayalam films and the Emirati infrastructures that enable them, now extends well beyond the housing market, into the media industries and outwards as an export commodity and localized accumulation, including within Kerala. The SmartCity project harnesses exactly the same narratives upon which Emirates-connected Malayalam films have hinged: dependable infrastructure and a craving for cosmopolitan visibility via a refashioned urbanity founded on Kerala's historic and economic linkages with the Gulf.

SmartCity plays heavily upon flagship strengths of the Dubai template, its knack with efficient infrastructures, which, it must be underscored, simultaneously become infrastructures of extraction. The very latest telecommunications technologies will seamlessly hitch all aspects of life through ubiquitous connectivity, through the work space to the remote control of one's home. This has always been a major selling point of the Emirati media free zones with their promise of reliable data speeds and security, so crucial to contemporary transnational film production. Needless to say, Tecom and Dubai's two telecommunications service providers, du and Etisalat, overlap in their ownership (Hanieh 2018: 86–8) and one might wonder to what extent the SmartCity neighbourhood is being engineered for extraction beyond the rental economy. Significant data, after all, is required to stream movies, which can then, in turn, buttress and perpetuate expensive lifestyles of connectivity.

The initial capital allowing for this Emirati expansion to Kerala was born of over-accumulation of oil revenues, incrementally transferred to more solid, one might say renewable, sources for ongoing revenue extraction, namely real estate, be it domestic or corporate (as is the case within the media free zone model). SmartCity Kochi comes designed with significant domestic accommodation, more, perhaps, than the Kerala state had envisioned. The goal, ultimately, is for real-life versions of Arun from *The Diamond Necklace* to continue paying rent into Emirati coffers even after ceasing to contribute to the UAE's economy in situ, and the stakeholders have expertise in exactly the types of properties that have long taken advantage of the likes of Arun. Dubai Holding is a government-owned holding company with a capacious assortment of assets, including the Jumeirah Group of luxury hotels and resorts. It shares genetics with its sister investment company, Dubai World, responsible for the famous reclaimed land mega-projects, The World and The Palm, while also managing the Jebel Ali port and DP World, one of the world's largest marine terminal operators, in charge of seventy-eight ports worldwide, including Kochi's. At the same time, Dubai Holding's interest in mixed yet integrated property investment coordinates with another local giant, Emaar Properties, whose portfolio includes the famous Dubai Mall and the aforementioned Burj Khalifa and who perhaps best embody the aspirational template associated with the emirate. This upcoming Kochi free zone will thus nest in a sprawling web of ownership that increasingly spans the globe, now embracing India. The implied promise of SmartCity Kochi, therefore, is the material reproduction of Dubai in Kerala (so far only seen at this scale via media like film) and the dreamscape of the lifestyle that goes along with it.

Plans promise an 'integrated township' or, to put it another way, a self-contained or gated community with domestic housing on-site and 'educational and health-care institutions … all well within reach'. GEMS, an international private provider of K-12 education, holds the contract for the school and Dubai Holding promises that the business park portion connects to its broader network of such developments, which incorporates the 'most number of Fortune 500 companies' (SmartCity, 6). In its choreography of opening and shutting of doors that maintain a specific type of clientele, SmartCity reproduces the logics of brethren-free zones the world over. Dubai's media free zones command exceptional labour, ownership, taxation and freedom of expression affordances, divorced from those of the state at large. SmartCity Kochi likewise offers 100 per cent foreign direct investment, duty-free import of goods, tax benefits and exemption of stamp duty (SmartCity, 11). As Orit Halpern et al. astutely point out, 'zones denote not the demise of the state but the production of new forms of territory, the ideal of which is a space of exception to national and often international law' (Halpern et al. 2017: 113).

At the same time, they uphold cruelly familiar class boundaries, which Malayalam films have taken pains to expose through their narratives. Smart City's promotional materials envisage sterile computer renderings of accordingly globalized spaces-yet-to-come full of pale-skinned business-suited inhabitants (see Figure 2.3). Ironically, the ersatz backdrops of Arun's Burj Khalifa abode in *Diamond Necklace*, whether studio-recreated or a fair representation of how doctored the actual Dubai can look and feel, open onto ways of critically regarding these blueprints for another Emirati free zone.

The blandness of these figures, familiar from similar graphics almost the world over, at one and the same time invokes a mobility, migration and transferability from which such spaces profit and its curtailment to a certain preferred 'type'. The generic buildings in which they work and live recall those of Dubai, while one particular image of housing blocks against a night-time sky appears eerily reminiscent of Surendran's in *Kammattipaadam*. SmartCity's brochure trumpets the development's green credentials and efforts to 'ensure that the environmental impact of the campus remains at a minimum' within its 'natural habitat encompassing forest land, landscaping, horticulture and river' (SmartCity, 8 & 2), while *Kammattipaadam* has laid bare the darker side of claims to unspoilt rurality.

Social cleansing of this order brings devastating consequences. Even those who feel interpellated by these images regularly experience painful repercussions through the over-reaching involved in indulging such presumed comforts. In *Diamond Necklace*, Arun's indebted predicament denies him the

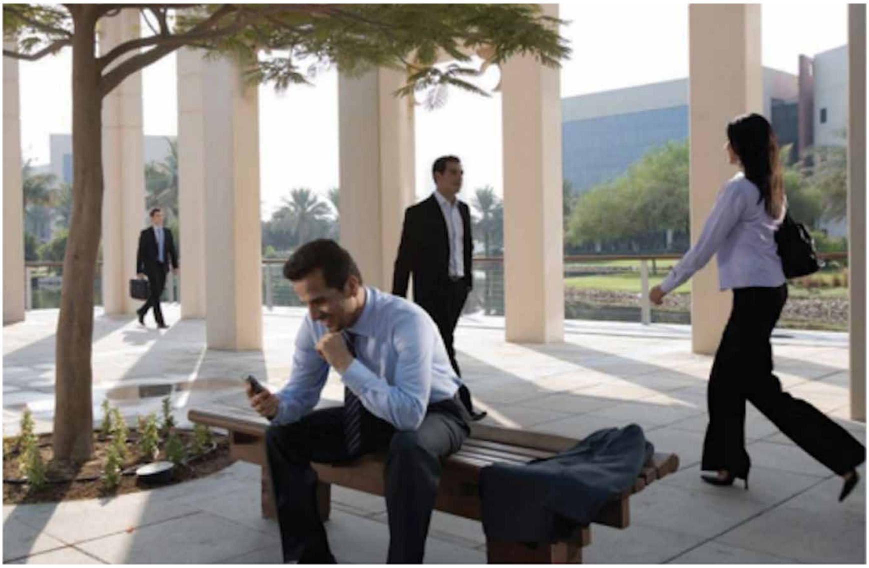

FIGURE 2.3 *Generic projections of SmartCity's future on the SmartCity Kochi website.*

right to rush to his mother's side when she is hospitalized in Kerala because his outstanding loans prohibit departure from the UAE. This is not the first chapter of a story of debt that crosses the Indian Ocean. Vast numbers of migrant workers from Kerala, working- and middle-class, arrive in the UAE already owing money to brokers for arranging their jobs there, a relationship that factors as an aggressive mode of disciplining until the initial amount is paid back. It is therefore crucial that we get to grips with how, relatedly, speculative formations like SmartCity interlace with the global rise and deregulation of the financial sector, which mortgages futures through the increasing availability (within and without national borders) of loans that can provide such lifestyles for profit through interest. Embracing how Indian land has been transformed into assets that can be increasingly traded internationally, Gulf investors operate at the forefront of securitizing such investments. The pathways and manoeuvres of global financialization now mean that this real estate can be converted into more mercurial and tradable units fed into hedge funds, private equity and pensions, often far removed from their physical locations, just as migrants and their cinemas have been for a longer duration (Buckley and Hanieh 2014: 167).

It is particularly urgent that we attend to the ways in which visual cultures simultaneously advance and critique such developments because the 'real world' of Kerala (and many other such regions) is increasingly being made to resemble these 'screen worlds'. From the 2000s onwards, Indian state policy has encouraged the instantiation of exactly these sorts of special economic zones, actively supporting the establishment of hundreds of them through tax incentives, often by way of population clearance and dispossession, and with its eye on enticing foreign investment (Roy in Roy and Ong 2011: 262; Searle 2016: 7 & 30). Emirati corporations have taken advantage of these changes in the law, ones entirely compatible with the template that flourishes on their own shores. This idea of metropolitan urbanity intersects with and is mediated by the fraught narrative of smartness that frames Dubai Holding's investment in SmartCity Kochi. 'Smartness' and Dubai-produced urbanity share the promise of exclusivity, abstraction and exception to national and legal scrutiny.

Worryingly, the syntax of smartness presents itself not only as a language of the future but also one of reform, resilience and governance. Halpern et al. show how smartness became 'a governing project able to individuate a citizen and produce a global polity' (Halpern et al. 2017: 108). It could be argued that the discursive logic of zoning, futuring, resilience and exclusivity that undergird the built environment of Dubai finds continuities in the idea of smartness, thereby enabling the material evocation of Dubai in Kochi. The films we have studied in this chapter present useful alternative models. *Kammatipaadam* reminds us that dispossession renders citizens extremely vulnerable to abuse, that their 'resilience' may, indeed, become criminalized or greedily co-opted. *Diamond Necklace* regularly concludes that strength lies in a community that is inclusive, respectful and never gated. Back in the real world of this free zone in Kochi, completion faces constant delay with much political and social push back. While smartness as discourse promises the management of crisis through innovation and systemic resilience, its utopian pledges are countered by a critical perspective that is to be found in the region's cinema.

Certainly, Kerala's films have done more than just quietly document the ongoing material transformation of Kochi and the conflicts that inevitably accompany it. They have also actively participated in ballasting a particular formulation of the built environment, its capital flows, its exploitations and prohibitions – not just in their diegesis, but also through their financial, infrastructural and technological ties to the UAE. What is so valuable about them is the difficult questions they raise while remaining so aware of the central role screen worlds play in fabricating the ones in which we more concretely dwell.

Acknowledgements

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3

Parallel tracks: Documenting the TAZARA in the age of the belt and road initiative

Xiaoning Lu

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),[1] a massive infrastructure development project implemented as part of China's drive to improve transcontinental connectivity and cooperation. As a state-mobilized globalization strategy, the BRI continues China's 'Going Global Strategy', launched in 2001, to promote outbound investment in energy and transportation projects in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.[2] Since the initiative diverges from – and is perceived to threaten – the dominant Western liberal democratic market economy model, it has attracted considerable criticism from Western countries. Concerned at what they perceive as China's attempt to transform the international economic order, Western countries have urged China's project partners to adopt caution in their dealings with the Asian giant. In 2021, in a concerted counter-challenge to the BRI, and, by extension, to thwart China's ambitious plan 'to build a new world order replacing the US-led international system' (Maçães 2018: 5), the G7 countries launched their global infrastructure initiative, the ‘Build Back Better World’ (B3W).

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[1] The Belt and the Road refers to the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road'. The BRI covers sixty-five countries and reaches more than 60 per cent of the global population, accounting for nearly a third of global GDP and global merchandise trade (Alon et al. 2018: 2).

[2] Also known as China's 'Going Out' policy, this strategy promoted outbound investment in energy and transportation projects in Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. It was intended as an important measure to further China's opening up (Shambaugh 2013: 175).

Alongside the intense international competition and a changing geopolitical landscape, several documentary films examining China’s infrastructure projects have been produced; these include the China Central Television Station’s *China’s Mega Projects* series (2012), the Free Documentary Channel’s *China’s Massive Infrastructure Initiative* (2018) and the Deutsche Welle’s *The New Silk Road* (2019). This chapter discusses this new genre which pivots on some economic and human outcomes of the Chinese state’s infrastructure projects. It focuses specifically on two documentaries about China’s first and most iconic infrastructure project on the African continent, the Tanzania–Zambia Railway (TAZARA): the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary *African Railway* (2010) and a documentary made by a Chinese filmmaker, *TAZARA: A Journey without an End* (2018; hereafter, *Journey without an End*).

Documenting the TAZARA project at a time when China increasingly plays a major role in Africa’s economic development is by no means an accident, but rather, a deliberate choice. Constructed between 1970 and 1975, the 1,860-kilometre TAZARA rail line, which links the Copperbelt of Zambia to the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam, was the precursor to China’s twenty-first-century African megaprojects. Conceived by Presidents Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, the TAZARA project was envisioned as a pan-African project that would end the ‘Balkanisation’ of colonial spheres of influence, while breaking Tanzanian and Zambian dependence on the transportation systems of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the South. Following unsuccessful approaches for financial assistance to Western and Soviet Union donors, China formally agreed to finance the project with a thirty-year interest-free loan in 1967; later, China also supplied resource inputs by way of equipment and workforce to help the construction of the TAZARA.[3] Known as the ‘Great Uhuru Railway’ (Freedom Railway) on completion, the TAZARA was the most visible symbol of Sino–African relations during the Cold War. It also exemplifies China’s distinctive ‘no strings attached’ approach to development cooperation,[4] which continues to characterize China’s strategic geopolitical development relations with the Global South today.

Since promoting China–Africa economic and trade cooperation is a core element of implementing the BRI, it is no surprise that China has made massive investments in financing and building major transport infrastructure projects, particularly railways, in Africa. As early as 2010, China provided Nigeria, the most populous African country, with a $900m loan, in part to pay for a railway linking the capital, Abuja, to the northern city of Kaduna.[5] In the ensuing years, China financed and built sections of the 752.7-kilometre modern electrified Ethiopia–Djibouti railway,[6] constructed the $1.5bn Nairobi–Naivasha rail line in Kenya (Miriri 2019) and completed the Lagos–Ibadan railway connecting Nigeria's largest city with its inland communities (Li 2021). China's anti-hegemonic approach to development cooperation in Africa, one ostensibly based upon 'the principles of sincerity, real results, amity and good faith and the principles of pursuing the greater good and shared interests',[7] nevertheless drew strong critique from across Africa, Europe and the United States. China's detractors perceive and characterize the country's extensive presence in Africa as 'neocolonial', arguing that it plunders the continent's natural resources, displaces local industries and traps African countries into a dependency relationship.[8]

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[3] For a detailed historical account of the conception and construction of TAZARA during the Cold War, see the first half of Monson’s book on Africa’s freedom railway (2009).

[4] As China claims, its development aid centres on the real needs of the recipient countries and is thus distinguished from the coercive logic of Western aid. For detailed discussion on the Chinese official accounts of its development cooperation, see Tan-Mullins et al. (2010).

Such ongoing debates about the nature of China–Africa cooperation provide a discursive field that not only informs policy, but also invites and facilitates competing media representations of China's infrastructure investment in Africa, into dialogue with each other. In what follows, I will explore the dialogical relationship between *African Railway* (dir. Sean Langan 2010) and *Journey without an End* (dir. Zhang Yong 2018) by examining their respective narrative and aesthetic strategies. As my analysis will show, the two directors' positionalities are significant in shaping their creative processes of documentary filmmaking. Their different representations of the TAZARA railway and its people reveal contesting discourses of geopolitical challenges posed by China's increased collaboration with Africa. More importantly, these representations are manifestations of the unfolding reconfiguration of the geopolitics of knowledge production.

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[5] David Smith and agencies, 'China Says Booming Trade with Africa Is Transforming Continent', *The Guardian*, 23 December 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/23/china-africa-trade-record-transform (Accessed 1 August 2022).

[6] 'Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway Line Modernisation', *Railway Technology*, 1 October 2020, https://www.railway- technology.com/projects/ethiopia-djibouti-railway-line-modernisation/.

[7] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals', November 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202111/t20211126_10453904.html.

[8] Such criticisms appear in public debates and scholarly publications including Mark Langan's *Neo-Colonialism and the Poverty of 'Development' in Africa* (2018).

African Railway: The politics of framing

Featured as a part of the *Wonderful Africa* season on BBC Four in the lead-up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa (Whitelaw 2010), the television documentary *African Railway* (2010) centres on the TAZARA, a bi-national railway linking Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) states to Eastern Africa's seaport of Dar es Salaam. But the documentary adds an ironic twist to the celebratory tone of the BBC's 'Wonderful Africa' due to its intense focus on the pathetic state of TAZARA, and its explicit questioning of whether the railway could transport hundreds of FIFA fans to South Africa in time for the start of the games. In essence, *African Railway* is an investigative documentary about TAZARA in crisis, stamped with the director's personal filmmaking style.

Before *African Railway*, Langan had made his name as a documentary director in the highly volatile war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan for BBC programmes. His back catalogues, such as *Langan Behind the Lines* (2001), *Mission Accomplished: Langan in Iraq* (2004) and *Fighting the Taliban* (2007), draw on interviews, personal reflections and a 'confessional' camera style, to bring 'a much-needed humanity and understanding to areas of conflict' (Lee-Wright 2010: 25). His work has won him many accolades, including a Grierson Award and a Rory Peck Award. Trained initially as a print journalist, Langan is inclined to position himself as 'a journalist with a camera', rather than a documentarian (Baker 2006: 193). His approach to documentary filmmaking is highly personalized, valuing both 'storytelling' and 'truth-seeking'. According to Langan, his motivation for making documentary film is kindled when he encounters a story with which he can connect. While making his first documentary, *Nightmare in Paradise* (1998), a successful video diary special for BBC2, Langan had an epiphany: if he could find a story with which he could personally become involved, his audience would be drawn to his documentary. A guiding principle driving his documentary making is that it seeks 'some kind of truth'; his personal involvement, Langan believes, assures that his films are more honest, authentic and closer to the truth (Baker 2006: 199).

Against this backcloth, it is not difficult to understand why Langan took on *African Railway* as his first film project following his 2008 release from captivity by Taliban kidnappers. The subject matter may seem humdrum for a documentary filmmaker who 'love[s] the excitement and adventure, and living life on the edge' (Davies 2008). Yet, news headlines such as 'TAZARA on the Brink of Collapse' and 'Save the "Uhuru Railway" From Collapse'[9] may have provided insistent prompts to relate a gripping story and reveal the true origin of TAZARA's financial crisis. In the opening sequence of *African Railway*, Langan explains his purpose in making the documentary:

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[9] These headlines were featured in *Lusaka Times* (29 October 2008) and *This Day* (31 October 2008) respectively.

> Completed in 1975, TAZARA was China's first development project in Africa, a new kind of foreign investment based on mutual benefit, as Chairman Mao called it, instead of colonial plunder. Whereas China's interests in Africa have grown massively, Africa's freedom railway has struggled to survive. At the end of the last year, TAZARA was on the brink of collapse, and I wanted to find out why.

In addition to affirming the filmmaker's commitment to 'seeking some kind of truth', this statement represents a clear illustration of framing, which journalist and media scholar Stephen D. Reese describes as 'an exercise of power, a dynamic process that is larger than the manifest content' (2018, xiv). In linking China's growing presence in Africa and TAZARA's financial crisis in one breath, Langan not only frames his investigation in such a way that it insinuates a causal connection between the two, but he also questions China's self-proclaimed objective to secure equal and mutually beneficial cooperation. This framing functions as an effective organising principle threading through the myriad footage shot by Langan, and which eventually becomes a coherent dramatic narrative about Africa's freedom railway.

Consistent with his previous documentaries, which take the adventures of his travels as the narrative, *African Railway* is structured around Langan's journey along the TAZARA railway line, and his endeavours to solicit the perspectives of various people involved with the TAZARA on the railway's operation and management. It also demonstrates Langan's trademark style: in addition to recording whatever he observes, he holds his camera at arm's length so that he can 'swivel the lens to capture his own comments, reactions and laconic asides' (Lee-Wright 2010: 25). The first part of *African Railway* documents Langan's round-trip train journey from Dar es Salaam station (Tanzania) to Kapiri Mposhi (Zambia), capturing slices of the everyday lives of the people he sees. In some respects, Langan's representations of the countries he travels through rehearse tired and clichéd Western portrayals of Africa. Binyavanga Wainaina has wittily satirized these colonial remnants of empire in 'How to Write about Africa', his well-known essay. For instance, soon after boarding the Mukuba passenger train, Lagan crosscuts from scenes of a choir of passengers, joyously singing away, apparently oblivious to their discomfort wedged tightly together in a packed third-class carriage, to one in which elephants and zebras roam freely outside the train carriage. Later, the filmmaker narrates to the audience that although the number of passenger trains has been cut from six to two each week, the TAZARA continues to

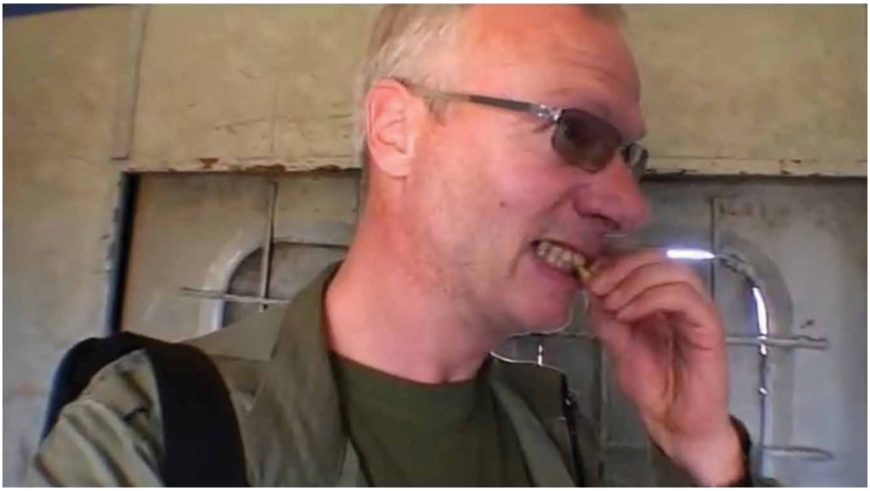

FIGURE 3.1 *Langan braces himself to taste a fried caterpillar, 2010.* African Railway *directed by Sean Langan © Renegade Pictures (UK) Limited MMX 2010. All rights reserved.*

provide a lifeline for local farmers and traders who depend on its services to transport everything from caterpillars to crops, kitchenware to livestock. To drive home his point, Langan reserves the close-up shots for a basket of fried caterpillars destined for sale at market, but he also devotes considerable amount of screen time to filming himself as he 'braces' himself before taking a wary taste of this 'exotic' African snack (Figure 3.1). Aside from reiterating weary essentialist tropes of 'how Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls, and eat things no other humans eat' (Wainaina 2019), Langan seamlessly introduces a new 'element' of Africa dear to Western media: China's growing influence. In a first-class sleeper compartment, he enjoys a nice chat with a friendly young Chinese highway construction worker stationed in Africa. In another sleeper compartment, he acquaints himself with some Zambian traders, just returned from Beijing with cheap goods they mean to sell in their home country. Though living in a portentous time, an elderly woman trader – a former politician – speaks of her support for former President Kaunda's government, while lamenting the rampant corruption of the current administration. This will later prove to be a subtly pervasive yet important theme threaded through the narrative of *African Railway*.

The dysfunctional state of the TAZARA line network is revealed when Langan makes the return trip from Kapiri Mposhi to Dar es Salaam. The train's progress is halted twice – first for four hours by what a repairman claims is but a 'minor problem' with the wheels in a first-class carriage, and then later, when a goods train is derailed, the train is stuck, unable to go anywhere, for twenty long and stiflingly hot hours. These are the moments when the rhythm of the documentary also slows down, as Langan brings his camera closer to the railway workers with whom he strikes up conversations, in search of more information for his documentary. The causes of the delays, as revealed by these workers, seem woeful and even ridiculous. For instance, Langan's train driver explains that it is not clear just how long passengers will have to wait before the train can be on its way again; the train is bereft of any means to communicate with the accident site, and derailments often happen because of failure to carry out regular and proper maintenance. To offer viewers an intimate perspective of the driver and his work, Langan enters the driver's compartment for a chat. Here he demonstrates his unusual ability to capture an ironic moment: a close-up shot of the odometer's hands pointing between 25 and 30 km/h, even though the train is stationary. With a sense of resigned amusement, the driver and his assistant admit that the indicated speed is actually faster than the train can generally reach, and moreover, that the dysfunctional odometer means that they must estimate the train's speed by timing the passing of telephone poles planted at intervals along the rail line (Figure 3.2).

This scene is echoed by another ironic standstill moment later in the documentary: Langan and a maintenance crew ride a maintenance trolley out to the Selous Game Reserve to repair a section of railway track, but they themselves are soon stranded in a broken-down trolley. A close-up shot of a uniformed rail worker labouring determinedly to restart the trolley is juxtaposed with a long shot of an elephant wandering leisurely across the

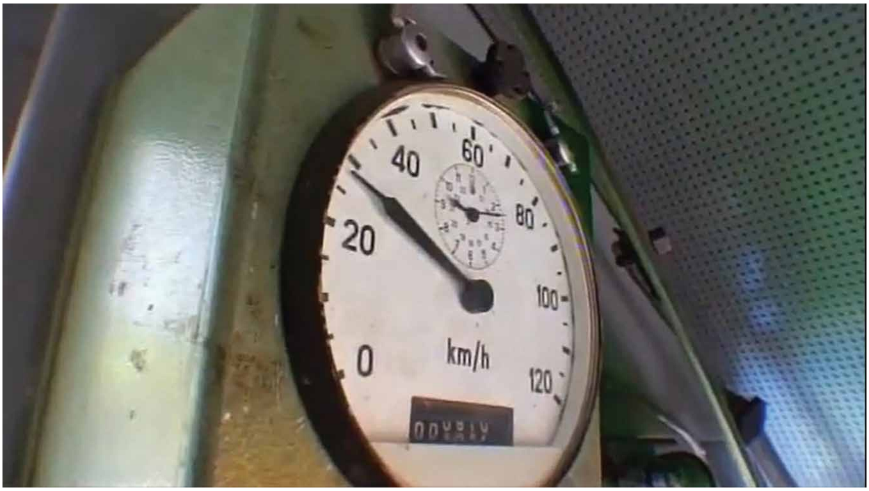

FIGURE 3.2 *Odometer points around 30 km/h while the train stands still, 2010.* African Railway *directed by Sean Langan © Renegade Pictures (UK) Limited MMX 2010. All rights reserved.*

nearby railway tracks, adding additional humour to Langan's comment: 'when the maintenance trolly is broken-down, you know the railway is in trouble'. These visual representations – the odometer, the trolley – of 'things getting stuck' become potent symbols for the state of the TAZARA.

As exposed by *African Railway*, the many problems besetting TAZARA are alarming. However, it is important to note that Langan's truth-seeking endeavour, the kinds of questions he asks and his on-the-spot comments are heavily influenced by his positionality within the textual and social worlds. Introducing himself as a journalist from the BBC, a world-renowned broadcasting corporation, Langan establishes an authority that quickly invites respect and cooperation on the part of his interviewees. This privileged position – a white middle-class male from the Global North, employee of a world-renowned media institution – bolsters Langan's credibility and confidence when interacting with rail workers, even though he has limited knowledge of trains and railway operations. At the outset of his train journey, Langan confesses, 'To be honest, everything I know about trains I've got from *Thomas the Tank Engine*.' As a popular British children's book and television series, *Thomas the Tank Engine* (aka *Thomas and Friends*) revolves around Thomas, the main character, an animated steam engine and his friends, other trains toiling away on the Isle of Sodor, which 'seems to be forever caught in British colonial times' (Slyke 2014). Whereas it is hard to tell whether Langan's constant reference to *Thomas the Tank Engine* is indicative of his unconscious nostalgia for Britain's imperial past, his attempt to fit his observations of the train operations and the workmen's efforts within an epistemological framework that is familiar and comfortable for him is apparent. A careful viewer will notice that in his interviews with the manager of the Kapiri Mposhi station and the traffic manager at the TAZARA Head Office, Langan makes an intertextual reference to two other key characters in *Thomas the Tank Engine*, the 'Station Master' and the 'Fat Controller'.

Unfortunately, Langan's limited knowledge of train operations leads to an insensitive and even patronizing rendering of the events captured and recorded by the camera. Take, for instance, the scene where the TAZARA traffic manager explains to Langan how his team manages train operations despite limited resources. Controllers in this office lack the means to contact train drivers directly, and must use a handwritten Train Working Diagram to track trains. Hearing this, Langan speaks to the traffic manager, 'Normally, I imagine in control offices you would see those red lights, the old-fashioned ones …. Even the fat controller in *Thomas the Tank Engine* had one of those [centralised train control] systems.' Holding the image in British popular cultural representation of train operation as a universal norm, Langan implicitly suggests that the many delays in the TAZARA network are owed to a culture of 'backward' working methods, combined with inadequate working conditions in the control room. The traffic manager remains quite optimistic about the operations in the control room, which, he counters Langan's beliefs, are, in his views, quite adequate and suitable, considering the available resources. Langan seems oblivious to the rail workers' pride in their work, as evidenced by the comment with which he concludes this scene: 'TAZARA was clearly not a functioning railway, and control room felt more like a comedy of errors.'

Langan's positionality determines his selection of interviewees and his spontaneous judgement; it also conditions his overall framing of the TAZARA crisis as but one of the consequences of China's relentless quests for the vast continent's wealth of resources. Despite the visually prominent position occupied by the TAZARA railroad, *African Railway* is in fact driven by Langan's inquisitive concern about China's aims for global power. For example, Langan constantly reminds the audience of China's invisible yet pervasive presence during his train journey. When he stops by the Kapiri Mposhi station, he requests that the station master show him the goods yard. A series of unsteady long shots show, lying on the ground, a large number of pallets stacked high with an estimated several million dollars' worth of copper, just sitting there, in an abandoned locomotive park. Langan shares his thoughts directly to camera: 'This is what it is all about, the copper. This is why the railway, TAZARA, was built by the Chinese: to get the copper out of Zambia' (Figure 3.3). Later in the film when his passenger train is held up en route to Dar es Salaam, Langan films nearby goods trains, similarly loaded with millions of dollars' worth of copper. His voiceover informs the audience that those trains have

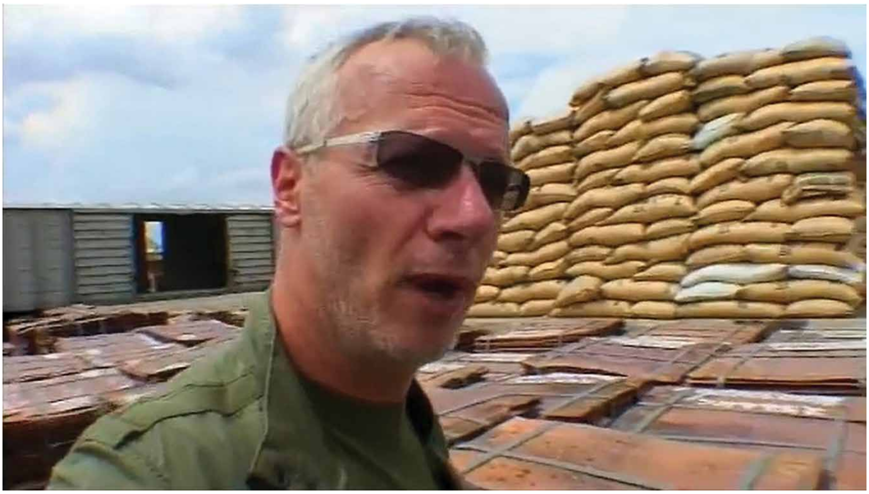

FIGURE 3.3 *Langan talks to the camera with pallets of copper in the background, 2010.* African Railway *directed by Sean Langan © Renegade Pictures (UK) Limited MMX 2010. All rights reserved.*

been stranded for two days, and tells viewers that the workers he spoke to blamed mismanagement and corruption for these operational failures. These segments effectively construct the documentary's narrative tension around the contradiction between Zambia's great economic potential and its severely underfunded and mismanaged railroad artery.

The most dramatic moments of *African Railway* are reserved for Langan's search for Chinese railway experts at the TAZARA Head Office, 'the heart of TAZARA's operation'. Several sequences involving the Chinese advisors are captured from a hidden camera, judging by the blurred and shaky footage. One such sequence is shot when Langan scurries past an office where the Chinese advisors are at work. Its clandestine nature is disclosed in the director's voiceover, 'I am whispering because they don't want me to film them. They are like the ghosts in the machine.' Langan's use of hidden camera is understandable when filming in dangerous war zones, but this technique in *African Railway* raises ethical questions. One of the most controversial scenes in the documentary occurs when Langan bumps into a group of Chinese experts, including Mr Miao, their team leader, whom Langan had previously experienced difficulty locating. From an unusual angle, Langan's hidden camera captures Mr Miao instructing his subordinate to tell the BBC journalist that he needed to obtain prior approval from the Economics Officer at the Chinese Embassy before conducting any interview (Figure 3.4). More than casting Chinese experts as taciturn and elusive figures, the voyeuristic gaze of the hidden camera functions as one mechanism whereby Langan

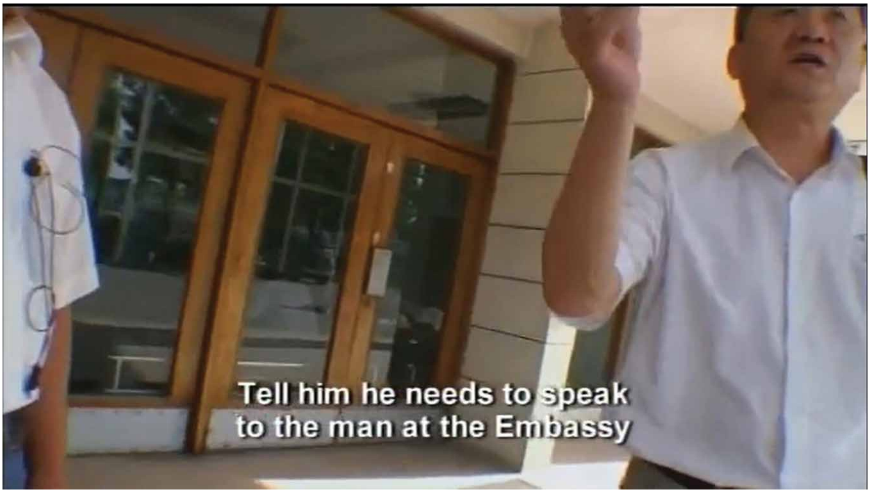
Tell him he needs to speak
to the man at the Embassy

FIGURE 3.4 *A hidden camera captures Chinese experts from an unusual angle, 2010.* African Railway *directed by Sean Langan © Renegade Pictures (UK) Limited MMX 2010. All rights reserved.*

deliberately insinuates himself into difficult situations merely to call attention to 'the China menace'.

Langan's implicit disapproval of the Chinese experts' reluctance to accept his interview soon develops into a negation of China's presence in Africa. Towards the end of *African Railway*, the filmmaker chooses to drive to Zambia's Copperbelt. As he approaches the Zambia–China Economic & Trade Cooperation Zone, numerous business signs written in Chinese characters appear. Conveniently linking China's growing presence in the area with the freshly announced news that the exclusive concession to operate TAZARA is to be awarded to a Chinese-owned railway company, Langan quickly concludes that 'Africa's freedom railway is about to become Chinese'. In *African Railway*, Langan's investigation into the TAZARA crisis amounts to his quest for 'the truth' about China's predatory presence in Africa, as is evidenced by his voiceover: 'No one at TAZARA had been willing to tell me the truth about the Chinese, but an accountant whom I met on the side of the road, who works for one of the major mining companies, is clear about their intentions.'

Deeply disappointed that some Zambians have to sell copper slags to make a living, the accountant vehemently criticizes 'China's investment' in Zambia as a resource grab, which facilitates the perpetuation of corruption, and impoverishes ordinary people. This accountant's direct address to the camera seemingly underlines Langan's 'truth' about the real reason behind China's African interests. In the end, the accountant's denouncement of the Chinese as neo-imperialists corroborates and confirms Langan's conclusion. In his perspective, China is no different from Africa's former colonizers, and the truth of the matter is that China's investments in the region will effectively stall the realization of Africa's quest for economic self-reliance and independence.

The story of TAZARA, as presented in *African Railway*, is a dramatic one with clearly identifiable victims, villains and winners. It portrays hardworking and underpaid African railroad workers as innocent victims of a failed management system in which the Chinese have a role to play. The message is brought home by Langan's deliberate use of a female train assistant's statement at the documentary's end: '[The train] feels like a prison. We work like slaves, and we don't rest. No overtime, no off days. We get paid less than 80 dollars per month.'

Journey without an End: A counter-hegemonic narrative

Because of its subject matter, *African Railway* aroused a great deal of interest among Chinese viewers since it was aired on BBC4 in 2010. Their reception of the documentary couldn't be more different from that of British viewers.

Paul Whitelaw, a movie reviewer for *The Scotsman*, readily accepts *African Railway*'s criticism of China as an exploiter of Africa's natural resources, 'just as foreign investors have done since time immemorial'. He is particularly drawn by the film's 'leisurely, wryly amusing' style and Langan's 'genial tenacity', marked by his ability to 'charm his way into various offices, carriages, homes and warehouses – full of rusting engines to provide a disbelieving overview of a crumbling edifice in the heart of paradise' (Whitelaw 2010).

In contrast, short reviews posted on China's popular movie review website, *Douban dianying*, reveal intense dissatisfaction with the documentary. 'This documentary is really good at slinging mud at China', 'a very biased BBC [production]', 'The interviewees didn't say much; the journalist has said it all,' and 'the BBC version has its agenda and vilifies the Freedom Railway.'[10] Aside from providing a brief insight of Chinese audiences' irritation with Langan's approach to documentary filmmaking, their comments reflect their marked wariness of Western media's negative and distorted representation of China.

The Chinese cinematic response to *African Railway* did not emerge until 2018, when Zhang Yong made his documentary *Journey without an End*. The original Chinese title of the documentary *Chongzou Tanzan tielu* (literally meaning, walking along the TAZARA rail line once again) clearly indicates the film's self-positioning as the interlocutor of Langan's documentary. Co-produced by the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University, Embassy of China in Tanzania and Yimu Afrowood, *Journey without an End* is Zhang's powerful critique of the hegemonic power of the BBC narrative.

As a Chinese director and scholar specializing in Africa–China media and communication studies,[11] Zhang frequently visits Africa for film and research purposes. During a field trip to Tanzania in 2016, he learnt about *African Railway* from Gou Haodong, China's Acting Ambassador to Tanzania. Like many other Chinese viewers, Zhang feels indignant about what many perceive as Langan's biased portrayal of China as a neo-colonizer. According to a news report published in Tanzania's *Daily News*, Zhang finds Langan's stealthy use of a hidden camera, unbeknown to any Chinese workers, which results in a partial depiction of the Chinese advisors, highly problematic. As he explains, 'filming a documentary without getting permission from the interviewee is disrespectful to that person and is also a violation of professional ethics'.[12] Another specific aspect of the BBC documentary that invites Zhang's criticism is 'a video clip in which an interviewed man claimed that the TAZARA railway "belonged to China".'[13] The clip mentioned here may possibly refer to a sequence where Langan quips that 'Africa's freedom railway is about to become Chinese', after he learns that China has obtained exclusive rights to operate the TAZARA. Zhang states, 'This is a huge joke because the railway ownership has always belonged to Tanzania and Zambia. The BBC documentary showed such an absurd mistake to the public, which makes one wonder about the BBC's unfriendly intention to smear China–Africa relations.'[14] At the time of writing, the official website of TAZARA specifies, 'The two Governments of the United Republic of Tanzania and the Republic of Zambia hold the shares of TAZARA on a joint and equal basis.'[15] Zhang's reaction reveals his concern about media powerhouse BBC's impact on the public reception of China–Africa relations. It also explains his motivation for making a cinematic response to Langan's film.

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[10] These reviews were posted by lddd (18 October 2012), Zhiyuan (10 April 2014), songsong (15 January 2015) and Kongxin luren (8 October 2018). https://movie.douban.com/subject/6506493/comments?sort=new_score&status=P (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

[11] At the time when making *TAZARA: A Journey without an End*, Zhang Yong was the executive director of the Center for African Film and TV Studies at the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University, China. Prior to making this documentary, he had co-directed with Hodan O. Abdi a six-episode documentary *Africans in China* in 2017.

Conceived as a counter-hegemonic intervention, *Journey without an End* aims to tell an international audience a compelling story of China–Africa relations. For the director, achieving this goal entails careful aesthetic triangulation. While countering the Western media's misrepresentation, Zhang needs to create a style distinct from the didacticism often associated with Chinese state media. He handles this challenge by devising a set of strategies at each stage of documentary production.

Well aware of the fact that Langan's one-man endeavour – Langan filmed, directed and produced *African Railway* – creates a rather one-dimensional story of the TAZARA, Zhang decided to form an international film crew to allow multiple perspectives to come into view.

In addition to hiring Chinese cinematographers, African music composers and Chinese–English translators, he invited a Danish researcher named Nielson Hahn to act as an interviewer in the documentary. Hahn makes a good candidate for this role because he specializes in central African studies, speaks Swahili and has previously worked in Tanzania. Zhang explains his choice of Nielson Hahn on the premise that 'the Nordic ideology is more neutral' than the hegemonic ideology spearheaded by other western European countries or the United States.[16] He believes that incorporating the perspective of an academic from Denmark in his documentary helps ensure impartiality. The team's make-up enables Zhang to interview a diverse group of people, including African political leaders, translators, former and current TAZARA railway workers, ordinary Africans, Chinese technicians and entrepreneurs, Mandarin teachers and tourists. Introducing diverse perspectives also distinguishes Zhang's documentary from China-centred narratives of the TAZARA produced by Chinese state media.[17]

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[12] *Global Times* journalist, 'TAZARA: A Journey without an End', *Daily News*, 11 September 2019. https://dailynews.co.tz/news/2019-11-085dc57ccb8bdc4.aspx (Accessed 4 May 2022).

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] TAZARA website http://tazarasite.com/about-us (Accessed 7 August 2022).

[16] *Global Times* journalist, 'TAZARA: A Journey without an End', *Daily News*, 11 September 2019.

Moreover, in contrast to the dramatic narrative arc of *African Railway*, Zhang's *Journey without an End* adopts an open-ended, episodic structure and a kaleidoscopic narrative. Composed of three, 24-minute segments, respectively entitled *A Railway of Friendship*, *The Life Line* and *Love for TAZARA*, Zhang's documentary fits easily into Chinese television's programming schedule. Each segment, with its distinct thematic focus, offers a specific counterpoint to Langan's 'truth' that China's involvement in the TAZARA impedes the African people's pursuit of freedom and independence.

Take, for instance, the first part of the documentary, *A Railway of Friendship*. Thematically, it addresses the early history of the TAZARA. Structurally, this segment echoes *African Railway* in its similar opening with a scene of the Dar es Salaam train station bustling with passengers, and then follows Hahn, the European academic, on a one-month trip on the TAZARA line to learn about the past and the present of the railway. However, the segment sets itself apart from *African Railway* by using omniscient voiceover narration and long shots of varying lengths to enhance the documentary realism. As the film opens, the camera shifts from a bird's eye shot of the solemn façade of TAZARA Terminus in Dar es Salaam[18] to a quick series of cuts that move from an outdoor railway platform to a spacious waiting room inside the station (Figure 3.5). Superimposed on these long shots is the voiceover narration:

> TAZARA's first station is here, at Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania. Both externally and internally, it resembles an old railway station in China. Since it was opened in July 1976, the station has seen an endless stream of passengers from neighbouring countries, and there are also people from Asian countries.

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[17] One such example is the 2019 China Central Television documentary *In a Place Far Away from Homeland* (Yuanli zuguo de difang), which focuses on Chinese workers despatched to build the TAZARA in the 1970s.

[18] According to architecture historian Ke Song (2022), TAZARA Terminus, which was designed by Chinese architects and built in 1976, demonstrates the presence of a Chinese modernism in architecture as an alternative approach to the Western post-war modernist trends.

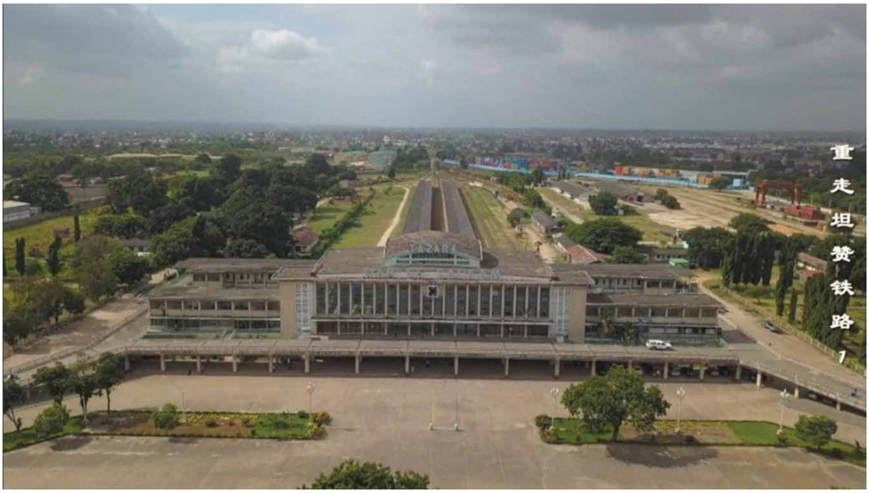

FIGURE 3.5 *Bird's-eye view of the Dar es Salaam station, 2019.* TAZARA: A Journey without an End *directed by Yong Zhang © China-Africa Film Studio Production, Yiwu 2019. All rights reserved.*

While setting an objective and detached tone for the documentary, the commentary immediately establishes the TAZARA as a point of connection between Africa and China, the past and the present, and a meeting place for people from all over the world.

More importantly, the segment dismantles the neocolonial paradigm employed in Langan's account of TAZARA's crisis by uncovering its much-obscured early history. It illuminates China's contribution to national independence and liberation projects in Africa, and highlights the hostility of Western powers towards the TAZARA project at its inception. This history is evoked through the director's use of lingering close-up shots and archival footage, and is reconstructed through reminiscences and life stories of various people who have worked, or currently work, for the TAZARA. A memorable scene occurs in a locomotive park at Yombo station, where Hahn chats with a railway station worker, to learn about the old, rusted wagons parked there. During their conversation, the camera cuts to a lingering close-up shot of a stone sleeper stamped with a 'Made in China' imprint in Chinese characters, a long shot of an entire engine, and a slow pan in a close-up of the body of a locomotive with the engraved serial number and the Chinese manufacturer's name, which can be clearly seen through the rust (Figure 3.6). The camera lingers upon the Chinese characters imprinted on the TAZARA, as the worker explains that these trains were used to carry tanks from Tanzania to Zambia in support of Zimbabwe's liberation struggles; their presence here evokes a

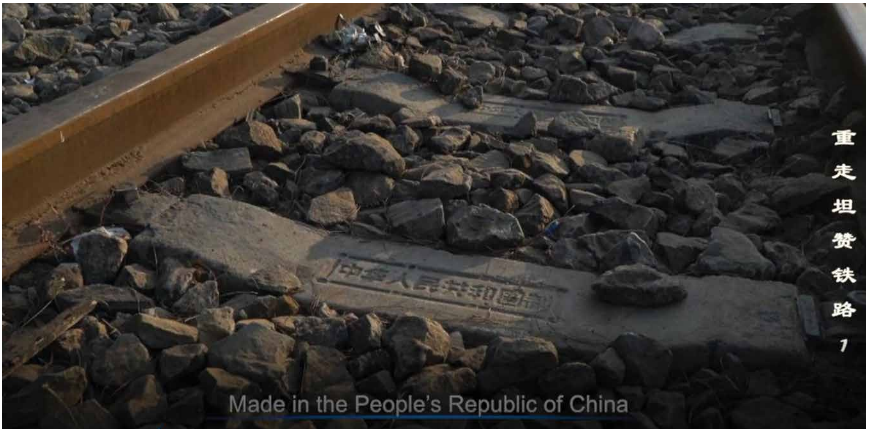

FIGURE 3.6 *A close-up shot of a stone sleeper with a 'Made in China' imprint under sunshine, 2019.* TAZARA: A Journey without an End *directed by Yong Zhang © China-Africa Film Studio Production, Yiwu 2019. All rights reserved.*

sense of respect for the past, as is well captured in Hahn's exclamation of amazement, 'This is a truly historical place!'

Another fascinating glimpse into TAZARA's bittersweet early period is evident in Hahn's interview with Evelyn Mwansa, Zambia's first female locomotive driver. Instead of rapidly cutting back and forth between the interviewer and the interviewee, Zhang mainly uses static medium shots and long takes to capture Mwansa's direct address to the camera. Dressed in bright-coloured African print attire with a red headscarf, the middle-aged Mwansa calmly recounts the suspicious happenings and her quick decisive action in speeding up her train as it passed through Chambeshi Bridge, just in time to avoid the death of her passengers by an exploding bomb. Mwansa's reminiscence amounts to far more than a tale of individual heroism; it is also a story about African peoples' efforts to safeguard the TAZARA, and its role in their liberation struggles and resistance against Western sabotage in the late 1970s. In bringing stories such as Mwansa's into public purview, Zhang contextualizes the historical and political significance of the TAZARA and exposes the skewed reporting of Western media on the TAZARA.

The second segment of the documentary, *The Life Line*, disrupts and challenges Langan's *African Railway* in its depiction of African life along the TAZARA railway. Hahn's encounters with train passengers, Maasai tribespeople, street and market vendors, small business owners and railway workers provide viewers with an excellent opportunity to learn about and appreciate the significance of the TAZARA in ordinary people's lives.

For example, for one travelling doctor, TAZARA remains the most affordable and reliable transport option, especially within the area of a tropical savanna climate; for the Maasai, the Indigenous people who inhabit the reserves along the railway line, the TAZARA enables them to develop a form of eco-tourism, and by extension, the means to improve their lives without harming the ecology; for a railway signalling and telecom technician at the Makambako station, the TAZARA provides him with a job that he likes, and he is especially happy that he has the railway just outside his home.

Whereas *African Railway* mostly associates the TAZARA with the helpless condition of poorly paid and overworked Africans, *The Life Line* sheds light on the economic opportunities that the TAZARA has brought to local people. Whether it is about a train platform teeming with hawkers at night, or a street outside a train station filled with vendors during the day, Zhang captures these everyday scenes with care to bring out the liveliness and energy evident in local communities (Figure 3.7). The episode featuring Flola Alom, a woman vendor at Mbeya station, illustrates very well the hopes that TAZARA has cultivated among local people. Over her husband's objection and despite much hard work, Flola is able to supplement her family income by selling roast bananas at Mbeya station. The omniscient voiceover brings home the message that TAZARA plays an important part in women's self-empowerment: 'More and more women along the routes are like Flola. They no longer rely entirely on their husbands for their family's income. Instead, they have the courage to make

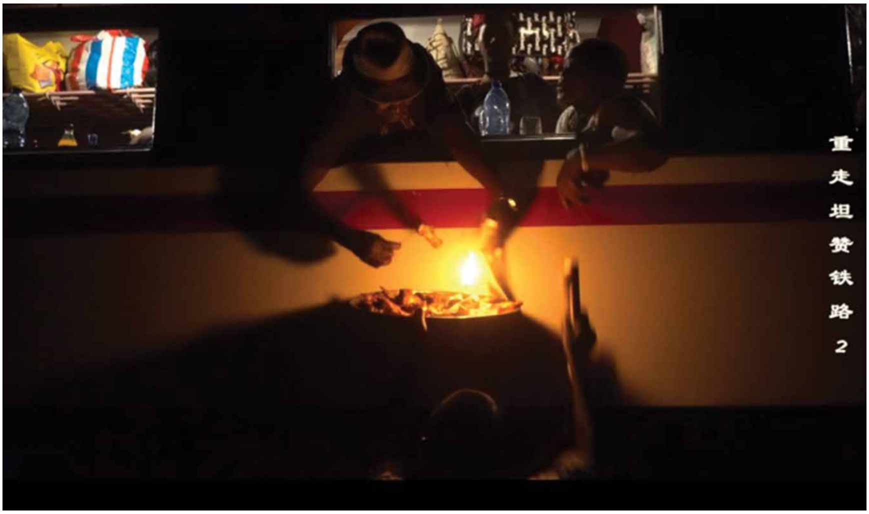

FIGURE 3.7 *A hawker sells snacks to TAZARA passengers on a train platform, 2019.* TAZARA: A Journey without an End *directed by Yong Zhang © China-Africa Film Studio Production, Yiwu 2019. All rights reserved.*

money with their own hands. For these African women, the railway represents freedom.'

Zhang's counternarrative to Langan's film is most evident in the documentary's third part, *Love for TAZARA*, which tackles head-on *African Railway*'s partial portrayal of Chinese railway experts. To counter Langan's characterization of Chinese advisors as a spectral presence – paradoxically hidden and yet omnipresent – Zhang uses direct address and observational filmmaking to afford the audience the freedom to construct their own understanding of two technical experts from China, an electrical engineer named Tian, and Feng, a mechanical engineer. Both are middle-aged Chinese men working at a sleeper factory in a remote village in Tanzania. The substantial direct address initiated by these men to the camera informs the viewer of their deep attachment to the factory and the Tanzanian people. Tian was sent by China to help Tanzania build its own concrete sleeper manufacturing facility. Having installed every piece of electrical equipment, Tian knows every detail of the wiring system, and considers the factory his home. Feng, who supervises sleeper production and provides technical guidance, is proud that the African workers recruited from farming communities have now acquired the necessary technological know-how, improved their income and gained respect from their fellow villagers. He says, 'This has fundamentally helped their lives. That's why they like us a lot.'

Direct and uninterrupted observations of their daily life recorded on camera further help personalize these Chinese experts. Tian befriends local children and endearingly calls his teenage acquaintances 'Rafiki' ('friends' in Swahili). At dusk, he routinely walks along the railway track, where he can access more reliable Wi-Fi signals, to contact his family in China. One of the most poignant moments in this documentary comes in a long take sequence featuring Feng strolling alone outside his resident camp while confessing his homesickness. The camera captures the vast blue sky and greenery, and on the soundtrack, we can hear his crunching footsteps on the grainy stone path. Even as he utters the words, 'whenever I get homesick, I'll sing songs', the man bursts out sobbing. As the camera keeps rolling, Feng covers his face with his right hand and turns aside to apologize (Figure 3.8). But he quickly calms down and explains that singing helps cure his boredom and benefits his health. Here, the camera's proximity to him and the uninterrupted film shot exemplify the documentary's openness to capture the accidental, spontaneous and momentary. Refraining from authorial intervention, this observational style provides a rare glimpse into the inner world of a Chinese technical expert. Thereby, it subtly builds an affective link between Feng and the viewer.

Because of its subject matter and non-didactic style, *Journey without an End* has aroused much interest among African audiences. The documentary

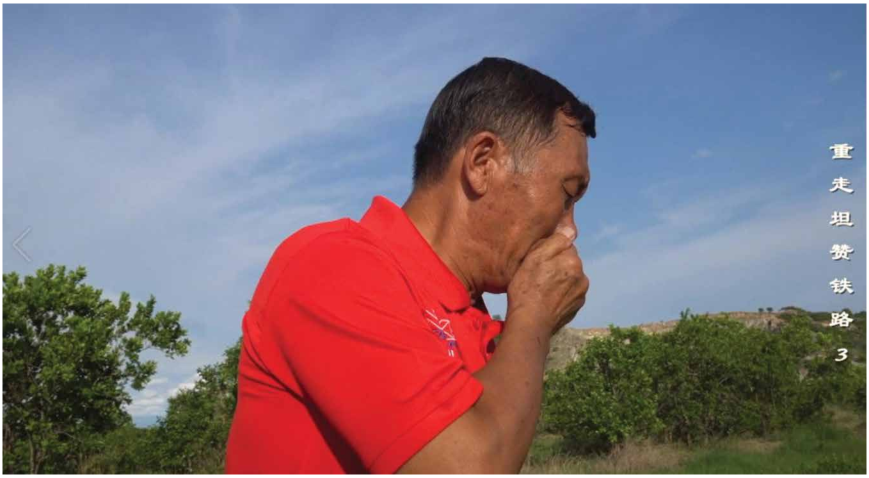

FIGURE 3.8 *The observational camera captures Feng's unexpected sobbing, 2019.* TAZARA: A Journey without an End *directed by Yong Zhang © China-Africa Film Studio Production, Yiwu 2019. All rights reserved.*

debuted in 2019 on China Global Television Network (CGTN), a state-run English-language news channel targeting a global audience and appeared on Channel 10 (Tanzania) in 2020. Before long, with the support of the Chinese embassy in Tanzania and Central China Television, it was translated into English, French, Swahili and Hausa versions and has subsequently functioned as a critical resource for public diplomacy. From 31 May to 27 June 2021, along with other Chinese documentaries, *Journey without an End* was featured in 'The Bond', a new TV quiz show co-created by Central China Television and African media to strengthen bonds of friendship between Africa and China. Broadcast on major African television networks, including Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Nigerian Television (NTA), Tanzanian Broadcasting Corporation (TBC) and Channel 10 Tz, as well as Sida digital TV network in twenty-eight African countries, the documentary has reached large numbers of African audiences.[19] Audience comments obtained by the quiz show host from a post-screening questionnaire reflect an overall positive reception. A viewer from Tanzania, who perceptively observes that Zhang's documentary mainly shows the Tanzanian side of the railway, asks the director to give more screening time to the railway section from Nakonde to Kapiri Mposhi, on the Zambian part of the line. A Nigerian viewer having some small knowledge of Chinese investments in Nigeria's railways before viewing Zhang's documentary expresses pleasant surprise at China's historical contribution to Africa's development, and expresses his wish that China would play an even more significant role in Nigeria's development.[20]

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[19] CCTV News, 'Nearly 200 Million Audiences! Audiences from 28 African Countries Have Been Attracted by the Chinese Communist Party History Quiz'. http://m.news.cctv.com/2021/06/30/ARTI3pBjpsnSeTS55Fu7n3s5210630.shtml (Accessed 6 May 2022).

Because of its success abroad, *Journey without an End* sets itself as an excellent example of 'telling China's stories well', a mandate Chinese President Xi Jinping placed onto media professionals to improve China's image in international communication, external publicity and thus strengthening China's narrative power (2013). In 2021, Zhang's documentary won the Outstanding Documentary Award for International Communication (Youxiu duiwai chuanbo jilupian), issued by the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee.[21]

Within China, *Journey without an End* met with a similarly warm reception. Since the documentary was made available on iQiyi, China's most popular Netflix-style streaming platform, and DocuChina, a digital platform dedicated to Chinese documentaries, it has attracted a niche audience. Movie reviews posted on *Douban dianying* reveal the documentary's educational values to young Chinese audiences. Some viewers learn about China's foreign aid project TAZARA for the first time. Others are impressed by the friendliness of the African interviewees and are delighted to discover that some speak fluent Chinese. Viewers who have watched both *African Railway* and *Journey without an End* exclaim that the distinctive cultural and ideological contexts give rise to such diametrically different narratives. They are thrilled that Zhang's documentary counters Western media's biased representation of China.[22]

Conclusion

The Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative, which promotes infrastructure investment and economic development, has initiated wide debates on a new Sino-centred global order in general, and China's growing presence in Africa, in particular. Sean Langan's and Zhang Yong's documentaries on TAZARA, China's first mega-infrastructure project in Africa, are simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of such an ongoing debate.

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[20] I would like to acknowledge the director Zhang Yong for providing me with post-screening audience survey notes.

[21] The Radio and Television Bureau of Zhejiang Province, '*TAZARA: A Journey without an End* and *He Zhizhang* Win the External Propaganda Award for Outstanding Documentary', https://gdj.zj.gov.cn/art/2021/12/31/art_1229288072_58458272.html (Accessed on 13 May 2022).

[22] See short movie reviews posted by Hanqing, Chuntian Yaa, Kanguo, and Kongxin luren on *Douban*. https://movie.douban.com/subject/30290638/comments?sort=new_score&status=P (Accessed on 30 April 2022).

As stated above, Langan's *African Railway* and Zhang's *Journey without an End* deal with the same subject matter, yet exhibit distinct film aesthetics and ideological positioning. Self-styled as 'a journalist with a camera', Langan is determined to expose some kind of 'truth' hidden behind the TAZARA's imminent collapse. Through carefully framing the TAZARA crisis, the filmmaker creates a coherent yet dramatic narrative that lays bare the many problems in TAZARA's operational management, fosters the audience's sympathy for hardworking ordinary Africans and questions China's ulterior motive for investing in the TAZARA. In a sense, the documentary rehashes the familiar argument that China is a neocolonial power and that China's economic cooperation with Africa is exploitative and predatory in nature. As it was broadcast on BBC4, Langan's documentary has the potential to considerably influence the public perception of a rising China.

Journey without an End is Chinese director Zhang Yong's confident response to the Western media powerhouse BBC's hegemonic narrative of the TAZARA. Although the TAZARA no longer faced imminent bankruptcy at the time of Zhang's filming, it was by no means free from financial worries. Despite the Chinese government's further investment in equipment and training and the substantial improvement in railway operations and general performance (Mumero 2012), the TAZARA had not yet been able to break even by 2019, when *Journey without an End* was released (Christopher 2020). Instead of treating the TAZARA merely as an infrastructure project that yields financial returns, Zhang approaches Africa's Freedom Railway as a material presence that is integral to the social fabric of local communities along the rail line. Purposely adopting an open structure and using a myriad of stories and memories shared by people connected with the TAZARA, *Journey without an End* paints a more optimistic picture of China–Africa relations in the past, present and future.

Considering that debate on the BRI's impact on Africa is triangulated among the West, China and Africa, African filmmakers' stories of the TAZARA, which are bound to provide new perspectives, are much needed and anticipated.

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4

Sino–South African film industry connections: A preliminary review

Mariagiulia Grassilli and Luke Robinson

Introduction

This chapter considers film industry – especially film festival and co-production – relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and South Africa, and aims to reflect on whether they represent the emergence of alternative networks that counterbalance traditional relationships routed through the Global North, or merely supplement and, in some cases, replicate the problems of those conventional connections. While contemporary film production and the festival circuit are structured such that African countries often rely on western European events, or Hollywood, both for investment and exposure, there exist historical precedents for alternative networks established to counterbalance these relationships, particularly between the former USSR and the so-called 'developing world'. The emergence of China as a direct economic competitor to the Global North in Africa raises the question of whether it can provide a meaningful alternative to Global North dominance of South Africa's 'screen worlds', here understood as the networks of festivals and film production, as well as the cinema that emerges from these relationships. Through an initial mapping of three key arenas – industry festivals, soft power events and co-productions – through which South Africa and China have explored film industry connections, we argue that, despite attempts at strengthening ties, current connections are both unstable and characterized as much by continued inequalities between the two countries as by a newly equitable relationship. While this reflects the intertwining of the film industry with broader national policies on both sides, it also reflects both the difficulty of replacing existing networks, and, arguably, the centrality of private enterprise in driving the growth of these relationships. In this context, this chapter concludes that it seems unlikely that the Chinese and South African film industries will establish networks that model alternative ways of interacting as distinct from those already in place between Europe, North America and the rest of the world.

China's media presence in Africa and film industry relations

Just as China's developing economic relationship with Africa has been the subject of discussion, so have its media connections. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the former often drives the latter, and thus we might expect the growing presence of Chinese capital in African markets to be accompanied by a growing Chinese media presence; it also reflects the centrality of the media industries to China's soft power drive globally, but in Africa in particular. However, this literature tends to focus on specific areas. There is an established literature on the presence of Chinese mass media in Africa, in particular China Central Television (CCTV, China's state television broadcaster), China Radio International (CRI, its audio equivalent) and Xinhua News Agency.[1] There is also a growing body of work on the representation of Chinese people in various African cinemas and popular culture, and vice versa (see e.g. Castillo 2021, Nardy, Coates and Coates 2021, Harrison, Yang and Moyo 2019, Thomas and Berry 2021). Films that have been extremely popular among local audiences, such as the South African-shot Chinese film *Wolf Warrior 2* (dir. Wu Jing 2017), have attracted considerable attention (see, e.g. Berry 2018, Galafa 2019, Guan and Hu 2021, Shi and Liu 2020), while work on the historical relationship between African audiences and Chinese cinemas is also beginning to emerge (e.g. van Standen 2017). Finally, there is work that explores the minor transnational and informal audiovisual flows between China and Africa, such as the Queer University videomaking workshops that the Chinese Queer University collective held in Zimbabwe (Bao 2020).

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[1] A good overview of some of this literature can be found in Jedlowski and Röschenthaler (2017).

As this brief overview suggests, though, little has actually been written on formal film industry relationships between the PRC and Africa. South Africa has one of the largest and most developed cinema industries on the continent; the potential for connections with the PRC in this regard is therefore clear. In addition, other emerging configurations – BRICS, for example, the acronym for the five 'emerging economies' of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – have specifically linked China and South Africa economically and politically in ways that suggest the possibility of emerging cinematic connections. This chapter therefore seeks to expand on existing work by exploring the emerging connections between the Chinese and South African film industries, with a particular focus on film festivals and co-productions.

At the same time, our attention is inevitably drawn back to an issue that dominates – directly or indirectly – much of the literature on China in Africa: neocolonialism. Writing on the PRC's presence in Africa either tends to frame China's activities as a new form of colonialism, with so-called 'debt trap' policies replicating the historical dynamics of the Global North's relationship with Africa and Asia, or represents them as a possible route to, if not undoing, at least balancing out that relationship via a new 'pole' in the global economy. In the writing on China's media presence in Africa, this debate plays out in distinct ways that reflect media-specific issues – for example, whether Chinese cinematic representations of Africans replicate or repudiate stereotypes associated with Western portrayals of the continent – but a fundamental concern remains whether this presence will ultimately reinforce or counterbalance the inequalities of a global system that has largely subordinated African interests at large to those of the Global North.

The same questions pertain to the global film industry, where similarly unequal dynamics exist. Notwithstanding the recent emergence of regional circuits and players, most A-list film festivals – those approved by the International Federation of Film Producers (FIAPF) for competitive features – are located in the Global North; so are the film markets and film funds attached to these events where potential film collaborations are broached and funding agreements explored. To paraphrase Marijke de Valck (2007), such events thus become the nodes through which films and filmmakers from much of Asia and Africa have historically had to pass in order to travel the international festival network and aspire to international sales, while relying on events like Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Rotterdam to screen, fund and market their films. This has potential consequences for the kinds of work produced in terms of form, themes and projected audience, as explored in writing on film funds (see e.g. Falicov 2016, Ross 2011). And yet, despite the colonial roots of such events, there have always been attempts to counter this structural imbalance. One good example is the Tashkent Festival of Asian and African Cinema, which, between 1968 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, served as a unique node connecting Second and Third World cinemas, and the directors who made these films (Djagalov and Salazkina 2016: 280). As China's film industry expands in size and significance, will it reinforce these existing inequalities, or establish itself as a counterbalance?

Our focus, argument and method

Against this backdrop, our chapter thus constitutes an initial exploration of the main stakeholders establishing networks between the film industries of South Africa and China. We begin our analysis by introducing the Chinese and South African film industries as they have developed and established themselves in the global arena of the film industry. This provides a context for thinking through why, in theory, both industries should be well suited to collaboration. We then map out the three arenas we have selected to explore the nature of these connections. The first of these is the industry-focused film festival; the second, the government-centred event; and the third, the international co-production. In all of these it is possible to trace some form of South Africa–China relationship, whether through the circulation of films, people or production proposals. However, as we then move on to assess these connections, their inequitable and unstable nature comes to the fore. South Africans in the industry largely view their relationship with China as an unequal one in which they are the subordinate party. We argue that this reflects the political nature of even business festivals in the PRC in particular, as well as the difficulty of replacing rather than supplementing the existing festival networks, and their nodes in the Global North. Only in documentary filmmaking, which has its own distinct festival networks, do connections appear to be developing reasonably systematically. However, in film production, these inequalities are reflected more clearly in racial hierarchies and issues of access. We argue that these then translate into the kinds of films produced, and the imaginary of their screen worlds, which often replicate long-standing racial stereotypes, particularly of Africans. This is not just a problem of government involvement, though, but also reflects the increasing centrality of private capital to these collaborations, even when they take place under the aegis of 'soft power'. Both are critical to shaping the festival and screen worlds of the Sino–South African relationship.

Before we start, we want to offer a few considerations on method and context. When we proposed this chapter for the collection, we were hoping to visit both South Africa and China to attend key festival events as participant observers, and conduct interviews with stakeholders. Then Covid-19 intervened. Unable to travel, we had to adjust our expectations. The research for this chapter is therefore based largely on publicly available material, both scholarly and from film industry and news publications. This is supplemented, however, by informal discussions and communication with key industry contacts. These individuals were contacted by email, telephone and video call, and were primarily based in South Africa, where people were easier to access. While this chapter attempts to map the emerging industry relationships between South Africa and China, there is therefore a particular focus on how these are perceived in the former. However, due to the sensitivity of the material, concerns about blowback, and in particular the issue of anti-Black racism among Chinese industry stakeholders, we have anonymized our contacts' contributions in text, in order to protect their identities.

China and South Africa: Contemporary film industry developments

The twenty-first century has seen the explosion of the Chinese film market. Following policy reforms in the 1990s, the government gradually allowed private capital and private production companies into the industry. The result was the rapid growth of a commercial entertainment cinema, reflected in the emergence of new genre forms such as the *hesuipian* (New Year's film), the blockbuster (*dapian*) and, increasingly, locally produced art cinema (*yishupian*). These developments were mirrored by a concomitant expansion in the domestic box office. In 2012, the PRC overtook Japan as the world's second largest gross box office; four years later, the number of domestic cinema screens officially exceeded that of the United States (Lee 2019: 298). In October 2020, ticket receipts officially surpassed those in North America for the first time. While many analysts had expected this transition to happen by 2022, it was accelerated by the differential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on both markets (Brzeski 2020).

Parallel to the emergence of a commercial domestic market, the Chinese film industry has also increased its presence overseas. Of course, even under Mao, China was not sealed to overseas cinema, with film weeks at home and abroad allowing for the circulation of film to politically friendly countries (Ma 2016). Moreover, independently produced film – in other words, cinema made outside the official system – has always historically relied to various degrees on overseas support, whether for production, distribution or exhibition.

However, the (re)emergence of a commercial entertainment industry has seen the expansion of popular Chinese films overseas. In particular, the industry has increasingly collaborated with foreign partners to produce films for both home and overseas markets. These have most regularly been other Asian production companies – in Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong in particular – but these relationships have also extended beyond the Asia-Pacific, notably to Hollywood and Europe.

While this development has partly been about generating new markets for Chinese products, it has also been political. Since 2007, the Chinese cultural industries – including cinema – have been an integral part of China's soft power strategy. Initially announced by then-President Hu Jintao, this strategy has been in part about reasserting government influence over cinema at home, through building a media culture that both reflects 'Chinese core values' and is popular with domestic audiences. But it has also been about exporting those values to audiences overseas. The aim here was quite explicitly to promote 'Chinese values' through popular culture in the way that the originator of the term soft power, Joseph Nye, understood Hollywood to be promoting American values around the world. This strategy was a response to both the popularity of Japanese and Korean popular culture inside and outside Asia, and the perception of continued American hegemony globally. The push to produce and promote certain Chinese cinematic products overseas cannot therefore always be disentangled from questions related to the PRC's geopolitical status, its perception of the broader inequalities of the global system, and its desire to establish itself as an alternative to Western (specifically, US) domination of global political and economic systems.

Although South Africa's film industry is one of the oldest in Africa, and indeed the world, it is only since the end of apartheid that its film industry has started to strategically position itself at international level. The industry is now one of the more established and commercially viable on the continent. It came to global attention when the film *Tsotsi* by Gavin Hood (South Africa 2005) won the Academy Award in 2006, after a strategic effort from the new South African government to have its film industry always present with new titles and establishing connections at international festivals. The latest research shows the industry contributes around R3.5 billion (*c.* 170mil GBP) a year to the country's economy, with excellent potential for growth and providing opportunities for employment in different sectors of the economy (National Film and Video Foundation n.d.a). In 2019 for instance, more than twenty South African films received a local cinema release. Unfortunately they claimed just R60 million of the R1.2 billion (*c.* 60mil GBP) taken at a local box office usually dominated by Hollywood fare (National Film and Video Foundation n.d.b: 6). The post-apartheid period has been a significant moment for the development of the South African film industry. The first film productions focused on the apartheid period, reclaiming history and memory. There were quite a few productions representing the resistance struggle during apartheid, how the new country was experiencing transition and the process undertaken by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. With strong direction from the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) – located within the Department of Arts and Culture, together with the Department of Trade and Industry – funding, tax incentives and networking were made available, whilst relationships were established, nationally and globally, for the film industry alongside TV productions by the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Efforts were focused on developing a national television culture reflecting and representative of the new voices of South Africa. One outcome of that was, for instance, the production of TV series which engaged youth, finally providing spaces for shared, inclusive representation. An example of such a series is *Yizo Yizo* (1994–2004), one of the first and most acclaimed TV series, set in Soweto and inner-city Johannesburg, and featuring local, non-professional, youth actors. This series screened in the Venice Film Festival in 2004, as part of the ten years after apartheid celebrations.

However, the last thirty years have also seen South Africa restructuring its film industry sector, widening its cinema and TV productions and positioning itself within the global context. International connections were made through participating at international festivals, investing in promotion and especially attracting international film production, filmmakers and actors to South Africa, including celebrities such as Samuel L. Jackson for *In My Country* (2004), Morgan Freeman in *Invictus* (2009) and Chiwetel Ejiofor for *Red Dust* (2004). This international film strategy has been influenced since the early 2000s by the very strong efforts of the NFVF and of key producers in South Africa to position themselves within the main international festivals: inviting global film industry professionals to South Africa – for instance, initially to the Cape Town World Cinema Film Festival, the Sithengi Film Market and then to the Durban International Film Festival – while being present with big delegations at the key film festivals, such as Cannes, Venice, Toronto and Berlin, with the aim of repositioning the South African film industry. At the same time, the very active work of the South African film commissions, especially the regional commissions in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, has also been significant in attracting international projects and global film productions. In fact, this has perhaps been the most lucrative form of production in post-apartheid South Africa. Many South African producers specialize in hosting such international productions by providing crews, finding locations and casting extras for clients. The film incentives, offered by the Department of Trade and Industry, allow visiting productions to claim money back for working in the country and have helped make South Africa one of the more attractive film destinations globally. Though independence offered a moment of potential transformation and redress, Moyer-Duncan (2020) laments the failure of South Africa to develop a cinema committed to the aspirant 'Rainbow Nation', with the persistence of film cultures rooted in apartheid racial division suggesting a 'refragmentation'. Some independent or 'art-house' films are being made by Black South Africans with 'the potential to foster social cohesion and strengthen democracy in line with the government's professed vision for a national cinema' (2020: 75). However these films have not always found nationwide distribution.

New avenues for South African film may be appearing via streaming services through the new digital platforms such as Netflix, M-Net, Multichoice and Showmax, which are now investing significantly in content in South Africa.[2] If films about South Africa once focused on apartheid, a new generation of directors and producers then started to make hits about modern life and love for global audiences. Both Netflix and its South Africa-based counterpart, Showmax, are investing in productions by African filmmakers in an attempt to attract audiences across the continent. *Queen Sono* (2020) by Kagiso Lediga – a spy action drama – is the first Netflix South African TV Production. *Blood Psalms* (2022) by Jahmil X. T. Qubeka is the most recent production by Showmax: an Afrofuturist fantasy drama set in ancient Africa, where a young princess battles a world-ending prophecy to navigate her people through ancient curses, long-standing tribal vendettas and the wrath of the gods.

South Africa has, however, always positioned itself beyond the European dependency network in comparison to other African countries, some of which have developed their film industry and productions in tandem with France, while also relying on international funds from northern European countries such as Norway, Germany and Belgium. The NFVF has actually explicitly promoted a strategy of global connections, including links with Hollywood and Canada, but also with Australia as an important site for industry relations and co-productions. Furthermore, South-South relationships with countries such as Brazil, India and China have been explored. At the same time there is an increasing focus on inter-African film industry relations, promoting cultural exchange and strengthening dynamics for collaboration, networking and partnerships within the sector, aiming for a borderless Africa. This is part of the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063 implementation plans and the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance.[3]

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[2] Since the early 2000s, M-Net (an abbreviation of Electronic Media Network) – a subscription television channel established by multimedia company Naspers in 1986 that began digital broadcasting via satellite to the rest of Africa though its sister company MultiChoice – has been engaged in film production and distribution in South Africa (De Beer and Swanepoel 1998). Showmax is an SVOD service offering African and non-African content in thirty-six African countries as well as in several non-African countries such as Poland and the United Kingdom (launched in 2015 from South Africa also as a brand of Naspers). It has a large catalogue of Afrikaans language content as well as content in Indigenous South African languages, and it is also investing a great deal in licensing and commissioning content in new contexts, such as Kenya (Dovey 2018).

In many ways, the interests of the South African and Chinese film industries thus complement one another. Both are expanding industries; both have a long history, but also limited experience of building global relationships and overseas markets; and both are seeking to establish connections that are not overdetermined by colonial relationships or great power politics. Their broader economic relationship is also strengthening. South Africa has become one of the PRC's key sites of investment. In 2021, Chinese investment in South Africa reached USD280 million, including USD130 million in non-financial investment and USD150 million in financial investment. Conversely, South Africa is an important trading partner of China, with bilateral trade accounting for more than one-fifth of the total China–Africa trade. In 2021, the total trade volume between China and South Africa reached USD54.35 billion, with a year-on-year growth of 50.7 per cent (Xinhua 2021). Indeed, Chinese investments under President Xi Jinping were seen by President Cyril Ramaphosa as an opportunity to kick-start economic growth after a decade of stagnation (Winning 2018). China's preference for South Africa, like much foreign investment in the country, reflects the country's sophisticated, large, liquid and well-regulated financial markets. Several advantages for Chinese business people investing in South Africa include the country's status as Africa's second largest economy (after Nigeria), the most diversified economy on the continent, its abundant natural resources, and particularly its mineral wealth and large presence of multinational companies, many of whom view South Africa as their headquarters in Africa (Wang 2020). These considerations thus mirror and influence those for investments specifically in the film industry, and suggest that connections between the two countries would be in their mutual self-interest. In order to assess the extent of these connections, then, we will next explore three key sites that provide opportunities for the exhibition and circulation of films from both countries, as well as spaces in which professional industrial relationships may be established. These are industry-focused film festivals, soft power events and transnational co-productions.

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[3] In 2021, the KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission (KZNFC), under the auspices of the Africa Month Programme, hosted a roundtable discussion on the state of film in Africa, post Covid-19. According to the Commission's CEO, this was with the intent of 'sparking a continued intra-Africa countries film conversation with the possibility of establishing a United Africa Film Festival, which would be owned by the continent's member states and held every year during Africa Month, using the BRICS film festival as a model' (Bizcommunity.com 2021).

Key sites of exchange: Industry-focused film festivals, government-centred events and transnational co-productions industry-focused film festivals

Major film industry-focused international film festivals are one key site where contact between the Chinese and South African film industries can take place, whether through the screening of films, or via participation in associated events like film markets or co-production forums. We use the term 'industry-focused' to suggest festivals that include the film industry among their primary stakeholders. This term is roughly analogous to that of the 'business festival', coined by Mark Peranson (2008), as these events are identifiable not least by their film markets, where the business of the industry is executed. This is true even in the PRC, where all official film festivals must be approved by the government. The Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) remains the primary industry-focused international event in China. The country's only A-list film festival, SIFF was established in 1993, and has become a key site for engagements between the Chinese and overseas film industries. In 2007 the festival established both its film market and its co-production forums. One of these, Pitch and Catch, focuses on global co-productions, and has promoted itself as the gateway to the Chinese film market for overseas investors and filmmakers looking for local partners. More recently, however, the Beijing International Film Festival, which also has its own film market, has emerged to challenge SIFF's position within the Chinese festival world. In addition, while both of these events are still primarily focused on narrative feature film, the Guangzhou-based GZDOC (Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival) has established itself as the key business festival for non-fiction film in China. This festival also includes forums where domestic and international filmmakers and funders can meet, greet and pitch. These events are arguably the three primary spaces for industry interaction in the PRC.

South African filmmakers have started to participate in these forums in China and have used them as spaces in which they try to lobby for Chinese–South African co-productions and other kinds of filmmaking collaboration. Spier Films is a production company founded by Michael Auret, based between South Africa and the UK. Auret is interested in establishing links between the South African film industry and other film industries around the world. He has a current project called *The Navigator*, about Zheng He, the Ming Dynasty explorer who sailed the east coast of Africa. Envisaged as a Zhang Yimou-style period drama, Auret has used SIFF as a forum to pitch this feature to Chinese investors, although, as communicated to us in a phone conversation, he is currently still looking for partnerships.

In South Africa, the Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) is South Africa's longest running and most established film festival. It is the festival that stimulates the growth of the film industry, its connections and the global interactions. DIFF proactively promotes the development of the African film industry and provides a strategic exhibition platform for local products alongside international films within a professionally implemented and reputable cultural experience. Based in KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, and presented by the Centre for Creative Arts at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, DIFF is widely regarded as one of the leading film festivals on the African continent and a vital event on the international film calendar. It contributes to expanding filmmaker networks, attracts local and international media, creates public awareness of South African and African cinemas, and promotes and celebrates African cinema that highlights the possibilities of local film production and stimulates the growth of the film industry.[4]

DIFF has three principal strands: the seminar and workshop component to stimulate industry development, a community outreach programme to service marginalized audiences, and the celebration of cinema through the exhibition of films. It also has pitch forums, discussions, and training and talent labs to provide opportunities for international film industry interactions. At the 2020 edition, China participated in different strands, and notably GZDOC gave one of the awards: the Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival Special GZDOC Invitation went to five film projects which were showcased at the Durban Film Mart 2020, providing them with the opportunity to participate in the virtual GZDOC Pitch Session in 2021. One of these, Sara Gouvelar and Natalie Geyser's *The House Is Burning* – a coming-of-age story about a climate activist in Khayelitsha – was a South African project; the others were from Morocco, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique (Callsheet 2020). This is one example of how, through pitching and training, relationships are harvested and made between festivals and film industries.

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[4] For an historical perspective and further analysis of DIFF, see Dovey (2015).

Government-centred events

In contrast to A-list and large-scale industry events such as SIFF or GZDOC, government-centred events have more explicitly political roots. They are often examples of what Dina Iordanova (2017) has described as cultural diplomacy film festivals. These festivals may vary in size and focus, but their primary aim is often to strengthen relationships between the governments involved in the organization of such events, or to cultivate the image of these governments for the overseas viewer. Inevitably, these festivals are therefore implicated in soft power strategies. Famously proposed by Joseph Nye (2004: x) as the ability to achieve political goals through the attractiveness of one's culture and values rather than through military coercion or payment, the frequently articulated desire of the Chinese state to project its values globally has rendered the question of Chinese soft power controversial. As Song Hwee Lim (2021: 27–9) notes, central government's close involvement with film production, combined with the fact that China's soft power activities are often intertwined with more traditionally 'hard' ones, can make it difficult to separate soft power from propaganda (if, indeed, the two are distinct). But, to invoke Alessandro Jedlowski and Ute Röschenthaler (2017: 2), when viewing China–Africa relations through the lens of soft power, it is also important not to assume an exclusively top-down dynamic, overlook the role and attitudes of local agents involved in this process, and ignore the particularities of what is produced on the ground, whether that be texts, events or audience responses. The extent to which these government-centred events are driven from the top down by official government stakeholders, or develop more organically through the enthusiasm of individuals lower down the ladder, may vary from case to case, and should be investigated on this basis. Distinct stakeholder configuration may in turn shape the practices of these festivals, with consequences for their soft power effects.

A key example of the 'soft power' relationship between China and South Africa is the BRICS Film Festival. Unlike most contemporary industry festivals, this is a peripatetic event that emerged out of the BRICS summit, held annually between the five BRICS countries since 2009. The festival was initiated in 2016 to showcase films from the five nations, and circulates in turn through the BRICS countries, with a different location every year. The first event took place in New Delhi in September 2016, where twenty films, four from each country, were screened. From there, subsequent iterations took place in China (Chengdu 2017), South Africa (Durban 2018), Brazil (Rio de Janeiro 2019) and Russia (Moscow 2020, alongside the Moscow International Film Festival), before returning to India again (2021, alongside the 52nd International Film Festival of India in Goa, in hybrid format). The event has since continued to alternate between member countries.

The BRICS festival is an example of an event with considerable high-level government involvement. Each iteration has involved the exchange of delegations between the participant countries; a South African delegation was sent to Chengdu, and a Chinese delegation reciprocated by coming to Durban. Furthermore, the organizing committee for the 2017 edition in Chengdu, for example, was headed by Nie Chenxi, head of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), then the primary government regulator of the film industry (Sarkar and Xia 2017). This high level of government support may explain the extension of the festival's remit to include film production, thus encouraging industrial cooperation and trade alliances with institutional involvement in culture, while also focusing on industrial links and cooperation through ad hoc productions. In 2016, at the eighth BRICS Summit in India, a film cooperation programme was mooted (China Daily 2018). Three portmanteau films – *Where Has Time Gone?* (2017), *Half the Sky* (2018) and *Neighbours* (2019) – have so far been released under this strategy. Over the years, portmanteau productions have been used as a way to produce filmmaking in these five countries, but also as a way of trying to establish certain kinds of industrial connections between these filmmakers and producers, using a model that does not require direct investment. *Where Has Time Gone?* was produced in 2017 by Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke's production company, with sales managed by his company XStream Pictures. It was composed of five short films made by Walter Salles (Brazil), Alexei Fedorchenko (Russia), Madhur Bhandarkar (India), Jahmil X. T. Qubeka (South Africa) and Jia himself. It premiered in Chengdu in 2017 and then went on for screening at the Tokyo FilmEx and Busan International Film Festival (Tsui 2017). Qubeka's *Stillborn* is a science fiction allegory, set in a dystopian future, in which an archaeological lab technician discovers a watch and tries to travel back in time to be reborn. Jia's *Revive*, which anchors the omnibus, focuses on a long-married couple who revive their love for one another, and features Jia's partner and long-term collaborator, Zhao Tao, as well as sweeping views of Pingyao, his hometown and site of the film festival he launched in 2017. *Half the Sky*, again executive produced by Jia, featured films by women directors, including China's Liu Yulin – daughter of novelist and scriptwriter Liu Zhenyun – and South Africa's Sara Blecher. It screened at the Durban event before moving on to Jia's Pingyao International Film Festival, where it was the opening night film, and then the Sao Paulo International Film Festival (Mubi.com n.d.). Blecher's short, clearly based on the story of Caster Semenya, concerns a South African rower faced with the choice of taking hormone suppressants or dropping out of her sport altogether. Liu's is about an estranged mother and daughter; at its heart lies the making of dumplings, the traditional foodstuff central to Chinese New Year family reunions. *Neighbours* – featuring South African Jenna Cato Bass's film on homelessness, and China's Han Yan on a father and son in dispute over the former's barber shop – skipped the BRICS festival entirely, premiering again at Pingyao (Dennison 2021: 45).

Two points are striking here. First, the screen worlds of these films are often conservative. In the Chinese instances, for example, they are clearly in line with an established government soft power emphasis on the promotion of 'traditional' content in 'modern' formats. Jia's film showcases both traditional costume and *wuxia*-style sword fighting; Liu's film foregrounds both traditional food and traditional festivities, while also focusing on family relationships, a theme picked up on by Han Yan. Stephanie Dennison argues that the project has largely attracted 'politically committed filmmakers who would be unlikely to be drawn to a filmmaking project that offered nothing but the opportunity to make "brittle propaganda"' (2021: 51), emphasizing instead the possibilities of the collaboration as a creative contact zone. But even when the Chinese filmmakers play with these expectations – *Revive* reveals its traditional past-times to be part of a tourist-focused re-enactment in contemporary Pingyao, for example, while also opening up a space to discuss the politics of reproduction – these commitments are clearly framed in ways intended to make them acceptable to the state, at home and abroad. In the South African examples, it is striking that of the three films, only the first was directed by a Black filmmaker, with consequences for what we see on screen. For example, Blecher's film *Measure of a Woman* shifts the Semenya storyline as a way of reflecting on the controversy surrounding the athlete's alleged difference in sex development (SDS). In doing so, while potentially reimagining rowing, a white, middle-class sport, as available to everyone, it also encourages a particular investment in the lifestyle that such an exclusive pastime represents.

Second, while the BRICS festival is an explicit attempt to cement relationships between its constituent members and their film industries, it is not obvious that this has resulted in sustained relationships, or the circulation of films, in ways that counter the traditional movement of cinema through the festival circuit. While Tokyo FilmEx and the Busan festival are not A-list events, Japan and South Korea frequently serve as intermediary nodes through which Global South films pass in order to access the A-list circuit. *Half the Sky*, which premiered in China before moving to Brazil, suggests a more self-conscious effort to establish an alternative festival trajectory. But aside from Sao Paulo, where the BRICS films have been programmed every year they have been released (Dennison 2021: 51), it is not clear which other international events have screened the productions, again suggesting a weak rather than a robust network of connections. Indeed, the fact that *Neighbours* skipped the BRICS event altogether in favour of Pingyao suggests Jia's own festival may be more central to the omnibus collaborations than any other – a point to which we will return in our final section.

Another example of a government-centred event with a slightly different configuration of stakeholders was the China Africa International Film Festival. This took place in 2017 in Cape Town, with a second edition the following year. Established by the Global Max Media Group – a Chinese media company headquartered in Gaborone, Botswana, but with offices in Cape Town – the event was co-sponsored by CRI and the Beijing Film Academy. Focused on screenings and forums, rather than the more complex industry interactions and connections that we have seen in the other festivals, this specifically positioned itself as an 'excellent platform to show artistic creations and productions', 'a reflection of soft power of national culture of China and Africa' [*sic*] that would allow for the mutual promotion of Chinese and African film culture (Beijing Film Academy n.d.). This event was organized under the auspices of SAPPRFT, the Chinese government ministry that regulated the film industry between 2013 and 2018. However, the particular combination of state institutions and private capital identifiable here suggests that the driving force for the festival was not the ministry, and shows how an alternative configuration of agents can shape a cultural diplomacy event in ways quite distinct from the BRICS Film Festival.

As China develops its strategy alongside economic and global interests, its film industry relations mirror economic expansion interest and the Belt and Road project also now shapes its actions. At the 21st Shanghai International Film Festival in 2018, there was a first signing ceremony, where thirty-one film festival institution representatives from twenty-nine countries gathered to sign the memorandum on the establishment of the Belt and Road Film Festival Alliance. Belt and Road is, in essence, a government project to secure key trading routes between China and the rest of the world: one overland (the 'belt', revitalizing trading routes through central Asia to Europe), one by sea – the 'road', a maritime silk road connecting China to Africa via Southeast and South Asia (for more information on the filmic engagement with this, see Lu's chapter in this volume). The Belt and Road programme screens cinema at SIFF from these countries, encourages the screening of these films in film festivals outside China, and organizes associated film industry events at SIFF. However this does not include South Africa as it is not part of that route. Not being geographically on the ancient silk road, South Africa is thus excluded from this emerging new circuit of alliances and networks.

Transnational co-productions

Transnational co-productions are a standard way to establish connections between distinct film industries. They are, as Stephanie DeBoer argues, a technology of production: a cross-border assemblage of labour and finance that facilitates new forms of contact, expression and identity both between film industries, and within the products they produce (DeBoer 2014: 2). Like festivals, they can therefore create their own networks of people, money and products. But, also like festivals, co-productions can take a variety of forms, with an equally wide variety of goals. While the most formal version of the co-production is facilitated by a cross-border co-production treaty, other productions might be closer to co-ventures or equity co-productions, where the partners share resources without the benefit of a treaty. This is particularly true in instances where cinema production may be politically fraught, as in the PRC, where there is potential government involvement at most steps of the way.

South Africa and China have no formal co-production treaty. However, there have been some more informal collaborations. One example, as previously noted, is the Chinese 'main melody' blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2*,[5] which, while funded and produced in the PRC, was largely shot on location around Johannesburg, in Soweto (T. Xu 2017). The action film centres on a war hero who defends medical aid workers in a fictitious African country. At a local movie reception, Ambassador Lin Songtian of the Chinese embassy in South Africa described it as 'an excellent Chinese film that carries forward patriotic enthusiasm and friendship between China and Africa' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). Such sentiments notwithstanding, the film has been extensively criticized for its recycling of White Saviour and Dark Continent tropes, and the lack of agency it assigns its African characters (see Galafa 2019; Berry 2018; Liu and Rofel 2018; Shi and Liu 2020). Here, changes in the world of screen production do not appear to have significantly shifted representation, or the diegetic screen world. In addition to Spier's *The Navigator*, which we mentioned above, similar co-productions are being proposed or are under consideration at the time of writing, for instance *Golden Lion and the Red Dragon*, set against the construction of America's transcontinental railroad during the 1900s, built by Chinese and African slave labour, and Daniel Roodt's *A Pair of Golden Wings* (Wu 2018; Cornwell 2019).

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[5] 'Main melody' (*zhuxuanlü*) films are state-produced films that embody the political line of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). *Wolf Warrior 2* is usually understood as an attempt to update the main melody genre, both in form and content.

Co-productions between South Africa, China and other African countries have started to emerge as viable models for collaboration. In early 2020, for example, Nigerian production and distribution company FilmOne Entertainment announced a slate of eight films, to be produced with Huahua Media (PRC) and Empire Entertainment (South Africa). The project's first film, the romcom *Kambili: The Whole 30 Yards* (dir. Kayode Kasum), was released in December 2020. The project's second film is said to be *30 Days in China*, starring Nigerian comedian Ayo Makun (Vourlias 2020).

Weak links, structural inequalities and Sino–South African screen worlds

This brief mapping has revealed several different ways China and South Africa have initiated connections, developed collaborations, and established direct relationships at institutional and at individual levels between their film industries. Through their international festivals, Shanghai, Durban and Guangzhou are sites of professional interaction, film screenings, project development and alliances. Cultural diplomacy is expressed through events such as the BRICS film festivals, film weeks and ad hoc film forums. Meanwhile, transnational co-productions by stakeholders keen to pursue collaborative projects and financing across South Africa and China are in development and, while not yet at full potential, surely signal an interest worth following in the future.

However, it is also obvious that these relationships are currently neither well developed nor necessarily equitable. In this final section, we argue that the precarious, unequal nature of Sino–South African film industry links prevents them from seriously challenging existing industry networks centred on Europe and North America. This unstable and unequal relationship also manifests in the screen worlds of these collaborations, and in their paratextual positioning. These issues are partly a result of the politicization of industry connections, with the boundary between state and non-state actors often elided. But they are also tied to questions of commerce and capital, suggesting how the withdrawal of state support also shapes these networks and the projects that emerge from them. Ultimately, the Sino–South African relationship is too embedded in the dynamics of the market to prevent it from replicating the inequalities that have always existed between the European film industries, the festival circuit and their African counterparts.

Based on our observations, the network of relationships between events in China and South Africa is weak. This is most obvious in the unstable and uneven nature of these connections, which do not necessarily result in long-term success, whether that be festival flows or industrial production. For example, while some South African filmmakers may be visiting SIFF and pitching feature projects, it is unclear whether funding has yet been forthcoming. Even Michael Auret, who was involved in producing South Africa's segments of the BRICS portmanteau productions, has failed to find investors for projects this way, suggesting that relationships built in one festival space do not transfer easily to another. Similarly, where spaces have opened up for the curation of African cinema in the festival, such as through the Belt and Road screening initiatives, these have not been open to South African filmmakers. As previously noted, the BRICS Film Festival does not seem to have contributed significantly to closer Afro–Asian festival relations, and, where they have – for example, the Sao Paulo International Film Festival, or Pingyao – these do not appear to have benefitted South Africa. Rather than construct new links that compete with the dominant networks, it is easier to make use of these events to establish such relationships. A South African professional made this point to us when they said that it was in many ways easier to meet with Chinese film industry figures at the major European festivals, which they would be attending anyway, rather than bringing them to South Africa. Why travel to Durban or Shanghai when you can meet these people in Cannes – a space which is, in some ways, a neutral meeting point for all parties? This in turn may partly explain why the one clear example of successful emerging industry connections between the two countries is that of DIFF and GZDOC. A reciprocal relationship between the two events looks to be evolving, with industry personnel moving between both spaces. But, as a festival of non-fiction, with strong links to television, GZDOC lies by definition outside the network of A-list feature film festivals. This may make it easier for direct connections to be established between the event and Durban than between DIFF and an A-list event like SIFF, which already sits higher in the festival hierarchy than its South African cousin.

In part, this precarity reflects the way in which industrial and political interests are blended in these events, which can open up potential spaces for filmmakers and industry practitioners, but can also close them down. This difficulty of separating 'industry' from politics is reflected in the porous boundaries between what we have described as government-centred events and industry-focused festivals, such that the former can engage in production (a film industry activity), while the latter can be requisitioned for political purposes – like the Belt and Road Film Festival Alliance. But in the PRC, in particular, where all official film festivals can only be organized with the formal approval of the government, the programming and organization of all of these events must at times respond to national policy. Arguably, the emergence of Belt and Road as a framing device for festival programming at SIFF has thus focused attention on other African countries – Egypt, for example – at the expense of South Africa. This might not be the case if these events were less directly tied to the Chinese government, and therefore less subject to shifts in macro-level political policy that then filter down to the film industry.

However, all these issues point to a further key issue: that the South Africa–China relationship remains internally unequal. Broadly speaking, South Africans perceive the Chinese as having the greater degree of access and control, with the result that their power and visibility in relation to any given project are greater than other participants. To speak of SIFF and DIFF as occupying different positions within a festival hierarchy already hints at this problem, but it is most obvious in film production and marketing. Not only were the BRICS portmanteau productions executive produced by Jia Zhangke, for example, but when they are screened, they have been branded as Chinese products (Dennison 2021: 51). In media coverage of the anthology, South Africa has sometimes been framed as a junior partner.[6] And, while it has been possible for a Chinese production like *Wolf Warrior 2* to shoot on location in South Africa, it has not been so easy for Black Africans of any nationality to do the reverse. We are aware, for instance, of the case of a filmmaker from Nigeria who planned to shoot part of his film in Lagos and in Hong Kong, who in the end had to opt for a new location in Japan, setting it up as an undefined urban Asian location, not having been granted visas for his crew from China. At the same time, anti-African discrimination in major Chinese cities such as Guangzhou during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the discrimination that is still directed towards Africans in the PRC (Kirton 2020). Again, we are aware of one director who, despite originally wanting to film on location in Guangzhou, given the emerging anti-Black prejudice in the city, opted instead to shoot in Taiwan. Clearly, these events had an impact on different forms of cultural collaboration. However, these inequalities also shape what we see on screen. The critique of *Wolf Warrior 2*'s representation of Sino–African relations that we noted earlier speaks to how this perceived sense of hierarchy on the ground plays out in diegetic representation. In particular, its recycling of White Saviour and Dark Continent tropes and the lack of agency it assigns its African characters speak to a Chinese perception of their own superior position vis-à-vis their South African interlocutors. But this dynamic shapes potential projects in other ways. Michael Auret described his decision to pitch a film about the Chinese admiral Zhang He 'discovering' Africa to Chinese financiers as based in part on its appeal to their sense of China's role on the continent. In particular, an emphasis on the peaceful nature of Zheng and his expeditions – he collected giraffes as tribute, then returned home – would potentially appeal to their self-image as collaborators rather than contemporary colonialists.

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[6] In its review of *Where Has Time Gone?*, for example, the official English-language publication *Beijing Review* described the South African film industry as 'very young', while liberally quoting the director of the South African segment, Jahmil Qubeka, as saying South Africa was a 'small country', new to film production, and that BRICS 'gives us a seat at the table' (Sarkar and Xia 2017). Jia described Qubeka's sci-fi short as the film which 'surprised him most' (F. Xu 2017) in the collaboration, which raises interesting questions about what exactly the director was expecting a South African film to look like.

Chris Berry (2021), in a recent article re-examining the idea of transnational Chinese cinema, argues that films like these are all examples of an emerging cinema of the Sinosphere. China has committed to globalization, though on what it hopes are its own terms, so a Chinese cinema has emerged that imagines that globalization. However, so too have other cinemas, not in Chinese languages, that also engage with 'globalization with Chinese characteristics'. Berry (2021: 192–3) suggests *Wolf Warrior 2* is an example of a film that imagines the Sinosphere from a Chinese perspective; Auret's project is a good example of what Berry terms a non-Chinese language film of the Sinosphere, one that is both a product of, and a response to, China's growing presence in southern Africa. In an attempt to appeal to Chinese investors, the producer has developed an idea that places the Chinese experience front and centre, framing them in a manner they might find flattering. As an historical epic, the project clearly seeks to imagine the Sino–African relationship as an alternative to (Western) colonialism. But by doing so, it elides both China's recent socialist past in the continent and the centrality of capital to its current expansion.

This is striking because, while the government may be an important actor in shaping Sino–South African screen industry relations, private capital is clearly just as significant. Indeed, there is a strong sense that, wherever possible, both governments have passed the responsibility for generating connections between the industry over to the private sector and private individuals even where the project is a potentially high-profile soft power project. While the BRICS portmanteau film production exercise is often positioned as being one of cultural exchange, one alternative interpretation of the anthology format is that it facilitates the involvement of private investors from each nation while minimizing the need for direct government investment. Thus, while Jia Zhangke is clearly important as the face of the project's branding, the fact that he owns his own production company, X Stream Pictures, and has established a film festival is perhaps equally key here. Private capital also shapes how these films circulate: according to Stephanie Dennison (2021: 51), the productions' sales agents in the PRC charge industry rates for screenings, which may help explain the films' limited exposure. Similarly, smaller soft power events like the China Africa International Film Festival are clearly driven as much by the interest of private investors as they are by the government proper – an interest which may wane quickly if such events do not translate into advantage for these actors. This may explain why this festival appears to have had only two iterations. Meanwhile, on the South African side, the frustration amongst our informants at a perceived lack of government support for industrial engagement via co-production, for example, has shifted the focus to private individuals and companies that may be interested in financing projects between the countries. For instance, we note the emergence of The Write Project Film Fund, spearheaded by PSP Medial Capital, backed by multiple angel investors from Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Cape Town and Kuala Lumpur, to promote the development and production of professionally produced filmed entertainment in Africa for exhibition internationally. While some of the issues in the relationship between the Chinese and South African film industries can be put down to changing priorities of government, in other ways the instability of these connections is arguably a result of government stepping back, leaving private capital and individuals to take on the role of generating connections in its stead.

In such circumstances, it seems unlikely that the relationship between the film industries of China and South Africa can currently function as a substantive alternative to that of either's relationship with Europe or North America. This is not so much an assessment of the depths of their ties as of their driving logic. To return to Zheng He, it is perhaps unsurprising that Auret has turned to this figure in an attempt to attract Chinese investment in a cinema co-production. His story smooths over the inequalities and frictions of the contemporary China–South Africa relationship, which in turn are inevitably bound up with issues of money and power. As Ying-kit Chan points out,

> Zheng He was, in China's idealization, an ambassador of friendship who connected Africans with the Chinese, who had not and never would abuse China's might to exploit or colonize Africa in the way Europeans did, as suggested by the 'historical' record.
>
> (2019: 60)

As a figure he suggests a desire to return to a mythical point of origin for this relationship, before it was overdetermined by colonialism, socialism or capitalism. Yet, it is precisely the potential smoothing out of these frictions that speaks to the project of globalization – the unimpeded circulation of capital – which in turn should alert us to how this story's rearticulation emerges from a new conjuncture of all these inequalities. While the festival and screen worlds of the Sino–South African relationship may supplement others in existence, they seem unlikely to replace them, and certainly not with a radical alternative.

Conclusion

This chapter is an initial mapping of the South Africa–China relationship in relation to the two countries' respective film industries, set against the background of the unequal North–South relationships which characterize the existing festival world and the broader film industry, the possibility of alternatives, and the question of Chinese neocolonialism in Africa. Our initial assessment suggested reasons why the global positioning of both countries' industries indicated opportunities for collaboration. However, by looking at key international film festivals, soft power events and co-productions, it appears that, while links are emerging, there are limits to what can currently be achieved. This is not just a consequence of broader political issues guiding policy between the two countries, though the Belt and Road Initiative's direction of African screen programming in China away from South Africa is an example of how this is the case. It is also a question of the replication of more long-standing inequalities in these emerging relationships that are identifiable from South Africa's interactions with Global North stakeholders. It is precisely these inequalities that shape the screen and festival worlds of Sino–South African cinematic ventures, and which at present suggest they constitute more of a supplement to existing connections than a distinct alternative.

When conducting our research, we spoke to some of the main actors in the film industry, institutional officials and internationally connected producers. Maybe a different picture would emerge if we oriented our research to the younger generation of filmmakers, and explored if they found creating partnerships, co-productions or film industry exchanges with China potentially interesting. Perhaps a new generation of filmmakers has already been groomed through film academy exchanges between the countries. Or, we might find that they are actually not interested in developing more formal relations with China specifically, as such relations are not seen as a potential opportunity. As with low budget productions, these filmmakers may not be interested in large investments for big productions, but more focused on tapping into emerging digital platform opportunities, or indeed even more independent productions. Depending on whom we are speaking to, perspectives on relations between South Africa and China – whether they are seen as an opening, as less interesting, or as something to be actively dismissed – will change. It is important to keep further research and analysis open to these different perspectives.

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SECTION THREE

Engendering comparative film studies

5

World socialist women's cinema of armed struggle

Masha Salazkina

At the time that I am writing this essay, in our current moment with its continuing escalation of militarization all over the world and the return of the Cold War rhetoric, it may seem ethically opaque to turn to the topic of socialist cinema of armed struggle, implicated as it was in the very ideological positions that seem to have re-assembled themselves now. As women's rights all over the world, from the United States to Afghanistan, are also under threat, it may likewise seem politically futile to focus on women's struggles within socialism, which appear to have little bearing on today's global situation. And yet, I would argue that it is precisely because of this regime of historical amnesia and misidentification that we – scholars, critics and citizens – need to be particularly attentive to the nuance of historical constructions and their contemporary reverberations. Reflecting on the way cinema in the second half of the twentieth century engaged with issues of global war – especially in its gendered dimensions, beyond the role of women as mere victims – provides us with just such a political and ethical opportunity.

From our contemporary experience of media-saturation, the unique effectiveness and affective impact of cinema as a tool of political communication may not be apparent. Today's coverage of wars in digital and social media is characterized by instantaneity, ubiquity, connectivity, resulting in oversaturation of information. In contrast, for much of the twentieth century, and especially outside of the Euro-American sphere, film was a major medium for both informational and affective communication, creating a very different modality and temporality of global audiovisual engagement, posing unique challenges and opportunities for filmmakers committed to the creation of solidarity and the understanding of military conflicts and their ramifications.

My own scholarly entry-point to these questions has been via my commitment to transnational and comparative modes of constructing film history as a counter-weight to overcome long-standing shared legacies of colonial and Cold War epistemes that shaped our discipline. The challenge of such project entails outlining a different geography of knowledge: one that resists both the Anglo-Atlantic Euro-centric canon of film history and the compartmentalization of Area studies, shifting the paradigm away from the overdetermined and increasingly ideologically overloaded categories such as 'postcolonial', 'Soviet bloc' or 'Global South'. Instead, new geographical configurations can bring to light the collective imaginary of a disparate, but globally connected network of filmmakers and audiences, with its potential affinities and solidarities.

Thus, as this essay seeks to demonstrate, placing Sarah Maldoror's celebrated film about the Angolan national liberation struggle *Sambizanga* (1972), alongside two other war films made by socialist women filmmakers made at different times, within distinct historical contexts – Soviet Ukranian Larisa Shepitko's *Wings* (*Kryl'ya*, 1966) and Algerian Assia Djebar's *Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (*La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua*, 1977) – reveals a more complex relationship between the artistic and political visions of Soviet and African filmmakers than have been commonly acknowledged. Irreducible to North-South, East-West, Orientalist or Cold War binaries, the transnational networks they formed re-functionalized epistemological models across various divides in complex and interconnected ways. Considered together and in relation to each other, the production and reception of these films as well as their filmmakers' personal and artistic trajectories reveal important commonalities, in particular through placing women at the centre of war narratives. I argue that while insisting on the common political struggle, *women's* socialist cinema of armed struggle – whether despite or because of its marginal positionality – contested the commonsensical idioms of mainstream socialist and Thirdworldist ideologies alike, redefining them from within.

Nowadays, both the postsocialist and postcolonial spheres at large are consistently marked by a total backlash against women's rights in both domestic and public spheres, causing many to lose sight of the crucial historical role of women within both revolutionary liberation and anti-war movements. Women's agency in today's military conflicts is continuously reduced to victimhood, according to the ossified patriarchal patterns. These cultural dynamics extend to the field of film scholarship, where war narratives continue to be associated exclusively with masculinity – an assumption that goes against the historical modes of representation of women within socialist cinema worldwide, and the realities of women's activism of the Cold War era. These histories are worth spelling out before we can turn to their cinematic embodiments.

Despite vast differences in the social conditions of women within the socialist bloc and those in the decolonizing nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America, they formed important strategic alliances, especially on the international intra-state level, such as the United Nations (Olcott 2017; Ghodsee 2019; Gradskova 2021).[1] These alliances were often rooted in the shared strategy of foregrounding broader political and economic issues in the struggle for women's emancipation – such as disarmament and decolonization, creating major rifts with mainstream Western feminists, especially those from the United States, who considered this approach as antithetical to women's movements. This disagreement became especially pronounced over the protests against apartheid in South Africa and Israel's occupation of Palestine, which the US women representatives in the UN (mostly middle- or upper-class white women) considered 'non-women related issues' and consistently boycotted the shared efforts of socialist and non-aligned women representatives to include them within the political purview of women's diplomacy (Olcott 2017: 38).[2] This conflict was emblematic of the way gender politics was articulated on the two sides of the Cold War and the way anti-imperialist armed struggle was configured differently on the two sides. It is not that the Western feminist slogan 'the personal is political' did not resonate with socialist and Thirdworldist women activists, who also fought for abortion rights, childcare and vocational choice. But at the same time, the reversal of the slogan – 'the political is personal' – was just as relevant for many of them, as their individual, family and community everyday lives were inseparable from the very struggles that their Western counterparts designated as non-women related. This is nowhere more visible than in films directly dealing with the experiences of war and anti-colonial struggles, and especially in the three films this essay will discuss.

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[1] The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) of the UN, founded by the state socialist members, concentrated on disarmament and decolonization as issues crucial to women's freedom from violence and discrimination, with strong support from women representatives from the so-called 'developing nations'. For more on this history, see Olcott (2017), Ghodsee (2019) and Gradskova (2021).

[2] This division came out into the open in 1975 during the two week-long UN-sponsored World Conference on Women in Mexico City, when two opposing factions emerged, abbreviated catchily as 'Betty Friedan vs. the Third World'. As a result, the US delegation refused to support the 'Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace', 1975, composed largely by the women representatives from non-aligned and socialist countries. See Olcott (2017).

Socialist cinema of armed struggle

Across the Soviet bloc and Leftist anti- and postcolonial cinemas of Asia, Africa and Latin America, what I call the socialist cinema of armed struggle (Salazkina 2023) constituted a major formation, cutting across genres such as conventional war movies, combat documentaries and historical epics. Cinema of armed struggle functioned in two ways: firstly, as part of deliberate, state-supported efforts to create and sustain an understanding of war as foundational for the national(ist) self-image; and secondly, to put the rest of the world on notice of the seriousness of the liberation movements' political commitments and readiness for new struggles. For many among the socialist artists and audiences, this cinema reflected and narrativized armed struggle that was personally experienced, individually and/or by family members, friends and comrades. After the Second World War, with its devastating impact on hundreds of millions of people, the wars of decolonization, civil strife and national security state oppression touched populations from China to Argentina, from Palestine to South Africa, in a global sweep. In these circumstances, this film formation was uniquely capable of mobilizing affective solidarities across the national and racial lines.

Some elements of this shared representational regime which differentiated it from its non- socialist equivalents included: (1) the prominence of (Marxist) historical analysis, intended to create an integral link between the memories of past wars and the experiences of contemporary political struggle, which could be manifested narratively or visually (through montage or other techniques); (2) the emphasis on the agency of the people(s), including women and children, and their active role in the fight; (3) as an extension of this, the celebration of the heroism understood as the need (and often, inevitability) of self-sacrifice for the common cause, which fed a cult of revolutionary/war martyrdom, including that of women and children; and (4) the valorization of resilience as another crucial form of heroism – therefore, again, justifying a focus on those who endured behind the lines, thus subverting the more traditional male-centred and battle-centred representations (Schwenkel 2014; Yaqub 2018; Duong and Sharif 2020; Salazkina 2023).

Stylistically, while spectacularization and glorification of violence were generally frowned upon for its association with Hollywood war movies, many of the socialist armed struggle films did include strikingly graphic and hyper-realist depictions of torture and other kinds of violence, including sexual violence. The traditional taboos – such as depiction of the dead bodies – were cast aside for affective didactic purposes. Narratively, happy endings in fiction films, even those tending towards the entertainment genres, are rare, and deaths of the main characters, whether on or off screen, almost expected. The enormity of the struggle and precarity of peace were thus fully recognized and amply visualized through the cinematic narratives. Despite the role of war and revolutionary violence as foundational for national (and nation-state) histories, solidarity in the struggle was consistently shown in these films to be above national, ethnic or racial identities, as these were understood to be necessary but transitional stages on the way to the overarching goal of autonomous nationhood and some iteration of an egalitarian socialist future (Salazkina 2023: 243–4). In this essay, we will see how these tropes hold true for Maldoror, Djebar and Shepitko's films, which, in spite of vastly different production contexts, show how women filmmakers complicated the established modes of socialist representation.

The continuities in these modes across the three continents derived in part from a shared field of cinematic references from Sergei Eisenstein to Roberto Rossellini, Santiago Álvarez to Glauber Rocha, formed through shared international sites of exhibition and training (which often included film schools in the Soviet bloc), within which arose significant conceptual affinities, albeit filtered through specific historical experiences. Mediated through cinema, the centrality of war and violence to the history of capitalism and colonialism and the contemporary politics of a separate, economically centralized existence made the Soviet bloc experience pertinent to much of the postcolonial world. Independence for the postcolonial countries was rarely won without bloodshed; liberation wars were foundational for many of the countries' precarious identities, which were continually roiled by civil wars that were often started and resourced by various foreign states. From the socialist point of view, capitalism's need for expansion – especially in terms of extracting natural resources – meant that new wars were inevitable as long as capitalism existed. War was thus a permanent horizon of socialist peace (Esch 2018:17).

The centrality of wars, past and present, was thus part of the discourse on peace, which characterized the political rhetoric of the socialist bloc. After all, 'peace' was the catchword for the Socialist and socialist-aligned bloc within the Cold War, the same way as 'freedom' or 'liberty' was for the other side. This anti-war discourse, however, did not seek to promote pacifism but active solidarity in defeating the common enemy (imperialism), and thus the roots of global aggression: this was encapsulated in the frequently used slogan 'fight for peace'. Women activists were positioned as active political agents in these struggles, and this was further demonstrated in their on-screen roles in cinematic representations of wars and other forms of armed struggle as well as the behind-the-camera status of women directors who adhered to the liberationist platform.

The affinities between the works I am examining in this chapter are not, I argue, so much the result of intertextual influence but of a shared worldview. In my discussion of the three films, then, I will first turn to Maldoror's *Sambizanga*, which, although made a decade after Shepitko's film and another decade before Djebar's, is set in the midst of the struggle itself, while the other two films deal with its aftermath. And yet all three films question this seemingly clear temporality which in one case insists on the struggle as open and ongoing, in the other as presumably concluded.

Maldoror in the Soviet Union

Sarah Maldoror's life (1929–2020) and cinematic career can serve as a perfect illustration of this position. Her motivation to study cinema – and to do this in the USSR – was notably underpinned by her anti-imperialist political stance. Maldoror claimed that it was when she saw Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* [1925] that she became fully convinced that cinema was the most effective means for expressing and disseminating her political commitments (Schefer 2015: 142).[3] When alongside her comrade and fellow aspiring filmmaker Ousmane Sembene she came to Moscow in 1961–2 to study with the celebrated Soviet filmmaker Mark Donskoi, Maldoror had already established a reputation as a political activist in French theatre as one of the founders of the first Black theatre company in France, Les Griots, along with the Ivorian filmmaker Timité Bassori, Ababacar Samb Makharam and Toto Bissainthe. Like Sembene, 'the father of African cinema', Maldoror, 'the mother of African cinema', also won a scholarship to study cinema in the Soviet Union, where she had to learn Russian before attending VGIK (Schefer 2015: 143). She also served as the director's assistant on Donskoi's film *Hello, Children!* (*Zdravstvujte, deti*!, Soviet Union, 1962); set at the famous Soviet international friendship summer camp in Crimea, it depicts the relationships formed within a group of children after the arrival of a Japanese girl suffering effects from the nuclear explosion at Hiroshima. The film included a multi-racial cast of young actors, and it is easy to see why Donskoi would have chosen Maldoror to work on it. After her two-year stay in the Soviet Union, Maldoror joined the pioneers of the African liberation movements, in Guinea, Algeria and Guinea-Bissau alongside her partner, Mario Pinto de Andrade (Angolan poet and politician, who was the founder of the Movement for the Liberation of Angola [MPLA] and its first president). In Algeria, she worked as an assistant to Gillo Pontecorvo on *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), then with William Klein for the *Pan African Cultural Festival of Algiers* (1969). Her first short film, *Monangambee* (1968), was partially funded by Algeria, and received an award at the Carthage film festival in Tunisia (*Journees cinematographique de Carthage*, JCC), at that time the most important festival for progressive Arab and African filmmakers, before the launching of FESPACO, the Pan African Film Festival of Ouagadougou (Festival Panafricain de Ouagadougou). Maldoror's first feature, *Sambizanga* (filmed in Congo, with the participation of Congolese militants) premiered at JCC's 4th session in 1972, followed by a screening at the Tashkent Festival of Cinemas of Asia and Africa in the Soviet Union just a few days later.

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[3] For more on Maldoror in the Soviet Union, see Dovey (2019).

Maldoror's position was quite unique: as the first woman of African heritage to make a feature-film-length in Africa, followed soon after by Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye with her film Une Lettre Paysanne (Kaddu Beykat, 1975), she was eager to show the African liberation struggle to the rest of the world, on par with a much more internationally visible war in Vietnam. Maldoror's political position within Angola was openly aligned with the MPLA's Marxist-Leninist (and Soviet-supported) orientation towards the struggle. As Moorman asserts in her discussion of *Sambizanga*:

> By 1966, three nationalist organizations, mentioned earlier, were fighting against the Portuguese in Angola. Anticolonial sentiment may have been unequivocal but the implications of this in terms of national rule and national affect were not. Therefore, when *Sambizanga* won the grand prize at the Carthage film festival in 1972, it was not only a show of support for the Angolan independence struggle generally but for a particular interpretation of that struggle and for the MPLA as the legitimate representative of the Angolan people.
>
> (Moorman 2001: 111)

Maldoror was, therefore, in many ways an early representative of the revolutionary anti-colonial filmmaking of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau: the cinemas which, as part of the protracted armed struggles against Portuguese rule, were most closely attuned to the other anti-imperialist wars, most explicit in cinema's revolutionary consciousness-raising function (Moorman 2001: 107).[4] But while fully supporting Sembene's, Vieyra's and other African filmmakers' commitment to the institutional development of the national or regional cinematic apparatus in Africa and to making African films for African audiences, *Sambizanga*'s address was explicitly international(ist). As such, it has not only been rightfully adopted into the narrative of Angolan national film history but also stands as an icon of Thirdworldist, Pan-Africanist and socialist internationalist cinema (Abrantes 2015). This internationalist stance is inseparable from the film's exploration of women's role in liberation movements. Both of these aspects have at different times provoked some controversy.

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[4] Scholars such as Claire Andrade-Watkins, Frank Ukadike and Manthia Diawara in their work assert the unique and radical contribution of lusophone African filmmaking to African cinema generally due to its revolutionary origins.

In recent years, critical response to *Sambizanga*'s gender politics has been somewhat mixed; at the time of its release it was enthusiastically received both in Angola and abroad (Ukadike 2002, and Mdege 2017). Instead, it was the question of whether or not *Sambizanga* could be considered an 'authentically' African film given its director's diasporic origins that remained a point of contention in the debates at the centre of the film's reception. As early as 1972, when it won the main award at the Carthage film festival (JCC), which was explicitly designated for African and Arab filmmakers, some protested that the filmmaker was neither. And yet, at least in part, this is also what insured the film's broad international circulation, especially in the heated moment of armed struggle preceding the 1975 victory over the Portuguese, when international solidarity through consciousness-raising appeared a more urgent priority than the creation of national unity through local spectatorship (a goal that would inevitably arise after independence). For this, the socialist bloc in general, and Soviet Union in particular, provided a forum through its highly developed and politicized film festival network (Leipzig, Moscow, Tashkent) which eagerly showcased African cinema. Tashkent festival of cinemas of Asia, Africa (and later, Latin America) was an especially welcoming venue where, like its Algerian and Cuban counterparts, sub-Saharan African films formed the programming core, providing yet another articulation of history, both recent and distant, as a site of armed struggle.[5]

Within Tashkent festival throughout the 1970s, gender frequently framed discussions of films focusing on (anti-)colonial African history, as for instance in such films as Oumarou Ganda's *Cabascabo* (1968), and Ousmane Sembene's *Emitai* (1971) and *Ceddo* (1977). However, Maldoror's *Sambizanga*, which was screened outside the official selection of the festival in 1972, was the film that drew the greatest amount of critical attention for the way gender determined its armed struggle narrative. This centrality of the female heroine is also what allowed Soviet critics to highlight *Sambizanga*'s direct connections to the classics of Soviet war cinema.

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[5] Countries which underwent the most prolonged struggle for independence – Mozambique, Angola, Congo and Guinea-Bissau – are understandably those whose cinemas reflected this thematic most explicitly.

The 1972 festival review by the well-known Soviet film critic Armen Medvedev, *Sambizanga* was discussed in the same section (entitled Solidarity) as a documentary on Martin Luther King that was presented by the civil rights activist and member of the Communist Party Jack O'Dell in Tashkent. Both screened outside of the main programme – whether or not because they were not made by an African or Asian director – and the evident intent in bringing these two films together was to underscore the solidarity of the radical black movements in the United States with the liberation struggles in Africa (Medvedev and Shatsillo 1973: 129–31).

While this juxtaposition seemingly foregrounds the foundational function of race in creating Thirdwordlist solidarity – consistent with the Cuban Tricontinentalist agenda, for example (Mahler 2018, and Young 2018) – the conclusion of the review complicates its racial politics. In his praise of the leading actress in *Sambizanga*, Elisa Andrade (see Figure 5.1), Medvedev compares the 'tragic intelligence' she conveys to that of Olena Kostiuk, the protagonist of Mark Donskoi's celebrated war film *The Rainbow* (*Raduga*, 1944). Recognizing that Maldoror trained under Donskoi, the critic insists: 'To those who haven't seen the film, this association may seem artificial. But truly, it appeared to us even before we learned the director's biography – like a joyous recognition of a complex but apparent connection between heroic ideals of seemingly distant peoples' (Medvedev and Shatsillo 1973: 131). The iconic images of the two heroines, accompanying the publication, in their stark black and white contrast make the comparison all the more graphic, insisting on transnational, transracial as well as trans-historic

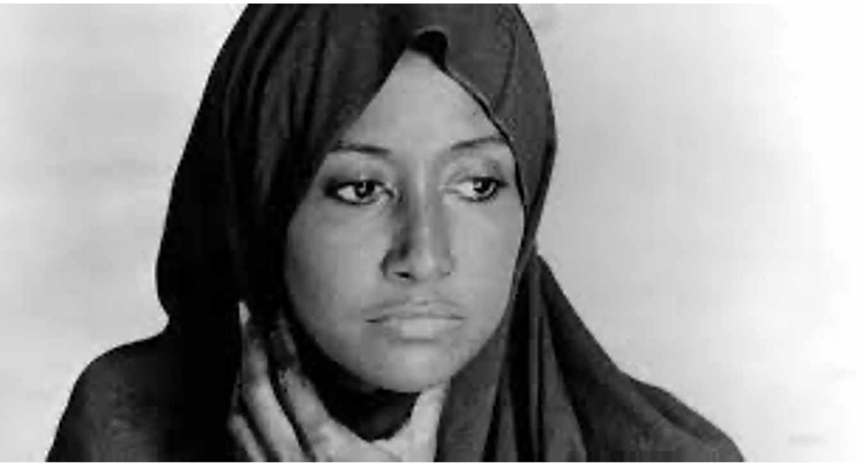

FIGURE 5.1 *Elisa Andrade, screenshot from* Sambizanga. Sambizanga *directed by Sarah Maldoror © New Yorker Films 1973. All rights reserved.*

construction of such comparison, fully in line with the dominant imagery of socialist internationalism.

There is no reason for us to think Maldoror (who was not present at the festival) would have objected to such an analysis. Throughout her life, she wrote and spoke fondly of Donskoi; she repeatedly disavowed having a nationality: 'I am from everywhere and nowhere' (cited in Pfaff 1988: 205). Her identity as a Black African filmmaker fully co-existed with her commitment to transracial solidarity within class struggle: in it, as one of the protagonists of *Sambizanga* summarizes it didactically, 'there are no Whites, neither Mulattos nor Blacks. Only the Rich and the Poor. The Rich are the Poor's enemies, they see to it that the Poor stay poor'.

And yet, if we, unlike its Soviet critics, place *Sambizanga* in conversation not with Soviet war classics but rather with other films by socialist women filmmakers from the same period, the topography of solidarity that emerges from their work is ultimately more complex and compelling, one that, without abandoning its socialist aspirations, goes beyond a single-minded focus on the unity of class interests to the recognition of difference and dissent.

Maldoror, Shepitko, Djebar: Women on the socialist and Thirdworldist film circuit, 1960s–70s

Indeed, Maldoror was not the only socialist filmmaker whose work has centred on women's experience of war and liberation struggles, and considering *Sambizanga* in relation to Shepitko's *Wings* and Djebar's *Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* reveals many important ideological resonances. It is somewhat ironic that the work of these three women directors has most commonly been discussed in English language scholarship as notable examples of *women's cinema* almost exclusively within either their respective national or auteur contexts, and in relation to their European or American counterparts.[6] On the one hand, while many European, British and US women filmmakers at the time were arguing for the need for separate women's film events (such as those organized within the Edinburgh film festival),[7] all three directors in interviews and articles resisted associations with (Western) feminism, never embracing the notion of women's cinema as counter-cinema. Gayatri Spivak's claim in her obituary of Djebar – that

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[6] A notable exception to this is the discussion of Djebar in Saglier (2022).

[7] For a useful discussion of this moment, see Damiens (2020).

'her most important stance is against identitarianism' (Spivak 2015: 106) – could, indeed, equally apply to Maldoror or Shepitko.[8] This unwillingness to be subsumed under any one identitarian category further extended to ethno-national labels and belonging to any national industries, which produced their films. *Sambizanga*, when it came out, was banned from commercial cinemas in Portugal and Angola (Lopez 1979); both Shepitko and Djebar's films also received little domestic circulation at the time of their release: *Wings* was in limited release in movie theatres in the Soviet Union, primarily outside of the main cities, passing largely unnoticed by the local audiences (Shepitko 1968), while *Nouba* was shown on Algerian TV (for which it was produced) only once (Bedjaoui 2020: 166). Perhaps even more than the filmmakers' gender or thematic emphasis, these films were deliberately marginalized by their respective national film establishments because of their deliberate rejection of the accessible style and triumphant and celebratory tone that so frequently accompanied films dealing with war and liberation movements.

These socialist women's directors' position on the international film circuit wasn't without complications either. Because Shepitko's *The Ascent* (*Voskhozhdenie*, 1977: another war film, albeit from a more conventional male perspective) won the Golden Bear award at the Berlin festival in 1977, and Djebar's *Nouba* received the prestigious Critics award in Venice in 1979, the two of them were thus part of an elite and very small group of women directors (alongside Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmüller) whose work was awarded at major European art festivals of that time. Moreover, when Shepitko participated in the 1975 Symposium on Women in Cinema, organized by UNESCO, she was one of only five participants from outside Europe or North America of the twenty-eight present (the other three were the legendary early Indian film star Durga Khote, who was seventy at the time, the radical Egyptian documentary filmmaker Ateyyat El Abnoubi, and María Luisa Bemberg).[9] Only two – as Shepitko was joined by Márta Mészáros from Hungary – were invited to represent the socialist bloc (UNESCO 1976).

At the Thirdworldist international festival circuit, from Carthage (JCC) and Ouagadougou (FESPACO) to Leipzig and Tashkent, cinema made by women was likewise consistently made less visible than that of their male counterparts. This lack of visibility was at odds with the reality of women's actual participation

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[8] Shepitko famously noted, in response to Mikhail Romm's comment about *Wings* 'showing a masculine hand': 'I make my films as a woman … But there's real cinema and there's feminine dabbling. Ninety percent of our cinema is feminine dabbling – and men are its main practitioners.' Cited in Kaganovsky (2012: 49).

[9] Bemberg, who at the time of the symposium had not yet made a feature film, came from Argentina's cultural elite, which reflexively oriented itself to Paris and New York and aligned with European and North American feminist movements.

– whether as part of film collectives (such as the Palestinian Film Unit's Khadijah Habashneh and Sulafa Jadallah or Ukumau group's Beatriz Palacios and Danielle Caillet, and The Cuzco School's María Barea), or as individual auteurs, such as Marta Rodríguez, one of Columbia's most important radical documentary filmmakers, Heiny Srour in Lebanon, or Selma Baccar in Tunisia, Sara Gómez in Cuba, or the Chilean exiles Marilú Mallet, Valeria Sarmiento and Angelina Vázquez. Like Maldoror, they were sometimes awarded prizes at these festivals – and yet just as frequent was the sexist undermining of their work by mostly male members of the film establishment, as happened when the Algerian film industry actively tried to prevent Djebar's film from being screened at JCC (Sela 2017; Seguí 2018; Ramírez-Soto 2021; Saglier 2022). These exclusions precluded the possibility of developing the kind of dialogue – let alone mobilization of alliances, affinities and solidarities – among these women filmmakers that was awarded to their male counterparts through the same networks.

Even so, their explicitly gendered meditations on the experience of armed struggle resonate with particular force across the global socialist anti-colonial context, and their position as women filmmakers acquires a particular meaning when approached as part of this framework. When we consider these films in relationship to each other, we can trace the way their directors' personal experiences and commitments signify in response to the predominance of the genre of cinema of armed struggle within socialist and Thirdworldist cinema. These films testify to the often-overlooked historical participation of women within these movements, and are perhaps most memorable for the way they explore the impact of collective struggle on everyday life, putting forward the temporal and spatial conflation of war and peace that was normalized in both colonial and Cold War biopolitics. As a result, these films offer models for some of the most nuanced negotiations between the subjective and the collective within both historical experiences and political horizons.

Maria, the protagonist of *Sambizanga*'s narrative, spends most of her time on film walking from village to village in search of her husband, a political prisoner. Some feminist scholars have critiqued Maldoror's depiction of Maria for her exclusion from the main sites of political struggle (whether of the guerrilla military action or of the torture and other experiences of state repression). Other critics, less sympathetic to gender issues, considered 'its feminist slant dilute[ed] the film's impact with armed guerilla struggle' (Cited in Moorman 2001: 120). Instead, I argue that one of the film's crucial contributions lies in demonstrating the inseparability of these spaces and their uneven and overlapping temporalities, understanding the overt experiences of armed struggle or state repression in larger terms than the patriarchal centring on heroism and battle. The growth of Maria's political consciousness and her political agency depends on her realization of the embeddedness of the two, and this is further underscored in particular, as Lindiwe Dovey explores at length, in the film's soundtrack (Dovey 2019). In both *Wings* and *Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* this dialectic is carried further, beyond war time into the post-war, post-liberation socialist reality, underscoring the unfinished project of the revolution in the post-war era, and the uncertainty of its unfolding, which, therefore, leaves it open to possibilities beyond those offered by the state.

Luandino Vieira, whose story Maldoror adopted for her film, in his correspondence with Mário de Andrade, Maldoror's partner, commented on the critiques of *Sambizanga*'s complex temporality:

> The profound comprehension of this phenomenon of revolutionary 'patience' … is a little difficult for the European left which always has the tendency to see in the revolutionaries of the so-called Third World this sudden and heroic enthusiasm and action (the hero who dies with a machine gun in their hands is the only one they can conceive) for which only they are nostalgic. […] For this reason I was very happy to read Sara's declarations, her courage to go against the cliché that they (still) want to impose on us against the reality we know.
>
> (Piçarra 2017: 25)[10]

This complexity and the refusal of cliches resulted in accusations of a bourgeois aestheticism in Maldoror's filmmaking style, which, according to some Thirdwordlist militants, insufficiently privileged the guerrilla organization and created scenes that were 'too beautiful' and 'too lyrical'. Western critics, on the other hand, saw her film and its unflinching depiction of torture as too politically didactic (Pfaff 1988: 212–13; Silva 2022). Critical responses to both, Shepitko's and Djebar's deliberately self-reflexive embrace of both art and politics, were similarly ambivalent.

While Maldoror's *Sambizanga* reproduces the slow, winding and lonely path towards revolutionary unity, both Larisa Shepitko's *Wings* and Assia Djebar's *La Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* centre, instead, on the loss of the sense of belonging that was once provided by the urgency of the struggle, and the inadequacy of the official forms of public memory to restore or even merely address it. As such, they also reject the kind of triumphalist socialist narrative that operates with assumptions of a shared utopian future, dissolving and levelling all differences. Maldoror, Djebar and Shepitko's positions recognize the mediation between the singularity of women's experience, not fully subsumable under the official rhetoric of either socialism or antiimperialism, and the continuing centrality of *collective* memory and political action, which sets them apart from the obsessive subjectivity of many of their contemporary Western feminist peers, closely reflecting the politics of broader alliances with liberatory movements.

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[10] Translation mine.

La Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua

Assia Djebar (1936–2015) was born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen to a family of Berber origin. Before she became Algeria's first woman filmmaker, she was the first Algerian woman to attend the École normale supérieure de jeunes filles outside Paris. During the Algerian Liberation War, she worked with Frantz Fanon for the newspaper *El moudjahid*, conducting interviews with Algerian refugees in Tunisia and Morocco. Already an established writer and academic by the time she made *La Nouba*, Djebar's decision to turn to filmmaking was made during the ten-year period during which she abandoned writing, refusing to express herself in French, the language of Algeria's colonizer. Film offered her not only a new form of visual expression, but an opportunity to work with sound: spoken, performed and sung. Both *La Nouba* and Djebar's second and last film, *Zerda and the songs of forgetting* (*La Zerda et les chants de l'oubli*, 1979), which consists entirely of documentary colonial footage, were made for the Algerian Television during a brief period of its political opening, but none of her further projects were supported by the government (Hiddleston 2006).

La Nouba projects an alternative community within clearly demarcated women's space and their intertwined histories to provide counter-narratives to the hegemonic mythologies of Algerian revolutionary homonationalism as embodied in the war experience. The protagonist of Djebar's formally experimental film, Lila, who operates as a narrative stand-in for the author, returns to her native village of Cherchell (where Djebar herself was born) fifteen years after Algeria won independence, looking for witnesses that might help her solve her brother's disappearance during the war. She is accompanied by her young daughter and by her paralysed, mute husband. The film brings together the stories of the Berber peasant women of Mont Chenoua: stories of their participation in the war, stories of bravery, betrayal and loss, the total effect of which is markedly different from the monumentalist male-centred narratives of the Algerian 'freedom fighter cinema' (Flood 2013; Bedjaoui 2020). These stories foreground the unacknowledged cost of war for the women who contributed to the struggle. The film's emphasis on women's testimonies and storytelling is further emphasized by our identification of the narrator and the director, whose gathering of women's multigenerational stories (including those of her own family) exposes the repressed national histories experienced by women while underscoring the resilience and vibrancy of their community beyond the traumatic past.

And while the community depicted on the screen is constituted through personal experiences focusing on the private domestic realm in opposition to the official state national culture, the narrator's role as a filmmaker brings it – both metaphorically, as part of the diegesis, and literally, through its exhibition – into the shared public sphere, creating a radically alternative mode of public war commemoration. And yet, while Lila through the film's narrative tells one story to the audience, she chooses to tell a different version to her daughter, remarking, 'Why tell her about the tragedies of the past? The occupation, the war and the hatred. It's better for her to dream of birds.' The gesture of protecting a child from 'the tragedies of the past' marks a real departure from the way children are usually interpellated in socialist war cinema, where their knowledge of struggle is the first step towards their involvement in it. In this way, too *La Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* is highly atypical for Algerian cinema, clearly representing a limit case of a socialist war film as well as a Thirdworldist film more generally – made at the very moment of its decline. The year of the film's release, 1978, was also the year of Boumediène's death. With the 1979 election of Chadli Bendjedid in Algeria, the socialist practices espoused by Ben Bella in the early 1960s began to be dismantled, while the state began to retreat from its support of women's rights, private and public alike, in a concession towards Islamism (Khanna 2008).

The film is structured through Lila's sense of dislocation and loss, with her brother's disappearance signifying the fact that the war has not been closed. As it turns out, the solidarity referenced in the film is distinct from the kind of internationalist solidarity we see in most official articulations of the genre, which are usually inseparable from the ideology of heroism.

But the anti-heroic narrative does not succumb to the subjective (neo) liberal narrative in which trauma is overcome by some recognition that allows for 'moving on' and of individual self-realization: tropes that become, in the post-Cold War period, normative in recent global art cinema's engagement with the topic of historical trauma and women. Instead of disavowing the experiences of war, the film seeks to restore women's place within it; instead of rejecting the struggle, it insists on the process of continuous resistance, refusing the assumption that liberation was achieved. By attending to the dissonances and fissures within the social body and the public memory and those who were left behind, Djebar's film treats the struggle for liberation as an unfinished project.

Wings

Similar concerns animate Larisa Shepitko's work, especially her 1965 film *Wings*, which centres on the post-war life of the woman fighter pilot. Born in the Donetsk region of Ukraine in 1938 and raised by a single mother who was a teacher, Shepitko was educated at Moscow's VGIK around the same time as Maldoror, studying first under Aleksandr Dovzhenko. Her directorial debut – VGIK diploma film *Heat* (*Znoi*, 1963) – was filmed on location in Kazakhstan and Kyrgizstan. An adaptation of a novella by the celebrated Kyrgiz writer Chingiz Aitmatov, it was entered into the Symposium of New Cinemas of Asia, Africa and Latin America at the 1964 Karlovy Vary festival and won the Grand Prix at the 1965 Frankfurt festival of cinemas of Asia and Africa. A perfect showcase of intra-Soviet internationalism, it was a truly collaborative project, with Shepitko working closely with her film crew, many of whom would soon become key figures of Central Asian cinema (Okeev 1987: 112).[11] In spite of the awards, because it was one of the first features produced at the Kyrgyz film studio, the managers of the studio refused to release it commercially, deeming the film ideologically ambiguous. The film's fate foreshadowed generally the precarious position of Central Asian poetic cinema within the Soviet cinematic apparatus, and, more particularly, the filmmaker's own struggles with it. On the international film circuit, Shepitko's films were quickly recognized as works of an important *auteur*: her last film, *The Ascent*, was the second film directed by a woman to win a Golden Bear at Berlin, and only the third film directed by a woman to win a top award at any major European film festival. *The Ascent* earned praise from critics and filmmakers around the world, from Senegalese Ousmane Sembène to Cuban Umberto Solás (both of whom served on the jury at Berlin that year). Indian filmmaker Basu Bhachattarya, who had seen the film at the Tashkent festival of Cinemas of Asia, Africa and Latin America, credited it with inspiring his commitment to support women filmmakers in his own country (Lipkov 1984: 46).[12] Shepitko died tragically in a car crash in 1979 at the age of forty-one, leaving *The Ascent* and *Wings* – both films centring on the experiences of the Second World War – as her main cinematic legacy.

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[11] Tolmush Okeev, who worked as a sound engineer on the film, by the late 1960s would become one of the most important voices of the Central Asian New Wave, and Bolotbek Shamshiev, who starred in the film, would go to direct several of Kyrgizstan's most popular films of the 1970s, including several adaptations of Aitmatov's work. See Okeev (1987: 112–14).

[12] Bhachattarya was the producer of *Touch* (*Sparsh*, 1980) directed by Sai Paranjpye, one of the first women filmmakers in India.

Like Djebar's *La Nouba*, *Wings* includes jarring and disorienting montage sequences of the protagonist's fragmented and disjointed memories and/or dreams that disrupt the narrative and produce a complex and rather ambiguous diegetic optical space. Yet while *La Nouba*'s narrative and spectatorial identification with Lila is, if anything, over-determined, Nadezhda, the protagonist of *Wings*, occupies a much more ambivalent position vis-à-vis both the director and the spectators. Unlike Shepitko, who was twenty-seven during the making of the film, its heroine is a middle-aged woman, a much-decorated fighter pilot of the Second World War. Forced to abandon her military career, she nonetheless occupies a highly placed social and professional position as a provincial official (a deputy in the City Soviet), and as the principal of a vocational school. Her heroism during the war is commemorated at the local museum. Her military demeanour (unnaturally straight back, buttoned up blouse, commanding voice, uncompromising and unwavering certainty of every pronouncement) is as striking as it appears to be at odds with her environment. She bears every marker of belonging to the Stalinist generation, the cultural formation to which Shepitko's own generation of the Thaw configured itself in stark opposition (Kaganovsky 2012). In an interview, the director said that she was, indeed, unable to 'become one' with her heroine 'but worked instead from a kind of intuitive genetic memory of the lives of my parents during the war' (cited in Kaganovsky 2012: 482). The film focuses on Nadezhda's particular inability to re-enter the very private, intimate realm, which Shepitko's generation of the Thaw cherished, as is evidenced by her failure as a mother (she is rejected by her adopted daughter), her ambivalence towards her long-suffering adoring suitor and her conflicts with the more freedom-loving students at her school. She rejects the traditional reduction of women to domesticity ('why does a person have to peel potatoes on Sunday?' she exclaims in a much-quoted outburst), and her one heart-breaking attempt to make herself sexually available to a stranger by unbuttoning her coat and provocatively slipping it off her shoulders is never even acknowledged, let alone reciprocated.

And yet, despite this emphasis on the difficulties of identification – Nadezhda's with her own private life and people's emotions; the director's with her heroine's generational place; the audiences' with the protagonist (as the film is full of self-reflexive cinematic tropes of mediation and lack of transparency) – *Wings* nonetheless gives us access to Nadezhda's most treasured, most intimate memories and dreams. Through a series of flashbacks, the audience gradually becomes aware not only of the protagonist's humanity and fragility, but, more importantly, of the experience of absolute freedom which she associates with the war. That freedom is indissolubly bound with its traumatic impact. During these montage sequences, providing point-of-view shots (from the cockpit of the plane, as we eventually come to realize) the narrative and spectatorial positions become aligned. Against the narrative, these subjective representations become the only space allowed to forge the unified symbolic community of the filmmaker, the character and the audiences; against the public persona of the character, these montage sequences allow us to interpret the character in a radically different and sympathetic way. Thus while providing a powerful critique of the war as the source of trauma as well as of the dehumanization of the Stalinist era associated with it, the film understands, dialectically, its foundational role as the moment of liberation and moral fortitude. Despite all of Nadezhda's irreparable faults, her commitment to doing the right thing, to the greater good and to the well-being of everyone is the ultimate driving force of her life. This is something clearly recognized and admired by many characters in the film and, ultimately, its audience. Shepitko's film is clear about the irreparable costs of war and militarization on both the women's individual psyche and the social organization, but in the greater scheme (one not allowed by a bourgeois narrative structure, but only through radically intervening in that structure) the larger stakes of the struggle are not easily disavowed.

Conclusion

Through their blending of (auto)biographical elements, attention to transgenerational memories, and the diversity and distinctiveness of women's experiences (joys and struggle alike), these three women's war films re-articulate the relationships between individual autonomy and the needs of the community as well as historical traumas of the past and the demands of future generations. They underscore the role of the state as, at the same time, a guarantor of rights and a mechanism of repression, and insist on the understanding of liberation as a transformative and continuous, unfinished process. As such they re-engage the key dialectics of world socialist cinema – tradition and modernization, and war and peace – in a way that is strikingly personal while fully committed to the socialist ideals of *communitas*, underscoring women's crucial role in historical and political transformative processes, and yet also in a way that went against the institutional and symbolic logic of the Cold War.

While public commemorations of wars and the revolutions were a fundamental part of all socialist cultures, their traces in contemporary social reality constituted a much more difficult subject – one that many filmmakers were eager to explore but the state was less eager to support. The aftermath of wars often included the reversal of the temporary disruptions of cultural norms, necessitated by it, including women's active participation in public life, while also causing changes in the family structure and/or increase in the number of disabled people. The burden of such adjustments falls disproportionately on women, whose traditional roles in patriarchal societies as caregivers tend to be swiftly restored and called upon by both, the state and the family members, to heal the wounds while also, especially in the socialist context, to respond to state demands to make up for the absence left by the men killed in the war. Such issues tended to be ignored by the socialist state, whose priorities resided in the combination of continuing political security and rebuilding the industrial and agrarian infrastructures. Nor do they easily lend themselves to heroic narratives. Here, an extension of the socialist cinema of armed struggle – films that explicitly explore the multiple psychic and cultural effects of these experiences and address the problem of war as part of peacetime – often offered a sharp contrast to the other forms of public commemorations, underscoring the profound and perhaps irresolvable contradiction at the core of the Marxist socialist vision of life as an ongoing and inescapable struggle. To me, as time goes on, these films continue to present endless moral and political dilemmas, which are yet to find a resolution in today's world, let alone today's cinema, symptomatic of our continuous collective difficulty of making sense of this shared past and the challenges of re-imagining solidarity in the post-socialist world. Recognizing them as a distinct transnational geopolitical cinematic formation within what we refer to as 'world cinema' and placing these films in relation to each other and their shared spaces of circulation is the first step towards this ongoing project.

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6

Nation, gender and political consciousness: Souleymane Cissé's *Baara* and Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire*

Sarah Jilani

In a 1975 essay, the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe writes: 'The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution, which began to reconcile us to ourselves' (145). 'Mental revolution' and a 'reconciliation with oneself' suggest transformations in people's thought processes and psyche as much as their outward-facing politics and actions – something that chimes with the 'psycho-political' (Hook 2004) writings of psychiatrist and anti-colonial philosopher Frantz Fanon. Fanon reminds us (1961, 1964) that the historical conditions Achebe here gestures to – those of the decades of anti-colonial struggle and nation-building – were also creative conditions, in that they could, and did, transform people's identities and social relations.[1] In light of this, the lived experience of anti-colonial nationalist struggle, and the effects of its political and social transformations at the level of consciousness are persistent but evolving preoccupations in post-independence or 'early' (1960s and 1970s) cultural production. Even though the pioneering generation of mid-twentieth-century African and South Asian film directors has been criticized and praised in equal measure as filmmakers who used the medium primarily for national consciousness-raising (Harrow 1980; Armes 1987, 2006; Gopalan 2015), filmmakers of this generation, such as Ousmane Sembène of Senegal, Med Hondo of Mauritania and Ritwik Ghatak of India, were deeply attuned to the contradictions and hidden agendas behind avowedly national aims. Their work often critiqued the neocolonial economic, political and social conditions that followed their respective national independences.

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[1] I define 'nation' here as a concept of shared community that can 'be imagined without linguistic communality' (Anderson 1983: 123) but which can nevertheless be, in Fanon's sense, a political community of people, whilst having some constructed (Brennan 1989) and some derivative (Chatterjee 1993) elements.

The search for an alternative, socio-culturally relevant cinematic practice interested a younger generation of filmmakers, too. The artistic aspiration to evolve with and depict everyday national conditions informed the cinematic realism of directors like the Malian Souleymane Cissé and the Indian Satyajit Ray, whose active years predominantly fell within the 1970s and 1980s. These decades began to see West Africa and South Asia diverge quite decisively from the Third Worldist political energies of the Bandung era, whose 'revolutionary visions and intimate solidarities' (Pham and Shilliam 2016, 9) were by then over a decade past. Cissé began working at a time of political and economic crisis in Mali. The devastation of the 1972–3 drought was ongoing; the Traoré government's over-confidence in multinational investments had not yet materialized; and local labour was disadvantaged by the financial structures of the CFA Franc, 'Africa's last colonial currency' (Pigeaud and Sylla 2021). Ray, on the other hand, had the majority of his work behind him at the turn of the 1980s, and a heart attack in 1983 meant his final films were completed with the help of his son, Sandip Ray. India's political climate, however, was as turbulent as Mali's; still reeling from the scars of the Emergency (1975–7), ethno-religious schisms were growing. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's heavy-handed response in Amritsar in 1984 would lead to her assassination by her Sikh bodyguards soon after. While the two films considered here interrogate nationalisms in different ways and different contexts, they do so backgrounded by such conditions of fragmentation. They are Cissé's second feature *Baara* (1978), often translated as 'work' from the Bambara language, and *Ghare Baire*, Ray's 1984 adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's novella *Home and the World* (1919) – two films that articulate anxieties about the trajectories taking their respective postcolonial nations ever further away from the promises of their independence eras.[2]

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[2] My use of 'postcolonial', as in 'postcolonial nations', is, as Ella Shohat proposes, intended to indicate 'less an "after" than a following, going beyond the moment' (1992: 108) of independence, and towards 'living with the legacies of', in a broad sense. When referring to socio-economic, cultural and political conditions of continued asymmetrical relation to Western capitalism after a nation-state's nominal independence, I follow Kwame Nkrumah's analysis (1965) in using 'neocolonial' and 'neocolonialism' throughout.

They communicate their shared but differently inflected preoccupations with the question of whether, and how, anti-colonial nationalisms invest in future neocolonialisms when they work to minimize the risk to patriarchy, and to class and caste hierarchy. To that end, *Baara* and *Ghare Baire* reveal how, and why, anti-colonial nationalisms that failed to challenge these hierarchies only partially and selectively fostered an awareness of the structural workings of imperialism.

I will refer to this awareness throughout as 'political consciousness', to mean an awareness of the political dimension (the power relations) underscoring virtually all facets of lived experience. Or, as Derek Hook helpfully paraphrases from Fanon, an 'awareness both of how one is crucially a part of the world and its conditions, and of how one can and should attempt to change that world on the basis of a carefully considered political project' (2004: 92). One of the major unfinished projects of historical decolonisation was a crisis in what several anti-colonial writers, politicians and revolutionaries from the Global South called consciousness-raising. This crisis was one wherein political, social and economic forces delayed and deterred *ways of being in the world* that many had hoped the twentieth century's anti-colonial struggles would precipitate in the global South. For Burkinabé leader Thomas Sankara, this social and psycho-political way of being would see formerly colonized peoples confidently 'accept themselves as they are' (Sankara in Murrey 2018, 82), ridding themselves of any internalized racism and colourism as part of their struggles for liberation. For Ousmane Sembène, it was similarly about the 'mentalities that remain to be decolonised' (2008: 73), and for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it was the 'mind[s]' themselves (2011) of both colonized and colonizer that needed to be decolonized. We know these complex psycho-political hopes did not transpire fully, with promising activities such as those within Afro–Asian networks (Halim 2017; Stolte 2019; Djagalov 2020) running out of steam in the global crises of the 1970s, and many anti-colonial figures being assassinated with the aid of the CIA (Williams 2021) before their policies could bear full fruit. Yet political consciousness remained an avowed concern for several African and Asian filmmakers. Sam Okoth Opondo, for instance, notes that FEPACI filmmakers engaged 'with micro-political and transgressive practices of everyday life … [disturbing] statist forms of cultural governance' (2014: 41).[3] Similarly, Utpal Dutt, Bijon Bhat Ghosh and other members of Indian progressive film societies were 'struggling with the question of form as part of their questioning of what constituted a “good” cinema’ (Majumdar 2012: 732) at this time, seeking aesthetics suited to mass political pedagogy.

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[3] Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes.

While much can be said on the philosophical nuances of the notion of ‘political consciousness’, for the purposes of this critique and within the periodizing limitations of this chapter, I work with the above ideas from the thinkers of the independence era in Africa and Asia in order to consider some of those ‘micropolitical and transgressive practices of everyday life’ (Opondo 41) in *Baara* and *Ghare Baire*, focusing especially on their consciousness-raising effects. A series of lived experiences, tacitly and overtly classed and gendered, result in the politicization – to different kinds and degrees – of these two films’ protagonists. Cissé and Ray suggest consequential shifts in political consciousness occur when the nationalisms certain characters are exposed to fail to resolve the intersecting inequities they observe within their everyday lives. The formal tools of the visual medium come to the aid of dialogue and plot to express how the systemic oppressions of colonialism produce and reproduce themselves after the independences at the level of intersubjective relations, space and place, and gender. They entwine with patriarchies that sometimes preceded, but are continually remade by colonialism, neocolonialism and global capitalism. A comparative approach that considers these two films from different postcolonial contexts, produced within six years of each other, can prove conducive to examining these dynamics between nation, gender and political consciousness.

In Cissé’s *Baara*, which follows a young textile factory manager caught between the demands of his boss and his desire to help workers organize, facial close-ups, ‘haptic visuality’ (in Laura Marks’ theorization [2000]) and the decisive role of women in its climax all map the workings of capitalist and patriarchal conditions in a neocolonial Mali. However, these tools also gesture to how and where such conditions have fostered a degree of political consciousness in those who are exploited most thoroughly in the film’s context: workers in general, and especially women – of all classes. In *Ghare Baire,* Ray focuses on the gendered dichotomy of home/world against the backdrop of an early-twentieth-century manifestation of Indian nationalism. In this period film, the discourses of both colonial class norms and Indian nationalism are utilized politically and psychologically by the two male characters in order to delimit the female protagonist’s growing political consciousness. Working both at the level of their diegetics and in their aesthetic choices, *Baara* and *Ghare Baire* examine how, and where, these very same conditions can give rise to consciousness of their workings.

'Were those your own thoughts?': *Ghare Baire* and the gendering of nationalism

Originally published in 1916 and translated into English in 1919, Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* is a story where 'home' and 'world' blur into one another during a period of Indian anti-colonial nationalism. This period saw the Swadeshi movement from 1905 to 1917, which responded to the 1905 partition of Bengal with a boycott on British goods. While a fierce opponent of British rule in India, Tagore was both a dissenter and reformer where nationalism was concerned (Nandy 1994). His critique of nationalism foregrounded the regional so as to cast nationalist discourses against the materially lived life of a locality (Tagore 1917), which tended to challenge notions of mutually exclusive spheres of culture or human activity that narratives of nation stand on, such as private/public, Hindu/Muslim, spiritual/secular. Yet, at the same time, the affective charge of the idea of 'home' in anti-colonial nationalist discourses of this time was enabled through its feminization – something Indra Nath Chaudhuri (2013) finds Tagore partook of, to a degree. This feminization enabled the symbolism of 'home' to be overlaid onto the land mass of the Subcontinent itself, the realm of Hindu spirituality and to upper-caste Indian cultural norms.[4] The story follows Bimala, a young woman who, at first, seems to embody these meanings. She emerges from *purdah* at the urging of her British-educated husband Nikhil, a *zamindar*, just as Nikhil's boyhood friend Sandip, one of the leaders of the Swadeshi movement, is visiting their estate.[5] For both Nikhil and Sandip, the 'world' is a male realm: one of intellect and moral philosophy, for the humanist Nikhil, and one of politics and struggle, for the nationalist Sandip. Sandip and Bimala's meeting sets in motion the dissolution of the gendered delineation of these spaces; as Bimala grows attracted to both Sandip and Swadeshi ideology, she is faced with a choice that calls on her own political consciousness.

Satyajit Ray's 1984 film adaptation sustains most of this plot but chooses to emphasize where Nikhil and Sandip are shown to be blind to how gender and capitalism operate – to how, in other words, nationalism and colonial capital are and always have been of the 'home', too. In doing so, it foregrounds the story's triangulation between the structures of Indian (bourgeois) nationalism, gender and colonial capital. This is not necessarily because Swadeshi represents a reactionary kind of nationalism, but because the class entitlement of the upper-caste *bhadralok* (Bengali gentleman) Sandip – an entitlement that British colonial rule frustrates – is something he mistakes for nationalist feeling. Meanwhile Nikhil, the benign landlord who believes in Indian self-rule but rejects Swadeshi for its violent tactics, still wishes to see Indian nationalism produce a new *bhadramahila* (Bengali gentlewoman), whose education and good taste will make her an ideal helpmeet for the modern Indian man. This triangulation between anti-colonial nationalisms, capitalism and patriarchy is revealed, though not resolved, when Bimala begins to expose Nikhil's and Sandip's nationalisms as contingent upon safeguarding these class and gender positions.

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[4] *Bhārat Mātā* (Mother India), for example, is a personification of India as a mother goddess: a trope popularized after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. In *Ghare Baire*, Sandip implies Bimala embodies her.

[5] *Purdah* is the religious and social practice of female seclusion prevalent in some Muslim and Hindu communities. A *zamindar* is a man of the hereditary landowning classes in various regions of India, whose powers were further entrenched during British rule (Ray 2000).

An early scene in Ray's film introduces Bimala as intelligent and headstrong, with a degree of political awareness that exceeds her husband Nikhil's expectations. When she correctly answers him about what Swadeshi is, Nikhil exclaims, 'You know so much!' Bimala responds with, 'I read the newspaper'.[6] Her confinement exists to a degree in Nikhil's mind, where he fails to assume that the newspaper that informs him of the world – a particularly 'national' form of media (Anderson 1983) – has also informed Bimala's understanding of her present. This exchange, and its evidence of Bimala's interaction with the 'world', is augmented by Ray's formal choices. Framing technique and *mise-en-scène* prove key to his communicating the emotive and narrative undercurrents of scenes like these. Here, Ray favours single light sources on the actors' faces; his framing is tight, directing attention to the unspoken words found in facial expression and gesture. Dialogue is layered, as brought to life by actor Swatileka Sengupta's complex tonal delivery – teasing, yet barbed.

Meanwhile, the materiality of this scene functions with as much depth. Setting is rarely if ever merely indicative of where or who characters are in *Ghare Baire*, but also of 'structures of feeling' in Raymond Williams' sense (1978) – of what Ray's characters are preoccupied with, what social forces are presently at work, and what 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships' (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015: 5) are present. An abundance of textiles – cotton Edwardian blouses and silk saris – lie draped on the furniture around them as Bimala explains to Nikhil that Swadeshi demands the boycott of Manchester cotton.[7] Ray's camera shoots in close-up the myriad objects in the room as Nikhil points out, one by one, that Bimala's comb, mirror, perfumes, dressing table and four-poster bed are all imported. Seeing her material surroundings anew in light of this information, Bimala immediately understands she is implicated, and demonstrates her political will in asking: 'then what should we do?'

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[6] All subsequent quotes from *Home and the World* (1984), Dir. Satyajit Ray [DVD]. New York: Criterion Collection Eclipse Series 40 – Late Ray.

The significance of props and set design continues throughout the building action, when Bimala agrees to then venture into the semi-public space of the sitting room to meet Nikhil's childhood friend Sandip. The heavy Edwardian drapes, the patterned silk of the couches, the men's *dhotis* and *kurtas*[8] as well as Bimala's fiery red sari all saturate the frame with patterned textiles, visually overwhelming the audience. For this class of Bengalis at this particular period of time, 'non-clothing textiles helped to negotiate the novel conditions of urban life, where homes were increasingly open to non-kin visitors, and men and women shared space in new ways' (McGowan 2016: 518). This crowded *mise-en-scène* also suggests the characters' class separation from the politics that is the subject of their conversation; the three characters are surrounded by material indicators of colonial tastes. These objects, Ray's direction suggests, have reached a degree of familiarity from use and now exist in a 'homegrown' register: Bimala adorns the English silver vases with local flora, and Nikhil serves his guests Darjeeling tea in Derby porcelain. Indeed, the accouterments of the colonial economy inform the characters' actions, organize their movements through space and even indicate their thoughts. Bimala interacts with objects in her sitting room almost incessantly throughout her stolen meetings with Sandip. Dedicated close-ups of particular props implicate the characters within the multi-directional flows of colonial capital in their lives – as oppressed colonial subjects from an oppressive class and caste. Coins facilitate a pivotal plot moment, where Bimala starts to grow wary of Sandip's motivations upon seeing him visibly exult at the touch of gold. Not just a matter of stylization, *Ghare Baire*'s 'visual excess' (Choudhuri 2013: 94) thus serves to communicate how Sandip and Nikhil's assumptions about Bimala's sheltered life have no basis in reality. With the home being populated by these objects, Ray renders it as an always-already historicized, 'worlded' space (WReC 2015), in the sense of colonial capital's penetration.

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[7] The Swadeshi movements aimed, amongst other things, to put economic pressure on the British Raj via a cotton boycott. Historians have pointed out there was little alternative, however, to imported cotton in the colonial market: Indian textile markets were only allowed to expand sufficiently to meet domestic demands after the 1930s (McGowan 2016: 519).

[8] Traditional Indian tunic and trousers for men.

This visual language not only acknowledges 'home' and 'world' as mutually effectual, but undercuts any easy gendering of home as feminine and world as masculine – groupings that theorists of anti-colonial nationalism like Partha Chatterjee (1993) have not fully queried. Feminist analyses do continue to reveal the gendered nature of nations and nationalism (Spivak 1987; Mohanty 2003; Vergès 2019), however, and find that an important aspect of this gendering is spatial. 'The assumption that "the nationalist mind" was always already male and that the issue of national "self-identity" was fundamentally a crisis of masculinity' (Gopal 2012: 61) rests on the gendering of space, which then makes it possible to posit that – in *Ghare Baire*'s context, for instance – women like Bimala existed outside the economic life of India under British colonialism, and therefore could not have any claims to the kinds of lived experience that may foster a so-called 'nationalist mind'.[9] As such, this is necessarily about the location of the development of political consciousness. The risk for patriarchy lies in that the instability of the demarcations between 'home' and 'world' is the very source of Bimala's growing political consciousness, which shows up the contradictions of an anti-colonial strategy that not only excludes women as economic subjects, but also asks the most from those who have the least.

This exposé also functions through the embodied experience of everyday life. One scene where Sandip sings a Swadeshi poem, uplifting and collectivist in its vision of India's freedom, is affectively charged for Bimala. Ray's close-up emphasizes a degree of internalization is taking place: ideology put to art has the rhetorical power to (re)inform people's perceptions of themselves in their world. But with the interruption of the servants with refreshments, Sandip confesses boyishly that he has not gotten over his weakness for sweets or foreign cigarettes. The fervour in his song, followed immediately by a return to bourgeois material comforts, now rings of Frantz Fanon's assessment of the colonized intellectual, who undertakes works of art

> in a style that is meant to be national but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The colonised intellectual who returns to his people through works of art behaves in fact like a foreigner.
>
> (Fanon 1961, 160)

It is Bimala's interjection that brings the 'world' of Sandip's politics into the 'home' that is Sandip's bodily pleasures: 'Can't you give [smoking] up? Don't you have the willpower?' Chuckling with discomfort, Sandip covers his exposure by urging Bimala to join the movement, but his revolutionary credentials have already been undermined. Ironically, it is Sandip who relegates the bodily realm to women, frequently hinting that elite Bengali wives like Bimala can socialize Bengali men into nation-love because they already embody nationalist feelings. While some therefore read his elevation of Bimala as empowering (Mitra 1995), his worship rests on the idea that women exist in some kind of idyllic state prior to intellectual faculties. Their revolutionary desires arise from their biology, instead of from their lived experiences, material conditions or acquired knowledge. Not only is Sandip attributing Bimala's nationalist sympathies to the sensual realm, but also throwing his own ideology into question. What are *his* motives, if *his* nationalist feeling does not arise from a place of embodied experience, as he so performatively celebrates in Bimala?

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[9] See also Ashis Nandy (1994) and Indra Mitra (1995) on the gendering of space in Tagore's original.

As Anirudh Deshpande points out (2009), this class of Bengali men often viewed the early Indian nationalist project through European colonial interpretations of 'progress'. For Sandip, power – when wrested from the British – would by the natural order of things go to those of his gender and background. And while scholarship agrees (Peacock 2011; Sengupta 2012) that Nikhil's 'good' nationalism is in contrast to this, Ray's adaptation suggests Nikhil's views rest on adjacent thinking. In a scene located in the symbolic space of a balcony, where the film's colour scheme is a meaningful duality of warm and cool tones (Bimala stepping away from the home fires and out into the world), Nikhil asks: 'Those things you said tonight: were those your own thoughts?' Despite urging Bimala out of *purdah* to see her demonstrate free will, Nikhil still holds Sandip's influence as the sole possible explanation for Bimala's growing interest in anti-colonial nationalism. His anxiety on this front presupposes 'the nationalist mind was always already male' (Gopal 2012: 61), and resents the encroachment of the 'world' into the spiritual-sexual realm (Bimala) that is meant to be his alone. Nikhil's is less a commitment to what *swaraj* (self-rule) could mean for societal transformation, and more a desire to see Bimala fit a twentieth-century colonialism that now requires a little more – but not too much – education in its upper-class women.

Tagore's text enacts such anxieties about nation and gender, but it does not solve them. In Ray's adaptation, Bimala's growing political consciousness leads her to act in a way that rejects both Nikhil's Enlightenment liberalism (by committing to the nationalist movement) and Sandip's provocation-as-politics (by refusing to scapegoat Sandip's innocent protégé, Amulya). Ray's script and visual techniques present the troubling ease with which nationalist feeling can serve as a cover-up for the class frustrations of Indian male elites, and how this is often performed upon and via women and lower-caste men. In light of this, the film's dark resolution makes legible the full substance of Ray's critique. Bimala herself utters it before Nikhil leaves to intervene in the riot that will cost him his life: 'I knew it. I knew I'd be punished.' Social punishment awaits a woman who has not moved through 'home' and 'world' embodying the roles she should have, and certainly if she has begun to demystify this false dichotomy.

‘I know how you made your fortune’: Women, labour and neocolonial space in *Baara* (1978)

While the contradictions of both the nationalist line and colonial capital are equally central to Souleymane Cissé’s film *Baara*, the spaces of ‘home’ and ‘world’ in his film have undergone transformations. Cissé deliberately uses the built environment as a vehicle for themes familiar from *Ghare Baire*, while making distinctly spatial formal choices around framing, sequencing and texture to depict an urban locale where Western capital cheapens African labour with the help of ostensibly ‘nationalist’ African governments. *Baara* locates political potential in the ‘homes’ and the ‘world’ within which this exploitation occurs. As such, those experiencing multiple and overlapping forms of exploitation within the film’s spaces – from the young men awaiting casual work to the women in social reproductive labour – are crucial to the dialectical relation Cissé sets up between characters’ political consciousness and those spaces where gendered and classed struggles take place. *Baara* follows two young men whose fates are intertwined by their distant kinship: Balla Traoré, a middle manager at a textile factory, and Diarra, a good-natured but oftentimes naïve porter who keeps getting harassed off the streets by the police. Although Balla is instructed by factory owner Sissoko to lay off workers to cover the factory’s 200 million Franc debt, he secretly disobeys. Balla gives Diarra a job at the factory, then encourages a workers’ meeting on conditions and wages, leading to tragedy.[10]

The late 1970s in Mali, sketched briefly earlier, also saw General Traoré hurl a particular accusation at the national factories for ‘draining the resources of the peasants, inducing drought, famine, and corruption’ (Diawara 2003: 70) as part of a privatization push. As a fraught terrain of national and international dynamics, textiles in *Baara*, as in *Ghare Baire*, prove a key trope. In historical context, textiles evoke those markets that colonialism and neocolonialism forcibly created in Asia and Africa. The profit in destroying the Bengali muslin industry in the nineteenth century was to the British Empire what

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[10] All subsequent references from *Baara* (1978), Dir. Souleymane Cissé [DVD]. Ennetbaden: Trigon Film.

Malian cotton today may be to the global fast fashion chain.[11] In *Baara*, the chasm between the conditions of (neocolonial) labour and the value of their productivity is at its most obvious in the setting of the textile factory, which is also where manager Balla – of a generation of educated young Africans who grew up hearing the rhetoric of national independence – acts in favour of labour over capital. And it is this setting that especially reveals what Fredric Jameson coins the 'primordial crime of capitalism' (1986: 84), the theft of collective wealth in which cotton has been of major consequence since the plantation. As such, *Baara* asks whether solidarities can be forged against the exploitative labour conditions of postcolonial urban spaces, and whether these can bring about shifts in political consciousness. Although, like Ray, Cissé poses no clear answer to this question, asking it through attention to space, power, labour and gender proves revealing in its own right.

The French colonial imaginary conceived of space as external to the self: one 'lived "in" space, one did not create space by interaction with it. It was thus an inert realm which could be remodelled, not a realm which was in process' (Langford 2005: 103). Its configuration as such helped facilitate the erasure and oppression of the Indigenous inhabitants of a place. Such 'spatial strategies', Henri Lefebvre explains (1991: 112), not only unfold in space, but are also about its appropriation, deployment and control. For example, middle-class Balla is introduced to the viewer as an educated, idealistic young man who defies the class hierarchies inherent in the spatial layout of the factory (he is more on the factory floor than in his air-conditioned office). Yet Cissé's tracking shot charting Balla's movement among his workers gives the viewer a sense of purposelessness. His attempt to talk over the noise of the machines is fruitless, and his workers know their tasks without his instruction. Cissé presents the factory's spatial order as one that compels its users – whether middle manager or worker – into their compartmentalized roles, producing or overseeing production for the neocolonial demands of global capital.

On the workers' part, physical work cripples their political life, minimizing the possibility of organizing. When Balla tells Diarra to be at the labour meeting, Diarra answers, 'I'm too tired.' The difference in their embodied experience of the same space is unmistakable thanks to the intense physicality of this scene, which contrasts Balla's crisp white shirt with Diarra's naked torso, glistening with sweat and dye. Cissé here perhaps highlights the paradox of educated young Africans who want to be the vanguard of working-class consciousness, yet cannot relate to their barriers to political organizing, such as overwork. This physicality is, in fact, a major tool amongst Cissé's aesthetic techniques in *Baara.* In addition to several intimate close-ups of the men in this particular factory, it also focuses tightly on the faces of various male and female inhabitants of the city – from the chorus women who accompany a travelling *griot*, to an imam resting in a mosque's shaded courtyard. When in the factory, the viewer's attention is held by sequences featuring the faces, hands and creations of the welders, dye makers, assemblers, weavers, printmakers, cotton spinners and machinists at the factory. Walter Benjamin (1969), Bela Balázs (2010) and Gilles Deleuze (2013) amongst others have all described the affective power of the close-up, usually utilized to reveal hidden meaning and disclose inner states. Cissé's extreme close-ups (forehead to chin) work via Marks' notion of 'haptic visuality' (2000): this describes a tactile connection that vision enables between the spectator and objects on film, where the eye functions as a faculty of touch in especially sensorial and embodied filmic moments. The physicality of the workers' labours is foregrounded through these close-ups, where the sweat on their faces, the fumes of the machinery, hair texture and the layer of red street dust on skin are discernible. An almost kinaesthetic experience for the viewer, these impart the sense that enduring such spaces and going through such motions cannot but transform body and consciousness. This connection implies that their labouring is not just a source of exhaustion and neutralization, but also a facilitator of knowledge in that their work informs their embodied experience of space, creativity, collectivity and hierarchy. I will return to the visual power of the body, for Cissé's climax is marked by the naked and invulnerable body of Sissoko's wife Djeneba, suggesting both the forms that women's exploited labour can take and their consciousness of this exploitation.

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[11] See also Bhadra (2014) for a study of the impact of the British Industrial Revolution on Bengal. Mali, on the other hand, has recorded its highest cotton production for the 2021–2 season; however, only 2 per cent of the cotton is processed in Mali, and 15 per cent of their national GDP depends on its sale, in what is sometimes referred to as 'cotton imperialism' (Haas 2021).

As *Baara* moves towards its conclusion, a series of scenes cross-cut two spaces that are explicitly political and gendered: the street and the bedroom. During the workers' meeting that sets the finale in motion, Sissoko's informants lure Balla to his office and strangle him. We then cut to Sissoko himself, who is being driven home by his chauffeur; then to Sissoko's much younger wife Djeneba, who is at that moment in bed with a lover. Sissoko comes home; the lover flees; the couple argue. We cut to the street, where Balla's wife M'Batoma has called at Sissoko's mansion in the midst of the quarrel. Inside, Djeneba is holding the upper hand; she speaks what is to be her last truth to power in a striking, static mid-shot, where Cissé positions the camera slightly above her eye-level. The technique uncomfortably places the audience in Sissoko's position, looking down on a vulnerable but accusatory woman. 'I know how you made your fortune. Your father, a small clerk, misused public funds, and you dare to brag about it', Djeneba says; Sissoko chokes her. That

Baara shows Djeneba to be committing adultery just before her own moral accusation of Sissoko is a telling choice. Sissoko murders Djeneba in a fit of rage that stems both from his perceived emasculation and from hearing the humiliating truth that his power is bought, his wealth stolen.

The physicality of the murder; the vulnerability in Djeneba's half-clothed body; and the surroundings full of imported luxury brands (Marlboro cigarettes, Johnny Walker whiskey) make the supposedly 'private' motivations of this crime entangle with its politically motivated aspect: the silencing of a whistleblower. Given what an integral role public and private spaces have together played in constituting the gendered body,[12] for Djeneba to thus politicize the bedroom speaks to how 'women face a form of hyper-exploitation under patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism' (Krishnan 2018: 120). For this character to use her last words to politicize the bedroom as an extension of the hypocrisy and violence of the neocolonial nation-state suggests that the structures that make possible her material conditions are known to her.

Like *Ghare Baire*'s triangulation between patriarchy, colonial capital and its ostensible opposite in anti-colonial nationalism, the governing systems of post-independence Mali, *Baara* suggests, function through the violence of Western capital in collusion with the neocolonial state. Both are always also empowered by a third factor, that of patriarchal violence within so-called private space. The vast majority of Cissé's characters suffer the consequences of knowing either through lived experience (such as Djeneba and M'Batoma) or learning through collective organizing (such as Diarra) – the spatial, sexual and social mechanisms of neocolonial patriarchy. At the same time (and this is what makes Cissé a dialectical filmmaker indeed) this mutually constitutive relationship between spaces and the knowledges of those who labour within them means that neocolonialism lays itself open to the risk of cultivating political consciousness within, and through, any location of its workings. For instance, despite the obvious differences in Djeneba's and Bimala's times and places, it is significant that two upper-class women – both seemingly sheltered from the political and economic strife of the 'world' outside – thwart the attempts of men who seek to control their consciousness of class and gender. The two women's growing political consciousness culminates in choices that spell class betrayal precisely because they are acts of spatial trespass.

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[12] The city, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, 'is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality', and 'the built environment provides the context for, and coordinates contemporary forms of, the body' (1995: 104).

Conclusion

This chapter's discussion has not intended to flatten the contextual and cultural differences between these two films, and cannot. *Ghare Baire* gestures towards an important question for its context of Indian nationalisms, before and after independence: whether these did indeed seek as radical a break with colonial hierarchies as they are today remembered as having done, and to what extent these nationalisms' investment in patriarchy complicates this. *Baara*, too, presents us with post-independence national conditions that are marked by accumulation and divestment, production and social reproduction, but offers a way in which we can understand the relation between neocolonial exploitation and political consciousness in its own particular context of 1970s Mali. Sustained throughout both films is that the intersections of patriarchy and (neo-)colonial capitalism are revealed when women's experiences are attended to, and also when shared material conditions ultimately disprove the false demarcation of social, political and economic forces into those shaping the 'home' and those shaping the 'world'. *Ghare Baire* and *Baara* look to shifts at the level of political consciousness in order to chart where and how moments of ongoing class and gender struggle in the (post-)colony, large and small, always give rise to lived knowledge of the structures of oppression. This consciousness precedes the very possibility of political action.

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7

Lights, camera, action! Nollywood female filmmakers as nego-feminists

Morountodun Joseph

Choosing to focus on Omoni Oboli in this chapter is rooted in various factors. This includes my advocacy for girls' education and the rights of underserved girls in Nigeria, a theme in some of Oboli's films – female advocacy. My recognition of the power film wields and the potential to have a far-reaching influence on audiences has been a key interest in my research. Therefore, the attraction to Oboli's body of work was, for me, natural. Her skilful employment of film as a powerful tool to make strong socio-cultural and political commentary about Nigeria while entertaining audiences has been consistent in her oeuvre, evident in films such as *Love Is War* (2019). Oboli didn't make entry into filmmaking by producing socially conscious films; however, she soon found the enormity of film as a tool to lend her voice to social injustices. In her words, 'If I were to speak loudly for everyone to hear, it would be through films.'[1]

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[1] Oboli speaking as a panellist at the *Inspiring Women Filmmakers' Conference* hosted by the School of Media and Communication, Pan Atlantic University, Lagos, on 15 March 2024.

Omoni Oboli: Carving a space in Nollywood and beyond

The image of Omoni Oboli in Figure 7.1 underscores her presence and authority within the Nollywood film industry, highlighting her artistic agency. The professional composition, engaging pose and bold styling employed in the image enhance this portrayal, embodying her creative and entrepreneurial prowess in contemporary Nigerian cinema. This visual framing establishes a foundation for an examination of her contributions as a critical voice among female filmmakers in Nollywood.

Oboli has proven herself a versatile screenwriter, director, actor and producer, adept at delivering entertainment and critical social messages. Reflecting on her entry into Nollywood in a recent African Screen Worlds interview, titled 'Shaping the Conversation: Decolonising Film with Nigerian Women Filmmakers', Oboli candidly admits, 'It was scary [to become a director in a male-dominated industry], but it was something that I had to do if I wanted my stories to have my DNA' (SOAS CCIMSS 2022). Oboli and other filmmakers attest that being a filmmaker in Nigeria is challenging due to various factors, including infrastructure and resource limitations. However, being a female

FIGURE 7.1 *Omoni Oboli (Photo: Omoni Oboli TV).*

filmmaker presents even more hurdles. It demands a steadfast determination to forge ahead despite socio-cultural stereotypes and financial constraints. It is what Nigerian feminist scholar Obioma Nnaemeka likens to walking like a chameleon: 'goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views' (2004: 382). In this chapter, I explore Oboli's and other women filmmakers' journeys in Nollywood from the perspective of Obioma's concept of 'nego-feminism', exploring how the ethos of this theory might help to unravel their challenges, impact and sustenance in a male-dominated industry. Nego-feminism goes beyond the conventional boundaries of theory and practice, creating a third space where theory meets practice, taking into account Indigenous African epistemological systems. In the next session, I further explain this concept and African feminist theory, which Nnaemeka forcefully argues must be built on the Indigenous. This theory forms the basis for inquiring into women's contributions to cinema, and particularly Oboli's intervention as a filmmaker seeking social justice.

Nego-feminism: An African feminism built on the Indigenous

African women do feminism; feminism is what they do for themselves and for others.

Obioma Nnaemeka

Obioma Nnaemeka, in her proposition of nego-feminism, presents a compelling argument for the imperative of 'building on the Indigenous in the construction of African feminist theory' (2004: 262). She defines nego-feminism as the feminism of negotiation – a no-ego feminism – and situates it within the context of African proverbs, which have long been core expressions of wisdom in African communities. These proverbs underscore the collaborative nature upon which nego-feminism is built. From the collective Igbo proverb 'when something stands, something stands beside it', to the Sotho proverb, 'A person is a person because of other people', we are introduced to fundamental principles that advocate for a shift away from an individualistic to a collective approach of engagement. This shift has profound implications for African filmmaking, as it encourages a more inclusive and diverse narrative that reflects the realities and experiences of members of society. The shift is absorbed in Oboli's decision in *Wives on Strike* (2016) to carry the burden of underage marriage in Nigeria and tell a story that highlights collective action to solve the problem.

Ethics in nego-feminism are not only reflected in narratives portrayed on screen but also reinforce the principles of inclusivity in practice. They underpin the concepts of collaboration and inclusivity, which have been integral to Nollywood since the 1990s. Oboli's work is shaped by the principles of no-ego feminism, which emphasizes collaborative and community-centred approaches, eschewing individualistic pursuits for the collective upliftment and representation of women. Obioma makes a clear case for nego-feminism as a feminism devoid of ego, a feminism that seeks ways to negotiate to achieve its objectives. At its core, this reflects a detachment from individualism, not in a reductionist sense, but as a way of shedding the distractions of the ego, which is often tied to selfishness, fear, competition, and the pursuit of growth through the exploitation of others. It embraces purpose and shared values that fuel the drive to achieve important goals. This contextualizes why one of the key tenets of Obioma's nego-feminist ideal is dynamism grounded in action. As such, she explains that 'for African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct' (2004: 378). As this chapter progresses, nego-feminist ethics and filmmaking practices in Nollywood are examined, highlighting the evolving contributions of women pioneers who continue to create in spite of patriarchal constrictions. Their works – encompassing narratives, characters and even underpinning lawsuits – reflect these nego-feminist ethics.

Women in Nollywood and Nollywood's transnationalism

With the decline of traditional griots tasked with the oral recounting of history, contemporary filmmakers may assume a role akin to modern griots whose stories, like those of Ousmane Sembène, transcend documentation and creatively (re)write important aspects of history. Nollywood's reputation as a key source of popular culture has been consistent, significant and progressive. Over the past three decades, it has become what Onookome Okome and Matthias Krings describe as the 'most visible form of cultural machine on the African continent' (2013:1). The permanence of Nollywood within the cultural landscape has been established, demonstrating considerable economic stability. Serious attention was paid to Nollywood's economic viability when, in 2013, it 'recorded a total revenue of ₦1.72bn (£3.6 million) … making it number three globally in terms of revenue and quality of production, according to the local daily Business Day' (Africa Research Bulletin 2014). Elizabeth Johnson and Donald Culverson, citing Jake Bright, note that 'the Nigerian government released data for the first time showing Nollywood is a $3.3. billion sector, with 1844 films produced in 2013 alone' (2016: 2). About a decade after, in 2024, Funke Akindele broke box office records with her film, *A Tribe Called Judah*, becoming the first Nigerian film to cross the 1-billion-naira mark, earning ₦1.2 billion (£700,000) in Nigerian theatres.

Going by the number of films sold yearly, Nollywood audiences worldwide are ready markets to invest in stories. In her article 'Charting Nollywood's Appeal Globally and Locally', Nigerian film scholar Moradewun Adejunmobi argues that within Nigeria, 'a successful film might sell between 50,000 and 120,000 copies', and she says that the successful Nollywood blockbuster, *Osuofia in London*, is 'reported to have sold 400,000 copies in 2004' (2010: 107). She concludes then that 'one would have to multiply these figures several times over to come close to the number of people who might actually watch each film within and outside Nigeria' (2010: 107). There is no doubt that Nollywood's growth has been exponential since the 1990s, and even more so now, with access and partnerships with multiple global streaming platforms, such as Amazon Prime Video, Netflix and YouTube.

Since the 1990s, however, men have been at the centre stage of Nollywood, with the examples of foremost producer Kenneth Nnebue and other key figures like Tunde Kelani (*Ti Oluwa Ni Ile*, 1993), Zeb Ejiro (*Domitilla*, 1996) and Andy Amenechi (*Mortal Inheritance*, 1996), amongst others. As in most other African countries, there was a paucity of women making films in the 1970s and 1980s. Lindiwe Dovey's important question comes to mind when she asks, 'How does one begin to offer a valid or useful critique of the relative absence, historically, of female-authored perspectives in the African film oeuvre without becoming obstructed by identity politics?' (2012: 21). In Nigeria, there were a few early cases like that of Lola Fani Kayode, who wrote and produced the popular soap opera *Mirror in the Sun*, aired on the government-owned television station NTA (Nigerian Television Authority) in the early to mid-1980s. In the 1990s, the spell of an all-male-director culture in Nigeria was also broken by the late Amaka Igwe, recognized as one of Nigeria's first female filmmakers.

Igwe began her filmmaking career in the 1990s with television drama series, with popular examples being *Checkmate*, *Solitaire* and *Fuji House of Commotion*. For her, it was an unintended transition from TV to films, as she states in her interview with Esonwanne: 'I'd been directing "soaps" for five years for NTA … So I progressed naturally from television to video, though doing the latter was also an experiment for me' (2008: 27). Igwe possessed the confidence required to thrive in a male-dominated space and this is evident not only in her productions but also in her stance about filmmakers in Nigeria; she notes: 'Film for us is just storytelling. You don't need someone to tell you how to make a story. In Nigeria, we just do it our way and we're doing something right because our films are seen all over the world. Nigeria produces 2000 films a year and it works for us … ' (cited in Ukata 2010: 1).

A core ethos of nego-feminism is 'doing'; it's a verb reiterating the need for action. So, when Nnaemeka says that 'African women do feminism; feminism is what they do for themselves and for others' (2004: 278), it demonstrates the readiness to take action, a common thread that can be found among pioneer women filmmakers and many of those who have come afterwards. For example, Igwe's doggedness was a springboard for generations of female filmmakers, setting a standard for women to tell their stories. Jonathan Haynes describes the opening of her film *Violated* (1996) as an 'attempt to open a high-end market' (2007: 74). The premiere was strategically planned with an opening in an exclusive venue in Lagos and high-ticket prices. There was also a month's focus on radio and television publicity, which was unusual at the time. Furthermore, *Violated*'s success, value and celebration highlight women's contributions to filmmaking at the cradle of Nollywood. Despite the irregular participation of women in filmmaking and the intermittent contributions by Igwe herself as a director, she set the precedent for women filmmakers who followed. Her influence was further demonstrated when prominent female filmmaker Tope Oshin produced the short film *Amaka's Kin* in honour of Amaka Igwe. This demonstrates Igwe's significant influence and documents the trajectories and challenges female directors face in the Nigerian film industry.

Since Igwe, other female filmmakers have gained prominence in Nollywood. One such filmmaker is Emem Isong, a key player in old Nollywood who is 'also pursuing New Nollywood strategies' as described by Haynes (2014: 57). She began her filmmaking career as the scriptwriter and the co-producer of the film *Jezebel* in 1994 and, after many successful productions, directed her first feature-length film *Champagne* (2014). *Champagne* set the standard with an exclusively female crew – a deliberate effort to empower women in technical aspects of film production. Isong, like Igwe, is a pioneer in Nigerian filmmaking, boasting a repertoire of award-winning productions, such as *Memories of My Heart* (2010), *Silver Lining* (2012) and *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (2014), signposting women's contributions to and proficiency in Nollywood. Other key early female filmmakers include Ngozi Onwurah, director of *Shoot the Messenge*r (2006); lawyer turned filmmaker Mildred Okwo, who has to her credit *The Meeting* (2012) and *Suru'lere* (2016); and Chineze Anyaene with *Ije* (2012). There is also Chika Anadu, whose film *B for Boy* (2013) questions cultural expectations of women and Tope Oshin, who directed such films as *Journey to Self* (2012) and *Here Love Lies* (2023).

Oboli's entry into filmmaking slightly differs from that of the aforementioned filmmakers. Her initial engagement with Nollywood was as an actress and she gained prominence in Kunle Afolayan's *Figurine* (2009) and Lonzo Nzekwe's *Anchor Baby* (2010). She showed strong determination from the beginning of her filmmaking career. Her first film, *Being Mrs Elliot* (2014), premiered at the Nollywood Film Festival in Paris. It was also screened at the National Presidential Complex and was attended by the serving President, Goodluck Jonathan. Despite this achievement, the immediate aftermath was marred by a stereotypical critique often directed towards women, characterized by what may be termed a derisive spectacle, an experience women have historically endured for centuries. Instead of being celebrated for her unprecedented success, critics focused on the seeming inappropriateness of Oboli's dress at the event, suggesting it was unsuitable.[2] This underscores the reductionist reception of women's creativity and heightens the cultural expectations of women even after remarkable feats. Rather than being praised or critiqued for her creative offering, attention was paid to trivial issues such as her attire, which is rarely a subject of discussion for her male counterparts.

It is important to emphasize the premise on which nego-feminism is practised – the wisdom to choose battles and know how to overcome them, as Oboli has demonstrated throughout her filmmaking career. This involves knowing when and how to negotiate. Understanding this concept helps to clarify some of the challenges women like Oboli have faced in making their voices heard as filmmakers in a patriarchal society. The two key characteristics of nego-feminism that have been highlighted are compromise and negotiation.

> African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines.
>
> (Nnaemeka 2004: 378)

Oboli has experienced certain controversies on her way to establishing her voice as a formidable force in the industry, including a court injunction forcing her to refrain from screening her film,[3] *Okafor's Law* (2016), at what was meant to be its Lagos premiere. The copyright infringement case in which Oboli's Dioni Vision Productions and FilmOne distribution eventually won was a huge obstacle in Oboli's career as a filmmaker. However, the tenacity to keep going despite this has helped her solidify her position in Nollywood. In the African Screen Worlds interview above, Oboli reveals, 'We have paved the way for all female filmmakers [in Nigeria]. We really have stood our ground … We're here! We are not going anywhere. There is nothing that anyone can do about it.' She has an oeuvre which she has built for more than a decade and that includes films such as *First Lady* (2015), *Okafor's Law* (2016), *Moms at War* (2018) and *Love Is War* (2019). *Wives on Strike* (2016), which she directed and produced, garnered a total of 51 million Naira (£102,272.00) within seventeen days of its debut (Onikoyi 2016).

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[2] From Oboli's personal account in her memoir, *The Stars Are Ageless* (2018).

[3] Jude Idada, a Canadian-based writer, accused Oboli of using his original script, Okafor's Law, and developing it into a film without acknowledgement or compensation. A Federal High Court in Lagos rendered a judgement on the copyright infringement lawsuit filed against Omoni Oboli, her production company Dioni Visions, and FilmOne distribution, with the outcome in favour of Oboli.

Oboli's enrolment in the New York Film Academy may also be seen as shaping her filmography, exposing her to global storytelling perspectives and broadening her narrative scope, allowing her to infuse her films with a blend of local and global sensibilities. Her first films, *Being Mrs Elliot* (2014) and *First Lady* (2015), were top box-office films during cinema screenings. Following the outcome of these two commercially successful romantic comedies, she went a slightly different route in 2016 with the production of her satirical comedy, *Wives on Strike*. While Oboli doesn't openly parade herself as a feminist, her films echo the essence of gender equality and the advancement of women's socio-cultural and political positions in Nigeria, tackling roadblocks by 'doing'. as Nnaemeka rightly states, 'African women do feminism' (2004: 378). Oboli's robust message of women's political acumen in *Love Is War* and indefatigability in *Wives on Strike* reflects this.

Oboli and other women filmmakers have embraced the new Nollywood era, which critics refer to as neo-Nollywood. In this era, films are made with larger budgets, attention to quality and an international audience in mind. The phrase became popular around 2010 and describes measures filmmakers took to move the film industry to the 'next level' (Haynes 2014). It disengages from the mediocrity ascribed to Nollywood films despite the irony of being the second-largest film-producing industry in the world after Bollywood. Nigerian film scholar Adeshina Afolayan (2014: 27) describes neo-Nollywood as 'a move away from the cinematic ebullience and mushrooming tendency of Nollywood towards a qualitative and aesthetic transformation of the industry'. Many scholars have engaged with this era and its naming, including Ezine Ezepue, who characterizes neo-Nollywood as one which is 'increasingly formal in the business of filmmaking' (2020: 2). A gentrifying Nollywood means an evolving film economy being dispossessed of its informalities and in the process of being incorporated into a formal political economy (2020: 6).

Beyond high-quality productions and a commercial focus, neo-Nollywood stands out in terms of transnational reach beyond the geographical borders of Africa. Adejunmobi (2014: 75) notes that 'new developments in Nollywood's interaction with global media deserve special attention'. Many Nollywood critics and scholars, including Adejunmobi (2014), who had in 2007 described recent Nollywood films as a 'minor transnational practice', acknowledge that Nollywood filmmakers are endeavouring to 'change Nollywood templates in the area of distribution' (2014). They have sought ways to gain widespread presence, including having 'theatrical release over STV [straight-to-video] productions', all in a bid to 'seek more international recognition in their work' (2014: 79). Nollywood has since steadily progressed in taking significant leaps such that it can claim to be a major transnational practice. It continues to take notable strides in film production with larger budgets, distribution on global platforms and international exhibitions to reach wider audiences, outshining early feats. Cross-cultural collaborations, distribution agreements and circulation of films across international markets are key strategies for Nollywood's expansion. More and more filmmakers have taken to screening their films in international cinemas, such as in the United Kingdom and the United States, sometimes before bringing screenings to Nigeria.

Transnationalism in Nollywood comes in various forms. Filmmakers sometimes draw from existing Western narrative forms and genres, such as melodrama and romantic comedies. Common in Nollywood films is also the adoption of popular Hollywood names; film titles and sometimes plots are adapted into Nollywood films such as Rukky Sanda's first production, *Lethal Woman* (2008), for which she says, 'I saw this American movie and I thought it would look good in a Nigerian movie and I copied it' (Adeyemo 2012). Tsika claims that Nollywood characters use Hollywood star names without necessarily accounting for them. He maintains that 'the seemingly unaccountable deployment of the names Valentino, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and especially Sharon Stone suggests, in fact, an eagerness to appropriate and thereby deconstruct the authority of Western standards of stardom' (2015: 107). To emphasize Nollywood's worldliness, Tsika argues that failure to acknowledge Hollywood's standard of stardom 'represents a deconstructive gesture designed to destabilize any hierarchical relationship between American and African styles of stardom'. This system of silent 'star-on-star mimicry', he argues, indicates that Nollywood is indeed an 'archive of worldliness' (2015: 107).

Nollywood is indeed a worldly practice; however, in its worldliness, it invariably roots itself firmly in creating stories and characters drawn from or adapted into socially and culturally relevant events that resonate with its core audiences. For Haynes, Nollywood's 'international dimension was accidental' (2016: 79). What was deliberate, he says, was the establishment of a 'synthetic and multicultural form of entertainment that would appeal across Nigerian national audiences' that nevertheless brought Nollywood recognition 'across the continent and beyond' (Haynes 2016: 79). The beginning of Nollywood's international reach, especially within Africa, owes credit to the South African-owned, pay television channel M-Net. Okome (2016: 112) argues that around a decade after Nollywood commenced productions, M-Net started broadcasting Nollywood films and devoted four channels to it. Since then, Nollywood's popularity has grown tremendously across Africa, and so has the 'popular perception of Nigerian cultures: urban and traditional' (2016). What also makes Nollywood's reach extensive across Africa, some parts of Europe and America is the use of the English language as a form of expression in Nollywood films.

In this way, some female filmmakers in Nollywood are driving the trend and are actively pushing their stories onto international platforms. An example is Genevieve Nnaji, a leading Nollywood actress who made her directorial debut with her film *Lion Heart* (2018). *Lion Heart*, which has a woman (Nnaji herself) as the protagonist, is the first Nigerian original Netflix film, giving global access to an African story from a female perspective in a cosmopolitan Nigerian setting. The film is a narrative that projects female power in a male-dominated corporate world. It narrates a woman's effort to save the legacy of her dead father's company, which was willed to her uncle and highlights her struggles and eventual triumph as she proves her value and prevents the company's downfall.

Female filmmakers in Nigeria have shown their commitment to 'doing' by addressing socio-cultural issues affecting women and are screening such films internationally. As an example, Jade Osiberu, a filmmaker whose film *Isoken* (2017), details the cultural travails of a Nigerian woman who is thirty-three and unmarried, adopts transnational measures in telling and sharing her story. She does this by casting a foreign actor, Marc Rhys, and holding screenings in foreign cinemas (in the United Kingdom). There's also Kemi Adetiba, an acclaimed music director who made her first feature film, *The Wedding Party*, in 2016. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2016, and when it was released in Nigerian cinemas, it broke box-office records, making ₦200,000,000 (£413,132.56) within sixteen days of its release in cinemas in December. The film was executive produced by Mo Abudu, who is currently championing the African media space in her effort to take Africa to the world through her production company EbonyLife. Mo Abudu recently partnered with Sony Pictures Television to develop a TV series based on the stories of ancient African female warriors. In recent years, Abudu, in her capacity as a producer, has created many blockbuster films that beam light on contemporary Nigerian cultural space, with *Fifty* (2015), *The Wedding Party 2* (2017), *Royal Hibiscus Hotel* (2018), *His Excellency* (2019) and *Chief Daddy* 1 & 2 (2018, 2021) as examples. Adetiba, in turn, recently made the successful film *King of Boys* (2018) and its sequel *King of Boys*: *The Return of the King* (2021).

Filmmaking by women not only creates a platform for them to share their stories but also establishes their rejection of inhibitions (such as patriarchal forms of culture), which prevent them from actualizing and expressing their creative potential. As Johnson and Culverson (2016: 5) aptly observe, 'telling one's story, as a female, is in direct contrast to being socialized into silence by societal and cultural norms'. The next section of this chapter focuses on Omoni Oboli's film *Wives on Strike* (2016), whose focus is condemning harmful patriarchal practices.

Wives on Strike: Oboli's message for social change

African women working for social change build on the indigenous by defining and modulating their feminist struggle in deference to cultural and local imperatives.

Obioma Nnaemeka

Oboli took a route sparsely travelled by Nigerian filmmakers when she wrote, directed and produced *Wives on Strike* (2016) (see Figure 7.2). Through the film, she advocates for under-aged girls who are forced into marriages, mostly to much older men, and dedicates the film to child brides all over the world. At the end of the film, she appeals to society's conscience, saying: 'May we rise up and fight for these ones who have had their freedom and childhood stolen from them.' The story is centred around a group of local market women who take a stand for their friend whose thirteen-year-old daughter, Amina, is about to marry a much older man. The women respond to this by embarking on a sex strike when one of the women's husbands, Papa Ngozi, refuses his wife's request to persuade Amina's father against his decision. A coincidental filming of the occasion when the four market women challenge the groom (Alhaji) as he comes to take his young bride draws media attention to them. In a short while, they become a topic of national interest. What begins as one woman's reaction to her husband's insensitivity soon becomes a unanimous agreement among friends to stop having sex with their husbands, backed by the slogan 'Women, Power!' Their movement very rapidly escalates to a national scale, where seemingly all the nation's women, including sex workers, join in.

The promotional poster for *Wives on Strike* is a tableau of four market women standing in solidarity, each embodying an attitude of defiance and resilience. Their assertive postures, characterized by crossed arms

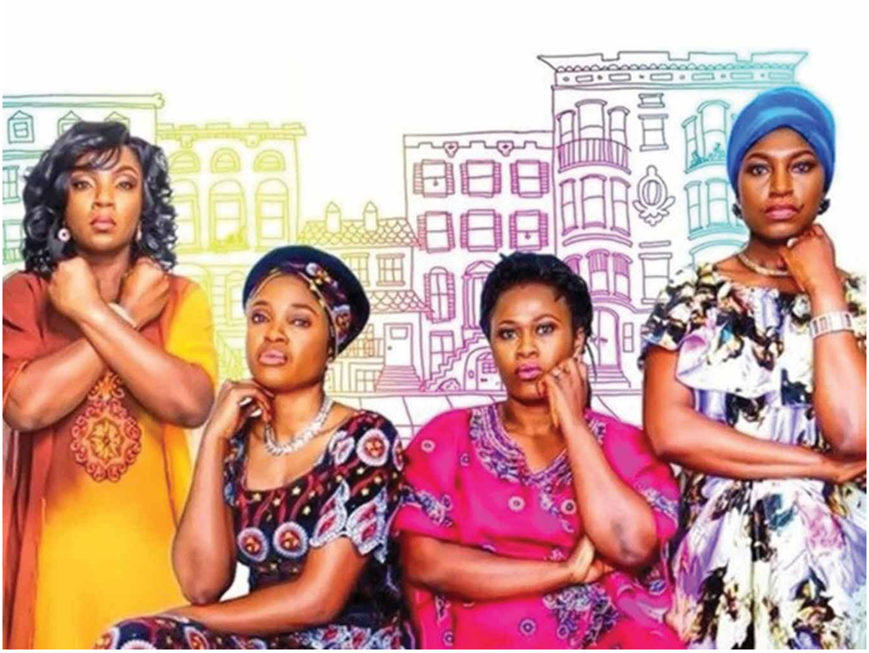

FIGURE 7.2 *The women of* Wives on Strike. *(Photo: Rotten Tomatoes)*.

and elevated chins, create a direct engagement with the viewer, symbolizing their united front against social injustice. This visual composition encapsulates a key message in the film – the empowerment of ordinary women who come together to confront and challenge oppressive societal norms.

The approach employed by Oboli can be elucidated within the framework of nego-feminism. This decolonial ideological alternative to Western feminism is distinguished by its positionality, devoid of ego, emphasizing the importance of negotiation in addressing disparities. Nnaemeka expounds in broader terms how nego-feminism is not comparable to a set of rules to which one refers for guidance but to an inherent ability to handle unfavourable circumstances as they occur. Nego-feminism 'knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework' (2004: 378). From Oboli's work as a filmmaker to the content of her film, we see the separation from ego and various dimensions of negotiations, for example, with the patriarchal challenges she faces within the industry. Her approach included demonstrating her ability to get the job done and claim her space through consistency and good-quality films. The film *Wives on Strike* underpins women's unprecedented strategy of approaching societal and political issues with a domestic weapon. It explains the market women's apparent lack of formal structure and strategy in addressing the problem but proffering a solution with complete reliance on their inherent will to solve an urgent problem.

Oboli's delivery was timely, as the issue of underage marriage was one of great societal import at the time it was produced. Nwauche (2015) asserts that 'issues of child rights protection are on the residual list of the Nigerian Constitution, giving states exclusive responsibility and jurisdiction to make laws'. The strike in her film aimed to draw attention to those states that were yet to implement already-outlawed underage marriage in Nigeria. The striking women do not understand their actions in the wider national context until a more enlightened woman educates them, a senator's wife who sympathizes with their movement. In the end, Mama Ngozi and her friends spark the attention of lawmakers, who eventually grant them their desire.

Earlier in this chapter, the collaborative and communal nature of African Indigenous society was established as a bedrock of African feminism, and one of the film's most salient themes is the power of collaboration. Throughout the film, the women act as strong pillars of support. A deep, unified sisterhood is formed in their efforts to stand for their friend when she can't stand alone. This is seen in the selfless way her situation takes precedence over theirs.

Using sex strikes as a means of negotiation is a bold approach in a society that is not only fundamentally patriarchal but also vastly cultural, with many traditions favouring men. With the film, Oboli signposts an era for women filmmakers in Nollywood where film transcends its entertainment purpose but also delivers unconventional, powerful social messages to audiences. Belonging to this era also is Stephanie Linus' *Dry* (2014), which follows a similar pattern of advocating for girls against multiple debilitating traditions, including female genital mutilation, child marriage and polygamy. Additionally, there is Bolanle Austin Peters' *Funmilayo Ransome Kuti* (2024), a biopic about Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti's fearless leadership in the revolution against colonialism and patriarchy.

Sex strikes have been adopted on several occasions in Africa. For example, in 2003, a group of about six thousand women had stayed away from their partners for about two months to protest crops being eaten by cattle in Cameroon. Organized by the local women's society, the strike was carried out to cleanse the society of its evil in the village of Aghem (BBC News 2003). Similarly, Leymah Roberta Gbowee, a Liberian peace activist who, in 2011, won the Nobel Prize for Peace, employed a sex strike as a protest tool in her women-led movement to end the Liberian civil war. During the civil war in Liberia, Gbowee mobilized women to stage non-violent protests, interreligious pray-ins, as well as sex strikes demanding reconciliation and peace from men. The protest received immense national and international media attention, bringing about comparisons between Gbowee and the character Lysistrata in Aristophanes' play. In line with this, R. Weinrich remarked in Gossip Central that 'self-assured and instinctively political Gbowee is a modern-day Lysistrata in the ancient Greek satirist Aristophanes' play' (cited in Morales 2013: 281–2). *The Daily Telegraph* observed, 'Perhaps her [Gbowee's] most famous moment came in 2002, when she persuaded many Liberian women to withhold sex from their warring menfolk unless they came to the negotiating table, a devastatingly successful campaign inspired by Aristophanes' Lysistrata' (cited in Morales 2013: 283). The documentary, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (2008), acclaims Gbowee and her group for playing a critical role in compelling the then-President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, and the men into peace talks (Morales 2013). Her actions have not only won her a Nobel Prize, but they have also inspired films. Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015) refers to Gbowee, for example, where she is mentioned as the key inspiration behind the instigation of a sex strike in pursuance of peace negotiations led by the protagonist, Lysistrata, in his film.

The idea of women renouncing sex as a means of non-violent resistance has been approached in several ways. It was presented as far back as two-and-a-half millennia ago in the play Lysistrata, an anti-war comedy by Aristophanes. Morales (2013: 284) points out, 'Lysistrata has become the go-to trope for any women's activism involving the withdrawal of sex'. Indeed, about a century ago, Lillian Sutton Pelee wrote a play titled *Wives on Strike* (1920), a satirical comedy that narrates women's actions in the face of subjugation. In the play, the response by women extends beyond the withdrawal of sex; it involves the abandonment of wifely duties in their entirety. So, too, feminist Nigerian writer Stella Oyedepo addresses patriarchal excesses using strike action relating to both food and sex to rebel against men in her play *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested* (2002).

In yet another film, *The Source* (2011), directed by Radu Mihăileanu, set in North Africa, women go on a sex strike against hard labour as they fetch water from a distant well while their husbands stay idle. This continues until the protagonist, Leila, who loses a child in the process, begins to protest. Backed by other women, they decide they have had enough, and begin a no sex strike action against their husbands. From the nego-feminist standpoint, sex strikes are a tool for negotiation even in difficult situations, perhaps especially in difficult situations such as deeply rooted socio-cultural situations that favour men. Nnaemeka argues that 'African women's willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances is quite pervasive' (2004: 380). I mark this with particular reference to Oboli's skilful introduction of sex strikes in a political context within a society that neglects potentially harmful practices that affect minors. This emphasizes Oboli's dedication to using film as her voice, in this instance to address challenging circumstances affecting the girl child.

Intertextuality in *Wives on Strike* and *Chi-Raq*: From Lagos to Chicago

When I began researching Oboli's body of works, one of the first things that caught my attention online was the unjustifiable claim that *Wives on Strike* was a copy of Spike Lee's *Chi- Raq*. Upon probing further, I realized that both films were produced simultaneously. While Oboli has refuted these plagiarism claims, a reading of these two films places them side by side to be viewed through a lens that crystalizes the universality of women's experiences across the world, but also highlights elements of nego-feminism that distinguishes *Wives on Strike.* Furthermore, in a book exploring *global* screen worlds, such a comparative reading offers rich material for situating Nigerian female filmmakers' work within a larger sphere.

Speaking about the reportage of the Liberian sex strike earlier mentioned, Morales (2013: 288) says: 'Sex strikes in the more developed modern world arise from very different circumstances, and with very different consequences, from those described by Gbowee. This is one reason why the sex strikes in the less developed world are typically discussed in a tragic register, rather than a comic one.' Contrary to this view, there are no tragic outcomes in *Wives on Strike*. The film starts comically, from the introduction, where the friends exhibit their excitement to be on television, to the very end, where Mama Ngozi is offered a huge sum of money by a well-known producer for the rights to turn her story into a film, which leads her husband Papa Ngozi to declare, with a sense of pride, that he married her because he had always known that she was a lucky woman.

Numerous correlations exist between the two films, notwithstanding their different contexts. One is set in a developed country, in a city that is beleaguered by contemporary problems, in which gun violence is at the top of the list. The other film is set in an emerging economy, faced with modern-day injustice relating to the rights of young, innocent citizens. What spurs the actions of the women in both films is the unjustifiable effects that the decisions of one group of people have on others.

In *Chi-Raq*, the protest is against gun-waging men who risk their own lives as well as those of others in their gang-related clashes. As a result, innocent lives are lost and, in one case, a young girl dies. This shocking event leads to a church service in honour of the girl and that stirs up an awakening in many people, including Lysistrata. In *Wives on Strike*, the impact of the laws affecting girls is less immediate, but the result is just as significant because, in many cases, girls who get married at a tender age end up with fatal diseases and sometimes die. For this reason, rather than witness their friend's daughter's experience of child marriage, a small group of women take matters into their own hands. Both films clearly underscore women's vital contributions to building society, promoting justice and fostering a harmonious environment.

The films are deliberately didactic and relevant to the conscience of the societies where they are produced and further afield. *Wives on Strike,* however, uniquely demonstrates the ethic of shared values in its style and context. One of the African proverbs with which Nnaemeka premises the understanding of building nego-feminism on the Indigenous is the Ashanti proverb, 'One head cannot go into counsel', echoing the need for an inclusive and collaborative approach to problem-solving. Oboni's representation of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, namely Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, as the key characters that make up the market women, speaks of a deliberate inclusion in the important conversation the film invites.

As in *Chi-Raq*, Oboli's film dramatizes the process of recognition and acceptance of the inherent power of sexuality. Both films offer the same non-violent approach to challenge demanding situations that extend beyond the confines of the family: women make the decision to withhold sex for the greater good. The success of the strikes in both films owes a great deal to the resolute steadfastness and the ability of both Mama Ngozi, in Oboli's film, and Lysistrata, in Lee's, to effectively lead the other women in a cause they believe is right. They both have partners they truly love, with whom they have good relationships before the commencement of the strikes. However, they willingly sacrifice the affection they experience for the sake of a broader humanity. The strike, though successful, ends differently for both women. For Mama Ngozi, it is a happy reunion with her husband, a kick-off from where they left. In Lysistrata's case, her boyfriend ends up being the culprit behind the killing of the girl. He confesses to this and is arrested, which leaves Lysistrata with mixed feelings – a sense of victory and loss. Thus, Lee's adaptation is underpinned by tragedy, while Oboli's film endorses the hope associated with the comedy genre.

The main points of departure in the films include a shift in the prompt to action. The chronology of both films follows the cause-and-effect technique, where witnessing unpleasant occurrences results in an immediate call for action. However, the protagonist's actions differ in *Wives on Strike*. Unlike Lysistrata, whose motivation is influenced by others, Mama Ngozi's immediate action is self-inspired. This action arises from an inherent realization of the need to help a community member unable to speak for herself, thereby underscoring the purpose-driven communal ethos of nego-feminism. Her subsequent support from her friends and other women reinforces her resolve. Her decision is a reaction to a disagreement between herself and her husband, and her spontaneous response develops into a phenomenon within a short time. She tells her friends what transpired between her and her husband the night before and that she has taken steps to 'lock up'. The women pledge their immediate support without debate.

The tenet of compromise and negotiation extends to the latter part of *Wives of Strike,* which introduces a more refined setting than the marketplace. A subplot introduces two important characters to the story – Senator Aniete and his wife, Vera. Vera steps up to amplify the women's voices and puts their protest in context. She uses her media platform to propagate the market women's clamour, which successfully draws government attention – especially because of her husband's political position. Her actions, however, spark friction between her and her husband, who worries about the implications of her public endorsement of the strike on his political standing. He forbids his wife from being a party to it, stating that the issue has not been 'specifically addressed in the House yet'. For Vera, it is an opportunity to be a part of a good cause. She is willing to compromise on the peace of her home and lend a voice in the women's negotiations, which had reached a national level, so she ignores her husband's decree. She sees it as an avenue to remind him of the purpose for which he is serving as a Senator. This is one of the key aspects satirized in the film. For example, Vera challenges him at one point: 'What I'm doing might be bad for your party, but trust me, it is good for your conscience!' Oboli utilizes marital conflict between the senator and his wife as a narrative device to comment on issues about politicians and government officials wherein pledges made during electoral campaigns lack substantive follow-through after they assume elected office. It represents a characteristic of the Nigerian political scene and, indeed, of the globally widespread betrayal of their promises by politicians. Often, people's hopes are dashed due to the failure of politicians to perform their duties. This aspect of the film is morally instructive, serving as a message to those who, like Senator Aniete, start off as upright individuals with genuine concerns to serve the nation but get carried away by greed for power and influence.

The comic aspects of *Wives on Strike* are key to delivering the gravity of the subject matter. Humour leavens the severity and sensitivity of the message Oboli intends to convey. She is able to maintain a reasonable balance, particularly with the introduction of the more serious side of politics. The actors easily perform their roles, although Mama Ngozi's closest ally, Madam 12:30, serves a more exuberantly comic purpose. She gained her name by resuming at her food canteen at 12:30 pm. Madam 12:30's actions are deliberately exaggerated in many scenes. Her boisterous personality almost overshadows the protagonist's as she takes centre stage in the strike. Her loud tone of voice in discussions, overly dramatic gestures and slightly intimidating frame depict this. The most highlighted aspect of comedy is the effect of the strike on the women's husbands, who gather in beer parlours on several occasions to discuss the state of affairs and strategies that can be employed to lessen their burden. The setting of their gatherings is typical of lower-class, and sometimes middle-class, men, who meet up in open-air spaces to socialise. They talk, drink beer and snack on local delicacies.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the film's style is the use of language. Oboli's *Wives on Strike* is presented differently, notably in its use of pidgin English. 'Lock it up', the women in *Chi-Raq* chant to signify their commitment to the strike, while the women in *Wives on Strike* stick to the pidgin English translation 'Lock up', a phrase that in both cases signifies denial of rights of access to their bodies until their demands are met. Oboli adopts the use of pidgin English to present most of the characters, especially the women, as uneducated people from the lower stratum of society. In Nigeria, people with minimal formal education commonly speak pidgin English in informal spaces. The market women's approach to the protest suggests they have nothing to lose. They speak pidgin proudly till the end of the film, even when they appear on national television to speak about their struggle. The language used in *Wives on Strike* distinguishes it from other mainstream Nollywood films that have adopted English, often spoken with foreign accents, as the unofficial form of expression. Oboli's film follows the example of Zeb Ejiro's *Domitilla* (1996), the first Nollywood film to adopt pidgin English throughout the film. However, many other films have been produced in pidgin, either in full or in part. Oboli employs pidgin English as the main expression language and provides English subtitles.

The film's poster foregrounds the resoluteness of the market women who spearhead the campaign, first against their husbands but ultimately against the lawmakers. The women represent the stratum of a lower-class society practising an informal economy with their own little businesses that keep them going and who are not directly benefitting from the government. Their inherent strength is revealed when proud rebel leader Madam 12:30 declares at the beginning of their strike, 'We are powerful! We just don't know we are powerful. Just look at us! Women!!!' For them, as with the women in *Chi-Raq*, the strike serves as a revelation of a power they possess but neglect, an eye-opener that their weapon is their sexual hold over men. This revelation is similar to the strike in Lillian Sutton Pelee's play *Wives on Strike* (1920). In it, Betty, the protagonist, who leaves her husband without looking back and upholds her dignity as a woman, explains the importance of the strike. She tells her husband, 'I know that the strike is the modern weapon of protest, and I intend to use that weapon to get what I want.' Mama Ngozi and her cohorts also meaningfully utilize the sex boycott as a weapon of protest, and this eventually leads to an unprecedented revolution. With the newfound power, the women are able to negotiate without elaborate rhetoric, education, political or financial influence. The striking women, notably, draw attention to the paucity of women in leadership positions and power in the Nigerian government. Madam 12:30, in her comic way, joyfully cheers on the strike, stating that men make up most lawmakers. This is true even though women constitute about half the nation's population.

Conclusion

The success of numerous Nigerian women filmmakers in a male-dominated industry can be attributed to their ability to navigate inherent African feminist principles. They have effectively balanced compromise and negotiation without losing sight of their goals, as true nego-feminists. The concluding part of Nnaemeka's postulation draws from her great-uncle's advice on adapting like a chameleon without being imposing. She, in turn, states concisely but firmly that a nego-feminist would take that advice. There is a similar pattern in how Nigerian women in film have charted their course in Nollywood, particularly Oboli, who, like the chameleon, has kept her head straight while looking in different directions without deviating from her goal.

This approach goes beyond negotiations of socio-cultural, political and economic factors that might impede progress. It also extends to the content of some of her films. Oboli's *Wives on Strike* presents women as active political and social change agents. The women's actions bring to the fore Nnaemeka's nego-feminist assertion: 'African women's engagement still nurtures the compromise and hopefulness needed to build a harmonious society' (2004: 381). For them, sex becomes a weapon – a weapon of negotiation involving sacrifice and resourcefulness needed to build a just society. At the end of *Wives on Strike*, women are not only victorious but also respected. They are respected for their boldness, commitment, selflessness and perseverance. Oboli continues carrying the torch by using her films as a metaphor for her voice, telling stories that matter while entertaining her expanding audience. She exemplifies what it means to be a nego-feminist filmmaker in Nollywood.

Her contributions challenge gender roles within the industry and provide an understanding of some socio-cultural dynamics in Nigerian cinema.

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SECTION FOUR

Of rifts and resonance: Reimagining film studies through conversation

8

Comparative noir urbanisms in Mumbai and Lagos

Akshaya Kumar and Jonathan Haynes

Introduction

This chapter is an unfinished conversation between an Indian scholar of media and cultural studies and an American scholar of African cultural studies, drawing upon their respective expertise to make comparative sense of noir urbanisms in Lagos and Mumbai. Since generic assemblies of cinematic production provide a useful gateway into the inter-national landscape, we perform this exercise as a way to unpack the global and contribute to the larger project of navigating global screen worlds. The crime film is an especially useful genre to aggregate 'world cinema' and situate otherwise disjointed film histories. A strikingly large percentage of all films from everywhere represent law-breaking in some form. But crime carries very different meanings and motivations in various filmmaking traditions and sub-genres.

We are particularly interested in Film Noir, considered in its relations with other film genres and with both local social concerns and transnational stylistic affiliations. Noir invites comparative attention because of its strong stylistic markers, durable themes and dramatic conventions, which have allowed it to keep its distinctive shape through its long and complicated transnational history. Its roots are in German Expressionism and French poetic realism; it flowered in Hollywood, via the gangster movies of the Great Depression and hard-boiled detective fiction; the French New Wave revived it as an iconic form, as repeated 'neo' versions did in the United States; and it has now spread all over the globe. This history is well documented so we will not rehearse it here (Naremore 2008; Neale 2000; Spicer 2002). Auerbach (2011) shows that noir's originary anxieties were shaped by the uncertain boundaries of citizenship in midcentury America; as we seek to establish in relation to the emergence of the multiplex-mall in both India and Nigeria, noir's revitalization helps pose the question of *cultural belonging* in comparative urbanisms.

Among the key narrative and stylistic tropes of film noir that express political anxieties are urban decay and masculine anxieties in the face of sexually desirable female bodies. Its grim stylistics critique the gravitational pull of urban life in the modern metropolis via montages of dark and slippery cityscapes that represent existential crises and cynicism, criminal violence, moral ambivalence and a generally mysterious menace underneath. The stylized symptoms of this bleak and alienated scenario manifest via chiaroscuro lighting with strong shadows, neon signs, fatalistic resignation and pervasive suspicion. Noir often navigates the grimy underground of the contemporary city, featuring parking lots, garages, industrial wastelands, and rundown theatres, brothels, nightclubs and strip bars. Such urban spaces provide the alphabet of the screen worlds of film noir. Here, we localize this transnational history in two particular cities, Mumbai and Lagos.

Counterposing Indian and Nigerian renditions of crime cinema occasions a reckoning with both the genre's particular and its universal caché. The universal caché derives from the formal conventions of crime genres in popular cinema worldwide, which can be powerfully attractive in themselves. The particular caché comes from the social content commensurate with its specific cultural boundaries. Crime films therefore provide a mode of political commentary in a global currency, using the syntax of a widely intelligible form to put the contemporary social world in sharp relief. To that extent, the versatility of crime genres is similar to the currency of the melodramatic mode (Grant and Kuhn 2006), which provides another gateway into a possible conception of 'world cinema'.[1] While melodrama and crime may occasionally intersect, the general syntax of crime genres runs contrary to melodramas, privileging stark realism, adventure and comedy over the tragic fatalism of melodramas.

In the case of both India and Nigeria discussed here, we shall note the transition from melodrama's compulsive moralizing tendencies towards noir's ambivalence and cynicism. As we therefore migrate from the moral community of the postcolonial nations addressed by melodramas at a time of reluctant transition into the city of anonymous masses, we are forced to grapple with a comparative history of noir urbanism, in which the city becomes the default site of grit, hustle, adventure, violence and of course, style. Among the films discussed here, while the moral framework of

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[1] Another, largely European arc of international crime film would be the sexpionage-based curation of European integration via Eurospy films, particularly vibrant in the 1960s (Smith 2021; Lopes 2022).

Kaante (2002) has distinct continuity with melodramas, both *Ugly* (2013) and *Gbomo Gbomo Express* (2015) are situated on the other side of the aisle.

Crime cinema's fascination with stylistics and its eagerness to transact in the global currency may cause the empirical bearings to be set aside. This chapter is informed throughout by a tension between genre's capacities to reveal social worlds underneath the urban hustle and generic capacities that spring from the stylistic worlds, which may, at the extreme, distract from or occlude those realities. This is a process particularly exacerbated in recent times by the emergence of international Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, such as Netflix, which are pitched to avail of socio-cultural 'diversity' while flattening out contextual depth via 'culturally odorless' representations (Iwabuchi 2002). While we grapple with this tension, we shall first traverse the respective history of crime genres in India and Nigeria, before engaging with particular films, and then with the key site which has reinvigorated the questions of cultural belonging.

History of crime genre(s) in India

The question of crime in Hindi cinema has been historically tied to the debatable credibility of law over Indian society. The debate on crime emerged via melodramas that exposed not just the legal violation of the social contract, but also its moral violation. Raj Kapoor's iconic films were key to this moral-legal deliberation over the postcolonial society, best manifested in *Awara* (1951) and *Shri 420* (1955).[2] The symbolic value of crime in these melodramas was derived from the moral default, which would instantiate a public deliberation over the role of law towards social justice, which implicated, by extension, the postcolonial society and its still-emerging jurisprudence. Effectively, the films questioned why postcolonial jurisprudence should be derived from its colonial predecessor, since the character of the new state occasioned an expansive reckoning with various fragments of the society that were of limited real value to the colonial state. Postcolonial reckoning, therefore, was primarily about an expanded society that emerged from the legacy of colonial government's indirect rule. Cinema often dealt with crime not as a legal event but as a moral default which implicated the agency and legitimacy of the state. Crime was addressed to inaugurate a deliberation over the inherited cracks that must be confronted to renew and reconsolidate the social body of the nation.

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[2] In each of these films, the debate is about the conditions of social upbringing versus innate moral character to shape the destiny of crime in a structurally unjust society, and the (in)ability of modern legal systems to take the entrenched inequality of access into account.

However, parallel to this trajectory, noir lighting and stylistics in general were foregrounded in comedies and melodramas produced by Navketan Films and Guru Dutt Productions before the advent of colour. Still, the socio-historical valences of crime were of marginal concern and American noir an obvious direct reference. Noir, therefore, remained of vital stylistic interest to Mumbai films across generic tendencies, but its characteristic deliberation over urban pathologies never took the foreground; that deliberation remained the burden of melodramas. Noir thus remained a marginal stylistic influence as against the much broader deliberation over crime, citizenship and postcolonial society.

In Hindi action cinema of the 1970s, crime appears split between two distinct tiers: the elite nexus of business and politics, featuring smuggler-villains; and the realm of petty violations and crimes of passion involving rebellious working-class icons. *Deewar* (1975) is a representative film where the rebel-protagonist of the second tier is recruited into the first tier. The two realms of criminal activity signified an open class war to which the state was a mute witness. In these action films, crime was often the last resort available to break out of one's helpless predicament. The plausibility of the revolt was often overshadowed by its symbolic meaning, which tilted the balance in favour of melodrama over realism.

The desire for parity with Hollywood feverishly gripped Hindi cinema from the mid-2000s (Prasad 2013), with brief detours elsewhere, including 'microimporting' Korean revenge films (Gopal 2022). This has internationalized the sites, personnel, currencies, scale and even the purpose of big-ticket crime, thereby liquidating the burden of empirical references. Most of this internationalization has adopted the established grammar of genre cinema, which Hindi cinema had resisted for several decades, under various euphemisms including 'masala film' or 'social' (Prasad 2011). Even afterwards, Hindi cinema has remained split between cycles of enchantment with genre systems and their rejection. The two Hindi films discussed here – *Kaante* (2002) and *Ugly* (2013) – will help us analytically track cinematic crime's ambiguous journey in neoliberal times, between stylization and gritty cynicism. But also, together they showcase the transition to what many have called 'New Bollywood' – a phrase and its attendant energies in some resonance with the case of Nollywood, to which we must turn our attention.

History of crime genre(s) in Nigeria

Nigeria's Nollywood, from its establishment in the early 1990s, created its own system of genres to address issues that mattered to Nigerian society, creating them in large part out of its own cultural resources, so it would be a categorical error to apply Hollywood or other foreign genre terms to Nigerian films, at least without careful consideration (Haynes 2016). But Nollywood always absorbed foreign influences, and in recent years, films strongly shaped by transnational genres have become prominent in the more prestigious reaches of Nigerian film culture. Rom coms are the leading example, but there have also been a number of crime films, such as *Gbomo Gbomo Express* (2015) discussed below.

Nollywood was born out of, and addressed, the acute crisis brought on by the imposition of a neoliberal structural adjustment programme (SAP) in 1986, which devastated the whole formal economic structure and the major projects of the Nigerian state (including education and health care), and by the depredations of the Babangida and Abacha military dictatorships during the same period. The middle class was largely wiped out, and law and order broke down everywhere.

Nigerian society experienced the 1990s as an affront to its moral principles, and Nollywood framed its responses accordingly. Its signature theme, established in the two-part *Living in Bondage* (1992, 1993), was the ‘money ritual’: an occult practice through which a human being is sacrificed in order to produce a flood of cash. Karin Barber observed in the early 1980s that the mysterious unearned wealth of the Nigerian oil boom that preceded the SAP crisis was figured by the Yoruba traveling theatre companies in the form of such stories (Barber 1982). And Jean and John Comoroff noted the global symbolic reaction to the triumph of neoliberalism in a ‘millennial capitalism’ full of zombies and vampires (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). *Living in Bondage* narrativized such beliefs in the idiom of television domestic melodramas, thereby focalizing all the strains and terrors of the SAP era in the nuclear family.

Money rituals were framed less as crimes than as sins, with souls at stake, and betrayals within the nuclear family were the primary emotional dimension, with perhaps a framing cosmic struggle between good and evil forces. Spiritual forces – a Pentecostal preacher or a ‘traditional’ sorcerer or shrine – came to the rescue. Or the film’s plot might rely on the principle that evil destroys itself as the wicked fallout among themselves. Moral horror and spiritual strength were the values; intelligence in planning or solving the crime is seldom stressed. As in real life, the Nigerian police and courts are unlikely to solve problems.

Early Nollywood also produced other kinds of crime films, including, notably, some socially conscious melodramatic biopics of young men driven into a life of crime by a callous society and perhaps a vicious family member. Nollywood always chased newspaper headlines, dramatizing famous criminals or kinds of crime. A cycle of vigilante films around 2000 stemmed directly from the spectacular rise and fall of a group of vigilantes armed with occult powers who operated in the Igbo cities of southeastern Nigeria.

Material factors played a major role in shaping crime film genres. Nigerian audiences loved Westerns and James Bond, but Nollywood simply couldn't afford the expensive arts of violence: precise editing, choreographed fight sequences, car chases, big explosions. Nollywood always shot on location, and domestic interiors for domestic melodramas were the cheapest option. The simplest special effects were adequate to evoke supernatural powers.

Nollywood was created through an alliance between professionals trained by the Nigerian Television Authority and traders in electronic goods who operated in Nigeria's informal markets. The so-called 'marketers' controlled the distribution of videocassettes, which was the medium of this all-video industry, largely controlled the financing of projects, and heavily influenced stories and themes. They seldom had more than primary education and often did not see eye to eye with the generally university-educated filmmakers, who resented working in the churn of rapidly made low-budget productions organized by the marketers.

But the two groups needed one another, and the film culture they produced together reproduced the capacious and confused ideology of 'indirect rule', which British colonialism had earlier developed in India. Part of what became Nigeria was ruled directly as a crown colony, with British-style institutions of law, education, religion, journalism and so on; the rest was left to the 'traditional' practices of 'traditional' rulers, now subordinated to the British. The anti-colonial nationalist movement similarly involved an alliance between a Western-educated elite and an array of kings and emirs, and this political alliance has been renewed up to today. The SAP era pushed people back towards available and affordable 'traditional' options: herbalists, diviners, indigenous systems of justice.

Twenty years after Nollywood's creation, the Nigerian economy improved and reconnected with the global economy, and a consuming middle class re-emerged. This prosperity was distributed with the sharp inequalities typical of neoliberalism. Multiplex cinemas began to be built in the new upscale malls of upscale neighbourhoods. As in India, these cinemas catered to younger and more affluent audiences, and engaged with the huge Nigerian (and wider African) diaspora on a number of levels, influencing everything from tastes to settings and financing. These multiplexes allowed for a 'New Nollywood' to emerge, freed from the control of the marketers and aspiring to larger budgets and higher technical and aesthetic values. The older model of low-budget straight-to-video production continued, but now there was an alternative for ambitious filmmakers.

Other alternatives to the market in VCD discs (which replaced VHS cassettes around 2000) opened up at the same time: satellite broadcasting, internet streaming, and digital and cable television. In 2013, the transnational corporations behind these new platforms began paying for large quantities of their own original movies and serials. Satellite broadcasting firmly established Nollywood as the regional hegemon across Africa, while internet streaming intensified Nollywood's relationship with the African diaspora. These platforms require vast amounts of content, which Nollywood's high-volume, low-budget system was indispensable in supplying. Both kinds of platforms make money by aggregating audiences, so the old-school Nollywood continues alongside many other kinds of content (Haynes 2018).

In this variegated new mediascape, the multiplex cinemas dominate the high end, as theatrical release is crucial for the 'windowing' strategy necessary for ultimate profitability. The gatekeepers of the multiplexes are cautiously attuned to the tastes of their audiences, which, as well as being younger and more affluent, are much better educated than the Nigerian norm and tend to be oriented towards American media. Recently, Netflix has emerged as a conspicuous player, buying or funding projects by the most sophisticated filmmakers and insisting on 'international standards'.

To a considerable extent, this new film culture exists within a neoliberal bubble. As James Ferguson argues, neoliberalism in Africa is not a uniform condition but a scattering of nodes plugged into the transnational economy and gated against the poverty that surrounds them (Ferguson 2006). Within this context at least, millennial capitalism has given way to a desacralized neoliberalism, sin to crime, money rituals to kidnapping, florid melodrama to clever plotting by both characters in films and filmmakers. These are the grounds for the new interest in noir.

Crime as a matter of style in *Kaante* (2002)

The early crime film of the new millennium was occupied with imitating an international idiom and escaping the aesthetic stranglehold of Hindi melodramas. It was however situated adjacent to the cinematic tradition in which crime in general, and organized criminal gangs in particular, sketched a biography of the city of Mumbai (see Mazumdar 2007). Sanjay Gupta's *Kaante* disrupted Mumbai's hegemony over the crime film, but more importantly, it detethered crime from social commentary on poverty, filth and precarity. It should not be a matter of surprise, then, that the route to Mumbai productions' multiplex noir, and its attendant questions of cultural belonging, goes via Los Angeles, although Gupta's stylistically ambitious venture navigates Los

Angeles cursorily in comparison to the contemporary depictions of the Mumbai underworld, particularly those in *Satya* (1998) and *Company* (2002). The Mumbai underworld films of the period were portraying a grimy aesthetic of sharp contrasts, rough neighbourhoods and clandestine but networked channels of the 'business' outside law. In comparison, *Kaante*'s pursuit was to evacuate the social commentary implicitly coded into crime films, and saturate them with an unhinged glamour fetish. This effective liberation of crime cinema from its socio-historical antecedents unleashed a whirlwind of style, glamour, tourist destinations and animated visualities (see below).

Kaante was released a decade after Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), which it did not just remake in Hindi but also expanded by completing the original's dramatic arc, with 'missing' character backgrounds. In this way, *Kaante* ended up emerging far less edgy and radical, and more compatible with a full-scale melodramatic ensemble that was the norm for Hindi cinema's theatrical releases. One could argue that *Kaante* extrapolated Tarantino's own project of *re-assembled homages*, but it also showcases the cross-cultural versatility of crime cinema. If Tarantino's film was a quirky, nonlinear celebration of violence while adhering to the contours of caper noir (marked by comic idiosyncrasies and adventure) in particular, and a heist film in general, *Kaante* rationalized it within a Hindi film idiom. It paid its own homage to Tarantino, but not before making Tarantino's explosive irrationality more palatable. While *Reservoir Dogs* remains unpredictable and inexplicable in terms of its sociological bearings, *Kaante*'s criminal-protagonists are on a somewhat bizarre mission. Set in Los Angeles, the film provides a commentary on the racial predicament of Indian Americans. The petty-criminal protagonists need the money to resolve their financial miseries but also to restore their honour against all variety of racial discrimination. We never lose focus on the fact that they are up against the fiercest of administrative and technological firepower in a post-9/11 United States.

Crime, in *Kaante*, is therefore a means of the protagonists enacting revenge towards white Americans, particularly the police, in their own land. However, the racial targeting of Indians by police forces seems patently absurd, given the fact that Indians constitute the most upwardly mobile ethnic community in United States, raking up nearly double the average household income. One may even argue that Karan Johar's *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003), which was released only a year later, presents an entirely contrary, and relatively more accurate picture of affluent Indian Americans. Even so, crime in *Kaante* renders a highly stylized adaptation of *Reservoir Dogs* with some moral caché, so that its protagonists can be empathized with. Anees Bazmee's *Deewangee* (2002) – an unofficial adaptation of *Primal Fear* (1996) – is another film that was released in the same year and could be classified as *Kaante*'s identical twin. The edgy appeal of the

Hollywood original's climactic shootout is used to pause for dramatic effect at the intermission, but the screenplay goes on to restore the moral order of things. *Primal Fear* is essentially about how a far-fetched split personality disorder is cunningly deployed by the murderer to dupe a hotshot lawyer into rescuing his life. But for its Indian counterpart, the ideological loop needs moral restoration. The murder itself is pushed to the margins of the plot as the film shifts its focus to the battling male protagonists. *Kaante* too imitates Tarantino's stylizations and verbal athleticism, while also translating his essential eccentricities into a rational framework of avenging the Indian pride.

Kaante gradually steers the language of cultural antagonism towards a film essentially preoccupied with style. The film is composed in choppy visual strokes that are marked by an erratic fascination with the Western metropolis: extreme low and high angles, glittering skylines at night, swanky automobiles, handheld camerawork, slow motion photography, aerial shots of highways, skyscrapers and a mesh of flyovers. Jerky camera pans amplify the slide of trigger-happy protagonists into a full-blown shootout and chase. And yet, the film repeatedly returns to the subject of filial and amorous ties as the motivation behind undertaking the most life-threatening stunts. This unevenness is reflective of contrasting mandates that the film tries to negotiate – between 'cultural backwardness' tethered to the idea of family and the age of imitation tethered to the valence of free agents of individual will and desire, in the terms laid out by Madhava Prasad (2013).

While melodrama and spunkier crime genre are in a tension here, *Kaante* is a key film that marks the decisive transition away from melodramas towards genre cinema proper. Via Hollywood and its numerous 'unofficial' remakes, Hindi film gradually began to give crime its 'due' in cinema – not as a sociological symptom of deeper malaise addressed in the film, but as an extended series of extravagantly mounted spectacles. The bank robberies, serial killing, psychotic obsessions, split personalities, con artists, etc. therefore became the staple of an *imitative lexicon* of crime films. As I (Kumar 2017) have discussed elsewhere, it is the emergence of this lexicon that deliberately alienated vast multitudes of the working-class and provincial audience of Hindi cinema – a trajectory that aided the multifold process of gentrification; one of the key outcomes of this gentrification was the provincial barricading that was amplified in sub-regional film industries like Bhojpuri cinema (Kumar 2021).

The Hindi crime film since the early 2000s remains obsessed with Western locations and currencies, particularly the US dollar. As I (Kumar 2017) argue elsewhere, it is roughly around 2005 that Hindi cinema was also marked by the emergence of animated visualities – particularly, decreasing average shot-lengths which, in many sequences, turned the moving image to a fast-cut collage of stylized photographs. Gupta was one of the key practitioners of the editorial intensifications that shaped animated visuality, and nearly his entire filmography contains films remade from Hollywood, and later from East Asian hits. *Kaante* was an early and crude example of the trend, which came to full maturity by Gupta's 2004 film, *Musafir*, which resembles a special-effects-laden graphic novel. Crime, in such a scheme of things, is also reduced to a matter of style that lends some disruptive value to the protagonists. The excessive sartorial statements and exaggerated gestural repertoire anticipate the violation of the legal decree, in style. The characters are marked by a disruptive excess that desires to break free of the subjugation implied in the unquestioning 'discipline' of social life around them. While the event of the crime appears as the definite disruption, it is anticipated by a series of indefinite disruptions.

Kaante needs to be seen as a film that inaugurated the visual scheme in which style completely overshadows the criminal event. The absence of any visual reference to the jewellery store heist in *Reservoir Dogs* follows from Tarantino's sparse and quirky style in which the viewer is never too sure what the film is about. The event of the crime remains mysteriously wrapped in verbiage, violent eccentricities and secrecy. *Kaante* 're-uses' these quirks for impact, but is very invested in the planning, execution and the failure of the bank robbery, the elaborately staged centrepiece. And yet, the event is reduced to an occasion for the absurdly orchestrated full-blown shootout. In this way, it deftly walks the 'Tarantino bridge' since Tarantino himself draws from the widest catchment of cinematic citations without ever being tied down by their empirical underpinnings.

Kidnapping in Nigeria

Armed robbery has been a feature of Nigerian life since the early 1970s, a function of the government's chronic failure to maintain a monopoly of violence in its territory, rising social anomie, and the habit and necessity of holding wealth in tangible forms, given centuries of unstable currencies and a banking system that barely functioned. All this intensified during the SAP crisis; spectacular devaluation of the naira meant that bulky amounts of cash needed to be carried around, bait for criminals. In its first decade, Nollywood made memorable films about large criminal gangs invading homes and taking control of whole streets and buses while they were systematically pillaged.[3]

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[3] Examples include *Oracle* (1998), the *Issakaba* series (2001), *Time Up … No Place to Hide* (2001) and *Ashes to Ashes* (2001). See Haynes (2016).

Reform of the banking system was one of the triumphs of the civilian regimes that took over from the military in 1999. The other was telecommunications. These changes allowed Nigeria's integration into the globalized neoliberal economy (though a high proportion of the population is still unbanked). Carrying bags of money is no longer necessary because ATMs are ubiquitous, at least in the places where people with money go.

Under the opening credits of Walter Taylaur's *Gbomo Gbomo Express*, an anonymous voiceover comments: 'A time will come when people will say, I remember the good old days when money was really money. [The camera shows us N5,000 in a saucer.] These days, money is becoming more of an idea than a physical thing. And most of us haven't noticed the switch.' Later in the film, when the hired muscle for the criminal conspiracy expects to see bundles of cash, this is taken as a sign of their stupidity: the money is to move through an international bank transfer.

Criminals require two things to get access to a victim's money through an ATM: a physical object (the card) and a PIN that is in the owner's mind. Kidnapping has replaced armed robbery as the premier crime, since it is the most efficient way to take possession of an ATM card and the body of the person with the code, who can be tortured.

Other modes of kidnapping have also become prominent evidence that Nigeria is now a failed state (Campbell and Rotberg 2021), incapable of providing its citizens with elementary safety and security. ATMs give access only to the limited amounts of money in current accounts. More serious pillaging of kidnap victims requires holding them for an extended period in a hideout while a ransom is negotiated with the victim's social network and the money is assembled. This kind of kidnapping is more associated with the open road. Vast areas of the country, including major national highways, are considered very dangerous. A steady stream of newspaper accounts of the kidnappings of politicians and celebrities keeps the issue in front of the public. Kidnapping is a routinized business whose protocols are well understood, but victims commonly suffer traumatic harm or are killed. The 2014 abduction of the 'Chibok girls', students who were kidnapped from their school by Islamists, was only the most widely publicized example of a practice that has spread across Northern Nigeria, with many mass kidnappings carried out by criminals, armed and protected by shadowy 'big men', who may then sell the victims to Islamist groups. Militants in the Niger Delta kidnap employees of the oil companies that operate there. The Gulf of Guinea has become the world epicentre of piracy, profits coming principally from the ransoms paid for ships' crews. From *Glamour Girls* 1 & 2 (1994, 1996), the first English-language Nollywood film, to the recent *Òlòtūré* (2019, available on Netflix), Nollywood has told stories of criminal organizations that lure women into travelling abroad for work, who are then kidnapped and sold into sex slavery.

‘Gbomo’ means kidnapping in Nigerian Pidgin; ‘Gbomo Gbomo Express’ refers to a rapid form of it that has become increasingly common since the film came out. Three or four guys will surprise someone driving an expensive car, forcing him or her to tour a number of ATMs, withdrawing the cash limit from each one. The crime is suited to the urban environment; it’s light, mobile and quick. The criminals do not need anything more than knives and an air of brutal willingness to use them, though they may well be more heavily armed. If they resist the temptations of carjacking and robbing jewellery, there are few leads for the police to follow.

It is hard to exaggerate the prevalence of kidnapping, and its visceral terror makes it an attractive subject for filmmaking. Nigerians are a mobile people, and mobility increases with wealth and success. The pleasures of the night in Lagos involve driving. Kidnapping is the crime the relatively affluent patrons of multiplex theatres have most to fear, the thing that might happen to them on their way home.

‘Lasgidi’

‘Lasgidi’ is a slang term for Lagos that emerged out of Nigerian popular culture sometime in the late 1980s. It means something like ‘the city of hustle’ or ‘the city of strong heads’, pointing to the anarchic free-for-all that characterizes Lagos. Lasgidi is the open city where everyone comes to make it, to assert and realize their personalities in a rough, Darwinian meritocracy, a ruthless social competition suited, even necessary, to neoliberal uneven development. ‘Lasgidi’ is often coupled with the injunction to ‘shine your eye’, meaning look sharp, watch your back, keep an eye on the people around you. But it also evokes the city’s raffish charms, which are considerable, and the wildness associated with the city’s enormous creative energies. Lasgidi is a bitch goddess, but there is usually a note of pride and affection when the name is used. It has turned into a brand, a name given to restaurants and shops – fashionable ones. Many Lagos indigenes have never heard the term; it’s used by people who are or want to be playing at a certain level. Lasgidi is glamorous to those who have mastered it, or at least survived it and prospered, or imagine doing so. Culturally, it is the ground of Afrobeats music, which incorporates the urban gangster imagery of American hip hop, and of the multiplex cinemas. This is the side of Lagos that *Gbomo Gbomo Express* shows, and the film embodies it fully and precisely.

Gbomo Gbomo Express (2015)

The film opens with a medley of establishing elements. First, panoramic drone images of Lagos at dawn – the unmistakable lagoon and highways, with the skyline of the Lagos Island business district in the distance. The end credits will boast, 'Shot entirely on location in Lagos, Nigeria with an all Nigerian Crew. Made in Nollywood.'

Cut to a recording studio, where the CEO Austin and the company lawyer Rotimi, conspicuously cool guys played by leading Nollywood stars Ramsey Nouah and Blossom Chukwujekwu, listen to an auditioning singer. After the voiceover about money, a new situation opens up. In a fashionable shawarma restaurant the cook Francis (Gideon Okeke) and the server Blessing (Kiki Omeili) complain about how badly they are paid, given the restaurant's rip-off prices. But they have a set of more lucrative professional skills, rapidly illustrated. Blessing has lifted the phone of one of a trio of catty women customers, and Francis quickly hacks into it and finds the number of the woman's husband. Their scam has elements of '419' fraud and *Gbomo Gbomo Express* kidnapping; the voiceover explains it as it unfolds.

'It can begin with a phone call and a number you don't recognize. And when you answer it, a voice on the other end says "If you know what's good for you … you won't hang up … " Then you hear another voice, a familiar voice you think you recognize.' (We see that it is Blessing imitating a terrified kidnapped woman.) 'Listen to me very carefully: we have your wife, and if you want to see her alive again, you'll do exactly wettin ("what", in Nigerian Pidgin) I tell you.' 'Let me talk to my wife right now!' shouts the husband. Francis cuts the call. A sex worker in the husband's car says, 'I hope all this drama doesn't mean I won't be paid in full.' The husband calls back, begging, and is told he has exactly one hour. A montage shows him going from ATM to ATM and picking up jewellery.

A guy smokes, lit in blue, in striking film noir style. Hooded and wearing latex gloves, he labels a whiteboard (of the kind we see detectives use in police procedurals) with notes reading 'ransom' and 'fifty million'. We never see his face; the filmmaking conspires with him to protect his anonymity. (Spoiler alert: this mastermind turns out to be Austin, the music company CEO and the voiceovers are also his.) At night, he gets into a car and hands the driver an envelope labelled 'Mobility'. Mobility is a fence, to whom Blessing comes with the jewellery extorted the evening before, along with the cash withdrawn from the ATMs. Mobility gives her Austin's envelope, which contains a job offer. She will have no connection to Austin except through a burner phone. She and Francis rent warehouse space to use as a kidnapping hideout, acquire a generous supply of weaponry, and hire as muscle Filo, tall and dumb.

The audience is made to work hard (to shine their eyes!) to make connections and keep up with the plot development underlying the blizzard of rapid scenes. (Another plot line is developing at the same time: Austin's partner Rotimi is conspiring with Nino, a violent gangster rapper who records for the company, to defraud Austin and start another label.) We know a lot less than the anonymous mastermind. This is Lasgidi, a continuous test of alertness and intelligence, full of people like Francis and Blessing with their nimble array of professional criminal skills. A principle emerges: people deserve what they will get. Blessing decided to go after the trio of well-dressed women in the restaurant because she despises them. They live cynically off of men; they manoeuvre to avoid paying the bill; the one who is stuck with it has her credit card declined. The apparently universal corruption relaxes any moral qualms we might feel, leaving us free to enjoy the spectacle of tricksters being tricked, a festival of wit.

Dark wit is nothing new in Nollywood, but its coupling with complicated clever plotting is. The more ambitious Nollywood scripts have often been loaded with self-conscious cleverness, but of a theatrical kind, playing around the formal limitations of stage drama, which often doesn't translate well to film. *Gbomo Gbomo Express*'s ironic integration of its own dramatic structure with criminal plotting seems inspired by American and European film traditions.

Austin goes out, alone, to a high-end club, where he drinks heavily and takes cocaine. He evidently has a substance abuse problem. Austin meets Cassie – beautiful, young, out of control – who kisses Austin to aggravate the man she came with. They close the club and leave together, stopping at a shop so Austin can buy more liquor and condoms. Outside, Blessing's confederates knock him out. Seeing Cassie waiting in his Range Rover, they kidnap her too. They come to, bound and gagged, on the floor of the abandoned warehouse. Under duress, Austin gives up the PIN to his bank card. There is a hilarious sequence of Filo using it, shot through the screen of the ATM so the prompts appear backwards. Blessing is exasperated to find Filo neglected to check Austin's balance, so they go back. By now, he's forgotten the PIN. Annoyed when she takes over, Filo slaps her ass and she grabs his genitals, while the machine eats Austin's card. The kidnappers call Rotimi with the ransom demand: N50 million. Francis threatens to shoot Cassie, and Austin tells a comically ineffective series of lies to try to save her. The two have had time, lying bound on the floor, for rom com badinage. Cassie is a funny one, with a shoe fetish. Hearing Filo trying to force himself on Cassie, Austin frees himself, rescues her and they run away. But she is recaptured. In a grand romantic gesture, Austin returns and surrenders himself to save Cassie. To stop the vicious beating he gets, Cassie announces that she is the step-daughter of Alexis Osita-Park, telling the kidnappers to google her. A quick mashup of computer screen imagery establishes that Alexis is worth $2.8 billion. The gang discusses how much to demand as Cassie's ransom. In negotiations with Francis, Alexis beats his ransom demand down from the 100 million that the gang had settled on to 30 million and a promise not to prosecute them. But then it turns out that he was thinking in naira and she was thinking in dollars …. (the rate of exchange: $1 = N360).

Meanwhile, adding to the general tension, it is revealed (in stages) that Blessing has bought a pregnancy test and it's positive; that she had seen a fertility test Francis had taken and he is sterile; and that she's used Filo as a sperm donor. But she loves Francis. The camera had noticed her noticing a wedding magazine. Through all of this she emerges as the deepest and most sympathetic character in the film. We learn that she has been a sex worker, but we're not encouraged to judge her. She warns Filo to get out. Filo returns with two armed men to steal the ransom money. He was too stupid to read the emails about how the money was to be transferred to a bank in Malaysia. In a tense standoff, Filo accidentally shoots Blessing, Francis shoots Filo, then everybody shoots everybody, as in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, or a Guy Ritchie film. Austin, in his hospital room, declines to let the wealthy stepmother Alexis pay him off. Cassie enters and tells him Alexis is taking her on a cruise for a few months. 'I'm not sure where that will leave us.' She leans to kiss him, apparently uncertain herself where the kiss will land … on his forehead, as it turns out. Clearly, romance is no match for the realities of the class system. Austin puts his bags in the boot of a car. The voiceover of the opening about the changed nature of money is repeated. He looks at his phone, which shows a $30 million transfer to his account in Malaysia. He tells the driver to take him to the international airport, discarding a vial of coke.

As the final credits roll, Alexis speaks to Rotimi and Nilo (the conspirators against Austin), who are stuffed into the boot of her car, denying they know anything about Malaysia (which is perfectly true). She says, 'I'll leave it to the two of you to decide which one of you will recover my money.' Rotimi nervously combs his beard, trying to hold onto his cool in the ridiculous, and probably fatal, position he's in. The transnational billionaire seems quite capable of grievous personal harm or murder. It's very funny, the last touch in this exhilarating tour of the morass of Lasgidi.

A rapid montage at the end, following the money transfer seen on Austin's phone, confirms that he was the mastermind with the whiteboard glimpsed near the film's beginning; sharp-eyed observers will also note that Cassie was always his target, whom he had been tracking through tabloid newspapers. We need to rethink the whole story. The discarded coke vial suggests his substance abuse problems were all an act, as was everything else in the nightclub and following. He returned to the kidnappers' lair because his plot had not reached its conclusion …

He's always been acting. Ramsey Nouah's skill as an actor helps elide the transitions from a hipster to cerebral mastermind to addled hapless hedonist to silly but charming lover, a softie who finds some courage. The film's other characters are vivid and sometimes stylized to the point of caricature, but the ones that matter are complex enough to also seem real. Cassie is rich enough to afford her sillinesses and wildness. She's a player too … the rom com element may have taken us in, but not her.

Nollywood crime films, like Nollywood generally, had always been dominated by melodrama. The money ritual films centred on the tortured soul of a protagonist, forced to betray and sacrifice a loved one. The socially conscious biopics also stayed close to the struggle within the protagonist between a life of crime and the expression of his inner decency. Kidnapping films tend not to centre on the perpetrator or the betrayal of intimates but on the victim's experience, and on the emerging relationships between strangers, across class lines, with reversals of normal power relations. *Gbomo Gbomo Express* cleverly makes the mastermind also the (apparent) victim.

But its decisive break with Nollywood tradition is to utterly abandon melodrama. Blessing's shocking sudden death is promptly forgotten. The film doesn't ask us to attach our emotions to anyone; the ending shows us that we haven't understood Austin at all. We wish him well because he's entertained us and we like a winner. The film has been exhilarating because the game is fun to watch.

Ugly (2013)

The city of Mumbai was always the protagonist of Mumbai underworld films of the 1990s–2000s (most of them produced by Ramgopal Varma), which sought to 'expose' the overwhelming nexus of crime, business, power, celebrity and wealth. The key triumph of gangster cinema of the late 1990s, however, was to provincialize Mumbai – reconfiguring its location from the default cinematic landscape to a tapestry of individuated neighbourhoods. *Ugly* (2013) follows in those footsteps, detailing the city's map via a kidnapping case, which triggers the conflict between policing and cinematic procedures. Once the chase kicks in, the control panels of police headquarters are engaged in a battle with fringe players of the film industry via techniques of interception and deception. While this battle opens up the city's crevices for realist appreciation, the film also sets in motion a parallel project in cynicism. The crime in *Ugly* occasions a series of suppressed, awkward, hilarious and cynical encounters. The film gradually reveals the inter-penetrating past lives of the characters – all of them disgraced by abuse, incompetence, violence and betrayal – as if to forcefully underline that 'there are no good guys here, lest you should think otherwise'.

The kidnapped girl, Kali, has two father-figures: her stepfather, a high-ranking police officer, and her biological father, a struggling movie actor 'hero'. *Ugly* is a film about their entangled and scrambled masculine egos and destinies. The search for Kali reunites them briefly; they chase, track and deceive one another, running us through the dark crevices of the city, exploding them into high-contrast visibility. In its multiplicative cynicism, *Ugly* crosses a line where the metropolitan hustle, marked by irony and wit, becomes indistinguishable from its dystopian commitments. Chaitanya, a close friend of Kali's father, spots an opportunity in the kidnapping and decides to anonymously demand ransom in exchange of already-dead Kali. He therefore seeks auditions from girls to find the best matching voice sample, as the evidence of Kali being in his custody. In a sequence intercut against the police search for Kali, he watches the video clips of girls performing for the imagined kidnapper, on a desktop screen in his office within the suburban premises of a rundown film theatre, Naaz. Chaitanya's anticipation and deception against the policing procedures of interception introduce us to the vulnerabilities of surveillance mechanisms and communication infrastructure – both essential to kidnapping (films). Watching him analyse the auditioning children forces a reckoning with how kidnapping films hinge upon the essential intervention of telephony or video cameras.

The clinching value of mediation allows these films to *play* with communication as well as interception, introducing fascinating uncertainties. Techniques of manipulating the moving image, which are at the heart of cinematic procedures, are brought to the battleground of crime and law enforcement. Foregrounding them, *Ugly* goes on a confessional overdrive to lend further credence to its faith in realism. It confesses to the elements of deception and interception embedded within cinematic procedures of editorial interventions. An implicit argument the film offers is that while the chaos within cinematic devices can be editorially rationalized, its corresponding urban traffic of signals, personnel and messages cannot be regulated. The incommensurate surplus, therefore, constitutes the hustle that becomes realism's vitality, and is congruous with what Haynes calls Lasgidi – 'a continuous test of alertness and intelligence'. In its grappling with realism, then, *Ugly* is starkly opposed to the sort of crime film *Kaante* is. The former goes into meticulous detailing of sites and transactions while the latter operates on a very simplified spatial layout. The more it tries to make sense of the dark city, composed by all manner of routine brutalities, the more it gets trapped within unreliable back-and-forth circuits of interception and deception. But at the end, the film also mocks all the intercepted phone calls, manipulated voice messages, geo-spatial tracking and clever setups, by discovering that Kali died very close to the spot where she was kidnapped. An 'old-fashioned' search operation, of the kind that was abandoned abruptly, would have easily found her alive.

Kashyap's cynical undertaking of realism breathes through eccentric digressions. While his work rebels against the stranglehold of melodramatic piety, it also deviates from the suffocating legacy of realism as a developmental aesthetic. His crime cinema stylized dark humour, psychotic derangement and a fetish for the performative excess residing within disruptive outlaws. Its cynicism is tethered to the desire to blend a richly grounded empirical sense of the entangled urban pathways with an art-house commitment to gritty realism. Since much of this derivative art-house commitment to realism rails against classical melodramas – which habitually divided the narrative landscape between virtue and vice – it may be argued that Kashyap's work overcorrects by veering towards hopeless, and often parodic, cynicism. Indeed, *Ugly* offers a much higher sociological awareness than *Kaante*, and traverses a story entirely within the realm of plausible, but the actual crime in both the films only triggers unrelated agendas – postcolonial superego in *Kaante*; and in *Ugly*, the crisis of masculinity in Bollywood's ground-zero. It may not showcase the compact visual economy and psychological blur of classical noir, but *Ugly* externalizes the darkness over events of domestic violence, police brutality, child abuse, depression, kidnapping, performance anxiety, distressing exploitative scenarios and relationships of diminishing marginal utility.

While classical noir and its stylistic footprint borrowed from German Expressionism have influenced crime cinema across the world, the more recent Hindi crime cinema has been wedded to the contrary aesthetic of gritty realism. *Kaante*, still preoccupied with the legacy of melodramas, was therefore far more invested in style as opposed to *Ugly*, a relatively mature expression of noir realism.

Noir in Nigerian multiplexes

In the culture of the multiplexes, crime films of the new kind considered here run a distant third in popularity to comedies and romantic comedies. Audiences have been ambivalent about such films, though they have been capturing a good deal of critical attention: Kemi Adetiba's *King of Boys* (2018) was a smash hit, and the leading (or perhaps dominant) film production and distribution company FilmOne thought Daniel Oriahi's *Taxi Driver: Oko*

Ashewo (2015) a successful experiment, but Dare Olaitan's *Knockout Blessing* (2018) disappeared from theatres within a week. The powers that be in the multiplex world are wary of this genre. The neo-noirish genre is driven to a considerable extent by the ambitions of directors who are eager to be part of transnational cinema and its artistic heritage. Adetiba cites Francis Ford Coppola and Fernando Meirelles as influences on *King of Boys*; Oriahi's *Taxi Driver: Oko Ashewo* is an homage to Scorsese and Jim Jarmusch, among others. Quentin Tarantino, with his characteristic antic mixture of comedy, graphic violence, and absurd conversations among colourful low-lifes, is, it seems to me, the most important general influence, which is especially strong in Olaitan's *Ojukokoro* (2016) and in *Gbomo Gbomo Express*, though in the latter case Guy Ritchie's crime films – similar in spirit but more tightly focused within the genre – may be a closer model.

Connor Ryan, in an excellent recent essay, discusses a number of these films and notes that something fundamental has shifted in Nollywood's relation to genre systems: that relation now includes a self-conscious desire to engage with transnational genres, as opposed to being directly tied to developments within Nigerian society (Ryan 2019). I largely agree with this argument, which is a necessary revision to the argument I made in my 2016 book. But I would also argue that the transnational genres often serve not as an escape from Nigerian realities but as windows into them. This group of noir-ish films, with their elements of crime, darkness, nervous tension, paranoia, dark wit, exhilaration and metropolitan stylishness, associate them with Lasgidi and express its structures of feeling. A film like *Gbomo Gbomo Express* allows Lagosian audiences both to contemplate what they fear from a safe distance and to imagine themselves in a position of dominance with respect to it.

Indian multiplex noir

The multiplex-mall in urban India has been a key site of the twenty-first-century leisure economy (Athique and Hill 2010), and a productive conduit of international commensuration of visual stylistics, with Hollywood in particular. Not only have Hollywood blockbusters gained significant prominence in this period, but for the first time, a blockbuster form has emerged to consolidate otherwise regionally fragmented film markets within India (Kumar 2019). Transnational mobility for fashion, travel and consumer goods has exploded within Hindi films for the upper-class protagonists, who have usurped cultural power from their predominantly working-class counterparts of the twentieth century. Crime cinema in general built the first barrier against this trend by attending to the grimy underbelly of the city, where legal decree held very little caché. *Kaante* defied this trajectory of crime cinema to offer a blend between international mobility, stylistic overload and outlaw desires, situated as it was in the heart of Hollywood. In some ways, the film anticipated the coming multiplex audience without being an actual beneficiary of it. *Ugly*, however, persisted with the 'Bombay noir' tradition (see Gopalan 2015), with the desire to expand the urban layout and lexicon, within what could be termed 'multiplex noir'. By this I mean a genre of dark films navigating routine domestic violence, disturbed strangers lurking in the vicinity and the psychological trauma of inhabiting the verge of the metropolis – nearly there, but not quite (Paunskins 2019). The multiplex has been a key conduit of interpenetration between genre stylistics and the repressed provinciality of the Indian metropolis (Kumar 2013).

Conclusion

The emergence of multiplex-malls has been concurrent with the expansion of urban boundaries, and the question of cultural belonging that accompanies the entry of 'outsiders' and haunts the urban pathologies of crime cinema. The multiplexes certainly embody the assimilationist polarity that underlies this chapter, by invoking standardized consumer culture, towards global circuits of food, fashion, travel and cinema.[4] But, in Mumbai and Lagos, they are directly confronted by messy postcolonial urbanisms. This chapter shows how the contemporary contrasts of neoliberal times have shaped the trajectory of crime genres in Mumbai and Lagos. A conversation with global screen worlds, we argue, is unfailingly present within the twenty-first-century crime films, albeit with varying degrees of self-awareness, and the frequent deployment of style as an indicator of cultural belonging.

Comparative noir urbanisms are marked by the tension between stylistic upgrades and reckoning with procedural and thematic entanglements of everyday urban life. The comparison helps us unpack the circuitry of crime cinema, with respect to the departure from melodramatic moorings. Since crime itself reveals key social faultlines, which stage the confrontation between state, as the keeper of law and order, and the incisions made by dis-orderly criminal events, crime genres in general and the long afterlife of film noir in particular help us engage with both idiosyncratic and subterranean aspects of the transition into neoliberal urbanism. The multiplexes support (within limits, and more successfully in India than in Nigeria) variations of art and popular cinema that, while reflecting a general shift towards the aspiration to participate in a global popular culture, nevertheless is grounded within nationally bound cinematic histories and cultivated audience preferences.

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[4] On this development in the Nigerian context, see Ryan (2023).

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9

The city as a site of contention: Contemporary Japanese and Pakistani cinemas in conversation

Irene González-López and Zebunnisa Hamid

Introduction

The approach of ‘global screen worlds’ encourages collaborative research through which scholars bring their own regional expertise to produce analyses that are attentive to local and transnational aesthetic and narrative traditions, languages, industrial contexts and social issues (Dovey and Taylor-Jones 2021). Inspired by the paradigm of ‘global screen worlds’ (Dovey and Taylor-Jones 2021), this chapter explores and compares two contemporary films from Japan and Pakistan to reflect on the experience, perception and representation of the Asian city. In the following pages, we bring into dialogue our expertise on Japanese and Pakistani cinemas and our shared interests in gender, intersectionality, identities in crisis and the city.

The city is frequently portrayed in the arts as a paradoxical site of empowerment and subjugation, of improvement and decadence. It functions as a quasi-universal symbol of modernity – both as imagined from a Eurocentric perspective and as it evolves in non-Western societies (Quijano 2000) – and the contradictions it entails. Thus, the city is connected both to progress and to the dilapidation of traditional values and social structures. Progress is often linked to the desire for a better life, imagined alternatively as economic prosperity, liberation or individual self-fulfilment. Yet progressing in the city usually entails moral conflicts and rejecting previous bonds – something that could seem to be in opposition to self-fulfilment (Vega 2013; Bose 2008). 'City films' interrogate the idea of a 'better life' and what the pursuit of this entails. They often articulate the contentious notion of modernity as experienced in and through the city through narratives of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and age which work to dramatize themes of inequality, confrontation, emasculation, danger, emancipation, alliance and access. In these films, therefore, different approaches to modernity also entail distinct ways of understanding the self, their desires, rights and obligations; and distinct ways of constructing personal and social relationships through space. A critical comparison of Japanese and Pakistani films can work to 'de-centre' the discussion about the cinematic city by examining how film mediates experiences of 'indigenised modernities' (Iwabuchi 2002). Our analysis rejects a particular, linear narrative of a Western modernity to be emulated by the rest but acknowledges the legacy of this long-presumed ideal and of historical and contemporary asymmetrical power relations in Asia.

To this purpose, we examine a Japanese film, *Dawn of the Felines* (*Mesunekotachi*, dir. Shiraishi Kazuya 2017), which recounts stories of three female sex workers in Tokyo, and a Pakistani film, *Zinda Bhaag* (translation: Run for Your Life, dirs. Meenu Gaur, and Farjad Nabi 2013), which follows three working-class male friends struggling to survive in Lahore. Both works can be contextualized in the global tradition of 'city films'. For instance, both were shot on location and follow the familiar story of individuals' searching for a sense of belonging or identity through various encounters with the city and its inhabitants (other similar city films include *Mahanagar* [Satyajit Ray 1963], *Metro Manila* [Sean Ellis 2013], *Bol* [Shoaib Mansoor 2011], *Tokyo Refugees* [Sasabe Kiyoshi 2014] and *Dead Pigs* [Cathy Yan 2018]). As many other city films, they also focus on marginal characters and issues of access, mobility and aspiration. Moreover, both *Dawn of the Felines* and *Zinda Bhaag* make use of multistrand narratives to portray different yet interconnected experiences of the city that reveal the intersectionality of gender, class, age, ethnicity and space (as also shown in, for instance, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* [2000], and Lim Kah Wai's Osaka trilogy [2011–20]).

Despite controversies around the term of intersectionality, we find it useful in contextualizing different positionalities to avoid presenting Asia (and Africa) as 'essentialist categories' (Dovey and Taylor-Jones 2021: 3). Intersectionality works here as 'an interpretive lens and method to consider various spaces in various screen cultures, and how these spaces reflect, reinforce, or dismantle intersecting forms of resistance and domination' (Massood, Matos and Wojcik 2021: 8). Based on this, we seek to shed light on certain power dynamics implicated in the interplay between identities, spaces and representation. In the following pages, we first explore the films' contexts of production and consumption as important elements shaping the films' politics, to then examine specific narrative and aesthetic strategies the films use in representing the city as a site of contentious modernity.

Locating production on the margins

With distinct historical and socio-economic development, gender and sexual mores, and specific aesthetic and narrative traditions, Pakistan and Japan are two very different Asian societies that may not, on the surface, appear to naturally come together. However, both countries share social traditions focused on the community and family, where the group's stability has traditionally been (and to a certain extent still is) valued over the individual's desire, and where male-centric traditions that work to undermine women's financial and sexual autonomy are dominant.[1] In the last century, rapid and often abrupt political, social and economic transformations, which are reified in the city landscapes, have impacted the way people think of themselves, of their communities and their cities (see also Braester and Tweedie 2010). An underlying tension exists between the individual, the group and the environment as tradition, aspirations and reality clash in the everyday urban experiences of its inhabitants.

Before examining how the two case studies depict this intersectional tension, we ought to contextualize them as commercial products. Massood, Matos and Wojcik remind us that 'each film offers a view of the city that is selective and ideological' (2021: 4). Any intersectional analysis, they argue, must be mindful of production and consumption contexts because conditions of production and talent, genre conventions, distribution circuits and audiences partially shape and/or reveal such ideologically selective depictions (Massood, Matos and Wojcik 2021: 6–7). The two films in this study have been selected because they occupy a liminal position that complicates their categorization as either mainstream or marginal, national or transnational, bearing witness also to changing screen industries.

Dawn of the Felines is rated in Japan as an 'adult film'. It is part of the Roman Porno Reboot Project (*Ribūto purojekuto*), which was launched by

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[1] In the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 compiled by the World Economic Forum, Japan ranks 120th and Pakistan 153rd, out of 156 countries.

Nikkatsu Studio in 2016 to celebrate the forty-fifth anniversary of its soft-core porn brand Roman Porno (active between 1971 and 1988). Five renowned filmmakers were entrusted each with the task of creating a film inspired by the spirit of Roman Porno while complying to several strict rules, which include an approximate length of eighty minutes, sticking to a relatively small budget, and completing the shoot in one week.[2] The pornographic nature of the film and its tight production conditions work to locate it as non-mainstream. However, Nikkatsu is the oldest major studio in Japan and the Reboot project relies on well-established stars and directors (including Nakata Hideo and Sono Shion) familiar to Japanese audiences. On the other hand, although the Reboot project was widely promoted as targeting female audiences and reworking the soft-porn category according to contemporary sensibilities (Takagi and Nishio 2017), only male directors were invited to the project and the female body remains the central object of eroticism and visual pleasure in the films. Yet *Dawn of the Felines* also lies on the margins of the porn category because, rather than exclusively distributed through soft-porn circuits, it has been screened in international film festivals, art-house circuits and the curated film streaming platform MUBI, where it is not labelled as an 'adult film'. These strategies evidence Nikkatsu's concern with expanding audiences within and beyond Japan and with investing the genre with greater cultural capital. However, the implementation of the project also suggests a primarily cosmetic transformation of the brand where the male gaze remains largely unchallenged, which is especially important for a film depicting female sex workers.

Zinda Bhaag, in contrast, is one of the earlier films of New Pakistani Cinema (NPC), a small urban, digital cinema catering to a largely middle-class audience with the first six films, including *Zinda Bhaag*, released in 2013 (Hamid 2020a). NPC films such as *Zinda Bhaag* can be categorized as more art house than commercial in terms of aesthetics, budget, box office reach and in their attempt to move away from formulaic storylines found in Pakistani mainstream cinema. *Zinda Bhaag* adheres to social realism in both narrative and formal terms, and features non-professional actors as its three main leads while also casting well-known Indian actor Naseeruddin Shah in a pivotal role. Simultaneously, the film contains nods to traditional mainstream Pakistani cinema by including song and dance numbers among other characteristics. In addition to being screened at numerous international film festivals, *Zinda Bhaag* was Pakistan's first official selection for Best International Feature Film (formerly Best Foreign Language Film) at the Academy Awards in over fifty years – appealing therefore to both commercial and niche audiences at home and abroad. In terms of themes, *Zinda Bhaag*, like many NPC films, is preoccupied with the urban affliction of the crisis of masculinity and the desire of young men to escape to foreign lands. The film was part of *Let's Talk Men,* a United Nations supported project on masculinity and the prevention of gender-based violence (Dadi 2020). One of the co-directors of the film is London-based British-Indian director and writer, Meenu Gaur, who is among a small group of New Pakistani Cinema women filmmakers, many of whom live and work between Pakistan and abroad, often operating within the margins of the two (Hamid 2020b). Therefore, in contraposition to the gender dynamics of *Dawn of the Felines*, here it is a female director who gets to rework the common narrative of the male migrant. Yet, here class also shapes the lens of the city narrative in *Zinda Bhaag* because (as often before) it is the educated middle-class who depicts and consumes the portrayal of the lower-class migrant.

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[2] So far, Nikkatsu seems reluctant to reveal the figures of the films' budget (Takagi and Nishio 2017).

Both films can be considered outliers of their respective contemporary industries while heavily grounded in established domestic and international genres and film cultures and attempting to appeal simultaneously to distinct audiences. With regional and transnational characteristics, and combining social realism with the musical, *Zinda Bhaag* treads on the margins of the mainstream, much like its characters. *Dawn of the Felines* similarly depicts subjects in the periphery of normative society while blurring the line between normative (mainstream) and non-normative (porn) cinemas. The following sections interrogate the narrative and formal aspects of the films to reveal the selective and ideological view of the city they provide while bearing in mind the positionality of the filmmakers and the markets in which they operate. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to enquire how these Japanese and Pakistani films re-imagine the contemporaneous city as a site of contention in this liminal space between counterculture and mainstream cinemas.

The cinematic city: Spaces and screens

In the films of this study, the city itself becomes an integral character, which the camera portrays in its interactions with the protagonists as they move across different neighbourhoods revealing the complex synergies between spaces and identities. As a result of this movement and the interactions that it forges, the city, we argue, is presented as being increasingly constructed through interconnected screen worlds.

Zinda Bhaag opens with an establishing shot of the old city of Lahore. We are then introduced to the bright images of the city through close-up shots of buildings, murals, women and children braiding each other's hair and applying henna, boys jumping into the canal, and street food, accompanied by festive music and a narrator who utters a phrase well known to Lahoris: '*Jinney Lahore nai vekhya, o jameya nai*' (One who hasn't seen Lahore hasn't been born yet). These cheerful stereotypical snapshots of Lahore disavow the dark undertones of the city and sit in complete opposition to the image of a generic crowded developing city of the Global South and the mood of the film itself almost two hours later when the end credits roll. While at first enticing us with the postcard view of Lahore, the film then begins to expose what lies in the shadows as it takes us deeper into the city streets. The camera is constantly moving, exploring the city through the characters and their interactions, reminding us of the multitude of overlapping experiences of the city. Through various montages, we see the city through not only the eyes of the three male leads, but also women navigating the urban space, and gangsters exerting ownership and control. The camera gives the audience an insider's perspective, as it exposes the multiple layers of the city without romanticizing it or glossing over the unpredictability and brutality of the city (as it perhaps does at the start of the film). As the streets become darker and the crisis being faced by the characters heightens, the city starts to become anonymous and unidentifiable. In one montage, for instance, two characters are shown drifting away from each other and deeper into the city and into the night. Flashing headlights from the surrounding traffic light up the shots as the specificities of the city begin to fade away and are replaced by the relentless motion and movement of the urban space, of any urban space, further highlighting the isolation and anonymity of the characters on screen. These characteristics of the city – the light and dark – are further complicated by the fact that the use of space and access to space is both gendered and divided along class lines, especially in Pakistani films, as will be further discussed.

Yomi Braester notes that most city films start with an establishing shot of the city and interspersed images of its landmarks that tell us 'as much about the observer as about the city' (2010: 17). *Zinda Bhaag*'s opening critically reminds us of the emotional and political identity of Lahore as constructed in the popular imaginary. In contrast, *Dawn of the Felines* does not include a single establishing shot, nor images of easily recognizable landmarks of Japan's capital city. Production requirements for the Roman Porno Reboot project films may have influenced the choice to avoid establishing shots, which are expensive and arguably lack narrative content. But it may have also been a calculated strategy to convey the fragmentation of the urban experience as a tableau of different scenes, while stressing the impossibility of defining Tokyo or the vibrant neighbourhood of Ikebukuro in a single establishing shot.

By zooming in directly onto the microcosm that develops on the streets, *Dawn of the Felines* appears to suggest that these stories could happen in any big city. The feeling of alienation and the serendipitous encounters are rendered a result of the emotional, economic and spatial dynamics that are forged in the city life, rather than marked as a distinct phenomenon of Tokyo. The camera often records the streets from the perspective of a pedestrian or a car but frequently out of focus. Rarely does it show the streets from the specific point of view of the protagonists. The camera is rather *on* them, depicting the sex workers against the city. Therefore, while we are encouraged to see the city through their experiences, the female protagonists are simultaneously rendered objects to be examined rather than subjects with whom the gaze of the camera coincides. This contradictory depiction of women as protagonists and yet objects to be looked at can certainly be traced back to the tradition of Roman Porno, its concern with scopophilia and its commodification of female subjectivity.

In the anonymity of the big city, technology plays a central role in interpersonal communication in both our films. Mobile phones, cameras, computers, user-generated content and online exposés play a key role in advancing the plot through mediated interactions. For instance, in *Dawn of the Felines*, Takada (Kaku Tomohiro) is a wealthy *hikikomori* (acute social withdrawal) for whom sex workers and the internet are the only connection with the outside world. For the sex workers, mobile phone chats provide a virtual space of intimacy where they can freely chat with each other despite being in the same room with their boss. In both films, digital technology becomes the trigger of accidental encounters and friendships, but also of exploitation and conflict, which are frequently linked to further economic transactions. Technology highlights the connectivity between acquaintances and strangers alike, but, simultaneously, it facilitates undesired irruptions into private life and relationships that feel more detached than face-to-face communication.

In *Zinda Bhaag*, for example, the same drama serial is shown on television screens in different locations in the film, suggesting some commonality between characters who otherwise never meet. Yet, as discussed later on, mobile phones in the film also play an important role as markers of social class and symbols of aspirations for social mobility, underscoring the inequality that separates characters and their experiences of the city. Shiraishi's film, on the other hand, highlights the increasingly mediated experience of commodified sexuality. *Dawn of the Felines* opens with a medium shot of Masako (Ihata Juri) from behind as she walks in the city. The shot is accompanied by the sound of female erotic sighs and various men's voices on the phone requesting sexual services. The camera cuts to a rapid montage of photographs of sex workers on display with pixelated eyes and faces while we repeatedly hear a camera shutter. Interspersed blurred images of the city are shown in overlap with visual depictions of sexual acts. Cut to the interior of a car, where Masako is checking sex work ads on the screen of her smart phone. She is unaware of being recorded on video by Horikiri (Yoshimura Kaito), the mischievous driver of the call girl company. We see Masako through the screen of his mobile phone, and later in the film we learn that Horikiri uploads these surreptitious video recordings with sex workers to the internet. The women's faces appear pixelated in the online videos, but their harsh commentary attracts new customers to the business. As a key component of modernity, technology allows for anonymity and intimacy to converge and its use is more often than not linked to some kind of transactional relationship, as we will analyse in what follows.

The role of technology further emphasizes access and the experience of surveillance on multiple levels in the city (Zimmer 2015) – through mobile technology, CCTV cameras as well as the audience 'eavesdropping' in on the characters. In *Dawn of the Felines*, the arrest of Rie (Michie), a sex worker who kills one of her clients, is recorded on the mobile phone of bystanders, making her crime irremediably public. In *Zinda Bhaag*, a CCTV camera in a high end grocery store catches Rubina (Amna Ilyas), an enterprising young woman and the love interest of one of the male leads, from a distance as she tries to discreetly place her homemade soap on the shelves in hopes of selling them. In fact, the audience's first view of Rubina in this scene is through a screen displaying the security camera footage, emphasizing the role of surveillance through a voyeuristic, distanced lens. The existence of technology and the role of multiple screens within a single frame highlight the interconnectivity between characters and space, while also pointing to a level of intrusion and surveillance that traps those characters within that very space. At the same time, characters in *Zinda Bhaag* are trying to evade, subvert and negate global surveillance to cross borders undetected when desperate and left with no legal means or access, highlighting their isolation and alienation in the process. Therefore, in various and contradictory ways technology is linked to the urban experience of modernity, allowing for both anonymity and intimacy, for virtual open access and surveillance, and for the creation of shared imagined spaces and of socio-economic barriers.

Weaving multistrand narratives

By depicting various characters who share certain attributes but differ in others, multistrand narratives are particularly effective in drawing attention to intersectionality. *Dawn of the Felines* provides heterogeneous profiles of women sex workers, challenging the stereotypical depiction that is often connected to specific outfits, places, times, age range and motives. Masako is a young woman who quit her office job out of boredom and fell into debt. As a result, she started selling sex while living as a so-called *nettocafe nanmin* (internet café refugee), a person who lacks a residence and sleeps at internet or manga cafés. Despite feeling lost at times, Masako seems to have no regrets and no interest in seeking another lifestyle. Rie is a middle-class, middle-aged housewife who works during the daytime as a sex worker. There is no financial motivation or need. As she explains later in the film, her marriage's failure (inability to bear children and husband's infidelities) triggered in her a desire to explore and exploit her own sexuality. Finally, Yui (Maue Satsuki) is a single mother who despises her work but finds it more profitable than other unqualified occupations and less demanding than other types of sex work because, officially, *deri heru* excludes intercourse. *Deri heru* is the abbreviation of 'delivery health', currently the most popular form of selling sexual services in Japan, and what brings Masako, Rie and Yui together. The multiple plot lines also enable a varied portrayal of customers and of the city spaces in which transactional sex takes place; and here the focus on the *deri heru* industry is also relevant. Because *deri heru* workers usually dressed in an ordinary, discrete fashion and are sent to the patron's house or a hotel, this sex business operates across the entire city in an inconspicuous manner and, consequently, transgresses the de facto segregation of urban spaces according to social class, day and night activity, productive and non-productive sex.

In *Zinda Bhaag* the familiar image of a Pakistani man's desire to leave the country in search of a better life, and to provide for his family, unfolds through a unique multistrand perspective of three working-class men – Khaldi (Khurram Patras), Chitta (Salman Ahmad Khan) and Tambi (Zohaib Asghar). Through their struggle to survive (and escape) the city, the three men can be seen to represent the various stages and images of migration, as well as the ramifications of illegal or failed attempts to leave the country. Khaldi works for a cable company, saving up money to move to the UK so that he can work for his uncle and support his family. Like Khaldi, Chitta, who works in the service industry as a waiter, also hopes to go abroad. Out of the three friends, Tambi is the only one who has the experience of going and living abroad, only to be deported.

Khaldi lives in a small, rented house with his mother and two sisters, both of whom are of 'marriageable age', adding more pressure on Khaldi as the provider for his family. Khaldi's job takes him into the homes of the elite, bringing his own life into sharp contrast with those of his customers. In one scene, as he returns home at the end of the day and starts to eat his dinner, his mother asks him about his visa status and points out the rising cost of chicken. As Khaldi starts to lose interest in his meal, she tells him about a friend's son who has gone abroad and is sending money back for his family, something she had hoped for herself. His mother's inability or unwillingness to notice Khaldi's distress further highlights his growing isolation at home and in the city. Dealing with constant pressure from home, Khaldi eventually turns to illegal means to make the money needed to achieve his goal. Khaldi's love interest, Rubina, encourages him to focus on building his career rather than fixating on trying to leave the country. His life, however, spirals out of control as he falls deeper and deeper into the dark underworld of the city. The gambling dens we follow Khaldi into are far removed from the large, open streets we see him driving through with his friends in the beginning of the film, further highlighting the character's downfall. Thus, like *Dawn of the Felines*, the film employs the multistrand narrative to juxtapose different environments of the city crossing between private and public spaces – in the case of *Zinda Bhaag*, the wide boulevards, modern homes, elite clubs, pool houses, gambling dens, cramped streets and low-income housing.

The multistrand narrative presents the audience with different points of access that results in a complex and multifaceted depiction of the urban experience that cannot be simply evaluated in terms of binary oppositions such as 'good' or 'bad', 'empowering' or 'exploitative'. In fact, as is often the case in city films, these films illustrate how empowerment and exploitation are frequently incomplete and irremediably interconnected and interdependent. As such, the films selected here avoid victimizing the characters. Their agency and responsibility are highlighted, without blaming, judging or punishing the characters. For instance, in *Dawn of the Felines*, the abusive mother, Yui, is not depicted in a particularly negative way: we are meant to empathize with her desire to be autonomous and experience romance; we do not witness her beating her son (despite the proof we see of this violence), and she is not symbolically punished as is usually the case in the arc of 'bad mother' characters. In contrast to *Zinda Bhaag*, class and economic necessity are not highlighted as key to the situation. Instead, and similar to other contemporary Japanese films depicting sex work (such as *Call Boy* [Shōnen, dir. Miura Daisuke 2018]), *Dawn of the Felines* conveys a nihilistic perspective of the urban society, in which alienated individuals lack support networks and guiding structures. But there is no moralistic or nostalgic tone. That is, the relativization or lack of morals is rendered an outcome of loneliness. The choices made by Masako, for instance, imply that morality and responsibility are dependent either on social pressure or on the emotional incentive of belonging. So if everyone is out on their own in the big city, there is no reason to follow any preconceived morals. Moreover, the plot line of Rie, the normative housewife, suggests that adhering to normative structures and mores does not guarantee the individual a sense of self-worth nor recognition by others.

In *Zinda Bhaag*, morality is shadowed in obscurity where crimes committed by the protagonists are neither condemned nor applauded but seen as part of their reality. While New Pakistani Cinema films such as *Zinda Bhaag* do indulge in nostalgia and to some extent even moral policing through the family unit and relationships, the individual is increasingly facing a state of crisis and isolation where morality is a luxury not easily afforded by those with few options. The city becomes suffocating even with the opportunities it offers as the opportunities themselves are largely based on accessibility and transactional relationships. But solidarity also brings together the protagonists of both films. Therefore, in these films, the city is presented as both the repository and amplifier of anonymity, solitude and suppressed emotions, as well as a hub where individuals may find what they are looking for, or at least comprehend what it is that they are looking for. Through multistrand narratives, the city, as a space and as a way of interacting with people, is portrayed as entangled stories of collaboration and competition.

Transactional relationships in the city

The protagonists in the two films belong to segments of society that restrict their access to more affluent parts of the city to transactional and transitory relationships. In *Zinda Bhaag*, the relationship between class and access is highlighted through places of work and transactional relationships. Chitta's desire to leave the country for a better life, for example, is only fuelled further in a scene where he and other waiters are accused of stealing a mobile phone by a guest at a party in an elite private club. The waiters, Chitta among them, are lined up and searched by the police for the phone, which now becomes a symbol of class differences and relations. While the waiters say nothing, the humiliation and anger on their faces are evident, especially when the culprit turns out to be a young child at the party. No apologies are offered by the accuser who speaks English in a British accent. The scene serves as a satire on Pakistan's elite and the following musical montage represents the anger felt by the waiters and their desire to one day have the power to stand up to the elite who humiliate and belittle them. The song 'Dekhein Ge' (We Shall See), written by author Mohammed Hanif and based on the revolutionary poem of a similar name by poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, accompanies the montage. This is foreshadowed in the scene just prior to it where a young woman at the party is listening to singer Iqbal Bano's rendition of the Faiz Ahmed Faiz poem.

The humiliation faced by the waiters at the party, the irony of an elite woman's joy over a revolutionary song and the waiters expressing their frustration when alone in the kitchen highlight the existing dichotomy in Pakistani society and the tenuous nature of relationships in the city. The club also further represents the gated and private spaces (Srivastava 2012) that exist within the city and separate those with money from the rest of the inhabitants who are only allowed access to these guarded enclaves through transactional relationships – money and access for service link the characters in *Zinda Bhaag* to those in *Dawn of the Felines*.

In both films, in the absence of (traditional) support networks that could provide stability and social integration, transactions (primarily economic) govern and map interactions in the city, reminding us of the undercurrent society that operates within normative spaces of the city, unnoticed by many (Kruger 2006). In *Zinda Bhaag*, cable technicians and waiters unable to support their families through paid jobs enter the homes and lives of the upper class to provide services without which they would not have access to certain spaces or people within the city. In *Dawn of the Felines*, the idea that interactions in the city are motivated by transactional interests is represented through the depiction of sex work – the transaction of sexual services for a monetary reward – which functions as a synecdoche of the city. Sex work provides the protagonists with outstanding, albeit temporal, mobility. Any woman can become a sex worker and access different kinds of spaces and interact with individuals with whom they share little in common in terms of socio-economic background. As such, the film uses an outstanding number of locations and shows sex workers in, for instance, the *deri heru* headquarters in Ikebukuro, in taxis, love hotels, restaurants, family-oriented residential areas, luxurious apartments and glamorous night clubs.

But customers also seek company and comfort because, the film suggests, in the city there are few networks of solidarity and care, nor support from the public administration. In fact, all characters are depicted as lonely and lacking a sense of belonging. They all yearn to experience a meaningful personal connection that will break through their isolation and provide them a sense of worth even if just for a brief time. Sex becomes the reification of this ephemeral, physical and emotional, encounter, associating the city with the (in)ability to connect with others individually and collectively. Against this background, the relationship between the three female protagonists stands out because it is not based on economic transactions and it is egalitarian; however, it is hard to classify. Masako, Rie and Yui interact in the working space (where they idlily chat, waiting to be called for work), and enjoy going out for lunch and drinks. However, Rie poignantly asks Masako: 'What are we? Are we friends?' Masako does not know how to answer the question.

They are ignorant of each other's real names, and it is only at this point, towards the end of the film, that Rie explains to Masako her personal background. As far as we know, neither knows that Yui has a child. Nobody asks personal questions. When they part ways, Masako starts to weep walking alone down the neon-lit streets of Tokyo, suggesting that Rie's words have pierced through her façade of detached autonomy and exposed their shallow performance of intimacy.

Considering the profuse number and diversity of locations used in the film, it is striking that we are never shown the homes of Yui and Rie. If the domestic space can be read as the core of intimacy and identity, by rejecting portraying these women in their personal habitat the film emphasizes their lack of belonging and the performativity that dominates their lives. Only home-less Masako is shown in her 'domestic' space, curled up in the narrow cubicle of an internet café after a hard day's work. The city is not presented as a home but rather as the stage where to perform anonymous transactions that often lead to failed attempts for self-fulfilment that make it essentially 'unhomely' (Hillenbrand 2010).

Dysfunctional masculinity, femininity and the city

The characters' experiences of access in the films are intrinsically connected to their gender – three male or transwomen sex workers in Tokyo, or three young working-class women in Lahore would not receive the same treatment. In fact, their specific stories can only be told from their gendered perspectives. Yet while *Dawn of the Felines* and *Zinda Bhaag* are very heteronormative in nature, they reflect an attempt to crack the façade of traditional gender roles and share a concern with dysfunctional masculinity and its intersections with class, age and city spaces.

Dawn of the Felines introduces five main male characters struggling with failure: Horikiri, the sex workers' driver who fails to succeed in the underworld; Takada, the rich *hikikomori* unable to engage emotionally with Masako, who has fallen in love with him; Kaneda (Yoshikawa Ken), an elderly and lonely widower who cannot accept his wife's death and seeks exclusively Rie's company (not sex) and eventually asks her to kill him after going bankrupt; Taniguchi (Murata Hideaki), a failed comedian and drug addict with whom Yui starts a romantic relationship; and finally Minoue (Matsunaga Takuya), an unqualified babysitter who works for women in the mizu shōbai (sex industry). Minoue stays with Yui's son, Kenta, and eventually grows a genuine affection for him. After realizing Kenta is a victim of domestic abuse, Minoue offers him to stay with him and confronts Yui for neglecting her son, but Kenta chooses to return to his mother. Minoue is perhaps the most marginalized male character from a patriarchal perspective – working precariously without a contract, performing a job often connected to women, and not engaged in sexual or romantic heterosexual relationships. Yet he is the most positive male character and the only one in the film to speak of morality and responsibility, revealing an ethical stance that seems of little use in the city.

Nevertheless, *Dawn of the Felines* romanticizes sex work for the benefit of the heterosexual male viewer by focusing on the long-standing, emotional relationships the three women build with three specific customers, instead of portraying a concatenation of sexual transactions with random customers. Moreover, the film completely disavows the dangers and risks that women encounter in the Japanese sex industry in terms of, for instance, physical safety or access to prophylactics because sex work occupies a grey area between regulation and criminalization, between visibility and invisibility (Aoyama 2014). As it is often the case in Roman Porno, the use of a comic music score in the last act of paid sex depicted in the film, between Masako and her boss, further works to provide a light-hearted closure to the film despite the uncertainty of Masako's future. Relatedly, the absence of any migrant workers (especially those from neighbouring Asian countries) evidences the film's ideologically selective depiction of the city and its sex industry.

In *Zinda Bhaag*, the crisis of masculinity (or dysfunctionality of masculinity) experienced by Khaldi is founded in his inability to migrate abroad to support his family, be financially secure, and move up the social ladder. This desire to leave Pakistan and the image of the Pakistani migrant is extremely gendered in its depiction also seen through the example of Tambi. Back in Lahore after being deported with few opportunities to make an 'honest living', Tambi begins to work for the Puhlwan (Naseeruddin Shah) or the don of the underworld, who is also the narrator of the story. While he may appear to serve as a warning for those trying to go abroad illegally, Tambi is one of the lucky ones to have survived the harrowing journey, and yet, as the Puhlwan reminds him, he is unable to escape the underworld. Throughout the film, the Puhlwan shares cautionary tales of countless men who have used illegal means to attempt leaving the country and cross borders; the funeral announcements heard over the loudspeaker throughout the film are a reminder of the fate that awaits most of these men. These announcements and the Puhlwan's tales suggest that very few can escape the streets and the idea of a better life is a myth for the inhabitants struggling to make ends meet despite the examples of development and growth visible in the urban jungle around them.

Young Pakistani women, on the other hand, especially those not belonging to the elite class, do not display similar desires to leave the country because they do not have similar opportunities. They have no option but to stay. This in many ways allows them to take on the role of the 'moral compass', as Rubina does with Khaldi, by emphasizing the importance of hard work, discouraging illegal means of obtaining money and acting as a reminder of home, family and love. Yet this does not prevent Rubina from having dreams of her own. She is shown to be working to support her family (though her family life is largely hinted at but not shown on screen), while saving money for things she desires, like a phone or a dress. Khaldi too desires to provide these things for her, which he does – the dress is stolen by Tambi, and the phone is bought from gambling money. His luck, however, begins to turn and he asks Rubina for money. When she does not have enough to give him, he is dismissive and admonishes her, belittling her work and difficulties at home, while taunting her for taking his gifts. In return, Rubina leaves him with his gifts. While she continues to work, her moral compass intact, Khaldi continues to dream of leaving, his crisis only deepening.

The city in *Zinda Bhaag* also serves as a constant reminder of the gendered differences characters experience in navigating the city. The space men have access to, and their experience of this space is largely based on class, while for women interactions in the city are often also informed by their gender. For example, most of the interaction between different characters in *Zinda Bhaag* takes place in public spaces – such as in a bus, a shopping mall, on the street or in a pool hall. While the latter two are predominantly occupied by men, it is in the former where we see more interaction between men and women in the film outside of the home. In fact, Khaldi meets Rubina on a bus for the first time, while she attempts to put up a flyer for her homemade soap business on the interior of the bus, much to the annoyance of the bus conductor. Khaldi is intrigued by Rubina as he watches her argue with the conductor. The positioning of the camera for most of the scene and the resulting perspective is representative of Pakistani urban society and social interaction within public urban spaces. The camera is seated towards the back of the bus and tilted slightly upwards like a passenger observing the interaction between Rubina and the conductor. To the right of the frame, where Rubina stands, is the women's section of the bus. The camera is positioned in the men's section on the left. The divide between the genders and the small crowd around Rubina and the conductor, which includes Khaldi and consists entirely of men, highlights key aspects of accessibility, the demarcation of public spaces and even safety. Here, the experience of the gendered city may in fact be owed to the perspective of a woman director.

While more women in the urban centres of Pakistan have begun to move away from traditional roles ascribed to them that restrict them to the home, their existence in public spaces, which are primarily masculine spaces, threatens the social equilibrium – and in some cases their own safety (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011). Women do use public transport but are mostly confined to sections specifically designated for them and families, bringing into focus the gender divide. In the bus scene, Rubina stands out by loudly arguing with the male bus conductor and standing her ground rather than allowing herself to blend in with her surroundings. Her assertion both threatens the gendered status quo of urban spaces, such as the bus, and highlights it at the same time. Similarly, like gender, class also dictates both private and public interactions in the Pakistani city. Public transportation in urban spaces, for example, is used primarily by those who cannot afford private vehicles such as motorcycles or cars; therefore, the bus becomes representative of a class divide. The elite class rarely ventures out into public spaces by walking on the street or taking a bus. Those with more money interact among themselves within private or gated spaces (Srivastava 2012), as with the example of the private club Chitta works in, or high-end malls and shopping areas significantly out of the financial reach of the working class. This also points to the luxury of space in the city – both gendered and class-based – in terms of access and the means to acquire it.

Conclusion

Dawn of the Felines and *Zinda Bhaag* present the intersectional experience of two cities in Asia through themes of transactional relationships, mobility, space, morality and technology, with an important focus on gender. These Asian cities are also shaped by starkly different socio-economic and political landscapes that produce distinct communities and notions of self, and also distinct screen cultures.

The films in this study capture cinema’s ability, regardless of language and modes of production, to highlight the yearning for worth, both self and social, in the urban space, through an imaginary that is local and regional, but also influenced by the global. One aspect that particularly stands out is the link between access and transactional relationships, both intimate and impersonal. Access and transactions are pivotal in pursuing empowerment or falling into subjugation and are highlighted, and in fact heightened, through technology and development. While these contentions seem ‘universal’ issues related to the cinematic city, their manifestation appears particularly dramatic in Asian societies with a strong traditional family or community-oriented worldview. While in *Zinda Bhaag* access and transactions are overtly determined by gender and class, and borders are clearly visualized, *Dawn of the Felines* reveals more ambiguous divisions and distinctions of access and mobility in the contemporary Japanese city, where modernity seems associated with lonely freedom. Both films, nevertheless, share a focus on dysfunctional masculinities, which are rendered both consequence and instigator of the conflicting experience of modernity.

As evident through this conversation between Japanese and Pakistani cinemas, the Global Screen Worlds project encourages comparative and collaborative approaches to the study of screen cultures. For us, the need to provide comprehensive contextualization for a wide audience was a challenge in terms of space, yet early in the project we learned we could not simply write about our cinemas and piece the two together. Instead, we began to think of major themes, realizing that we were at times overlooking seemingly simple but key observations. We kept coming back to the idea of transactional relationships, questions of access regarding gender and class, the role of technology and the juxtaposition of various film cultures, multiple screens and multistrand narratives. We got excited when we could make connections and even more excited when we could not because that only pointed to the diversity of our cinematic cultures. As we explored the cinematic cities in these screen texts, we were drawn to the idea of yearning and the need to belong in a space that can often be inherently isolating, especially as the push towards modernity strains and breaks familial and communal ties, and challenges tradition. Yet even when discussing modernity and the cinematic city, by bringing two seemingly opposing Asian cities together we can begin to emphasize the need for more regional comparisons, links and conversations to take place outside of familiar Western constructions and frameworks, highlighting the specificities and yet global characteristics of the urban experience.

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10

The possibility of an ‘Us’: Yasujiro Ozu’s legacy in Alain Gomis’ cinema

Estrella Sendra and Laurence Green

Introduction

This chapter offers a comparative study of the work of Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis and Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu in order to examine the legacy of the latter and how this may be reflected in Gomis’ four, first feature-length films, *L’Afrance/As a Man* (2001) and *Andalucia/ Andalusia* (2007), *Tey/ Today* (2012) and *Félicité* (2017). These films by Gomis are put in conversation with three films by Yasujiro Ozu: *I Was Born But …* (*Umarete wa mita keredo*, 1932); the latter’s remake in colour over two decades afterwards, *Good Morning (Ohayō,* 1959); and *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari,* 1953). Through our conversation – bringing our respective knowledge of Senegalese and Japanese cinema to bear on our analysis – we try to imagine a cinematic ‘us’ that extends the world of onscreen homes and their inhabitants from a local level to a more global ‘screen world’. What follows is a dialogical piece, which explores the legacy of Ozu’s work in Gomis’ cinema, not as a mere souvenir or initial encounter, but rather as an ever-present influence in his work, and the relation between film characters and the spaces in which they dwell, as Figure 10.1 creatively implies. We focus on three main dimensions: the aesthetics, themes and tone of both filmmakers. In the process we will also uncover a further quality, beneath the surface, that can be traced as

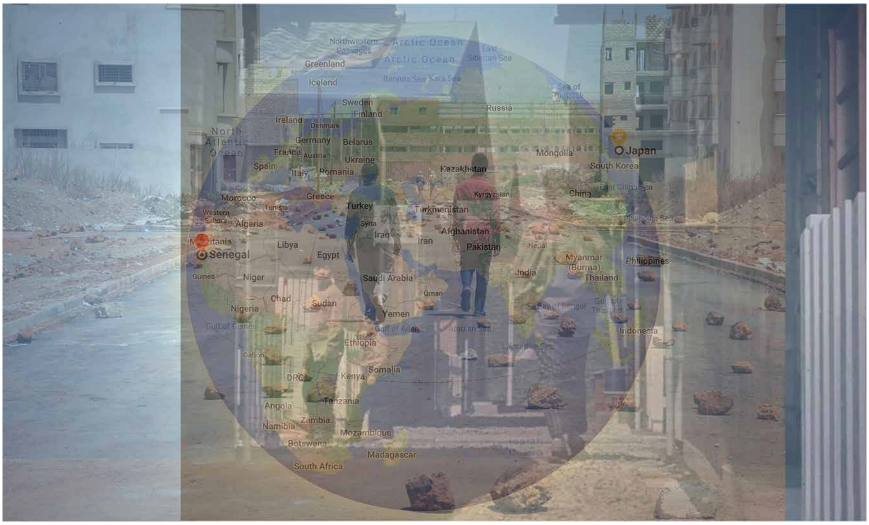
Arctic Ocean
Greenland
Iceland
Sweden
Finland
Russia
Ireland
Denmark
Germany
Belarus
Poland
France
Austria
Ukraine
Spain
Italy
Romania
Kazakhstan
Mongolia
Japan
South Korea
China
Morocco
Tunisia
Greece
Turkey
Turkmenistan
Algeria
Syria
Iraq
Afghanistan
Iran
Pakistan
Nepal
Western Sahara
Mauritania
Senegal
Libya
Egypt
Myanmar (Burma)
Philippines
Thailand
India
Guinea
Niger
Saudi Arabia
Oman
Chad
Sudan
Nigeria
Yemen
Ethiopia
Indonesia
Gabon
Somalia
DRC
Kenya
Tanzania
Angola
Zambia
Namibia
Mozambique
Botswana
Madagascar
South Africa

FIGURE 10.1 *Collage merging* Tey *(Alain Gomis, 2012) and* Good Morning *(Yasujiro Ozu, 1959) over a world map with the pinned locations of the two films, Senegal and Japan, respectively © Osphere Films. Elaborated by Estrella Sendra for the purpose of this chapter (2022).*

a form of clear cinematic lineage, from Japan, to France, Senegal and, by extension, the world.

L'Afrance/As a Man is Alain Gomis' first feature-length film. Set in the transitional period to the new millennium, in 2000, *L'Afrance* is a story about the human quest for identity and belonging, an experience enhanced in postcolonial urban contexts. In the film, El Hadj is a Senegalese mature student based in Paris whose presence in the French metropolis is shaped by his feeling of the need to return home, and his continuous temporal and spatial struggles between the remembered Senegal, the present experience in Paris and future expectations. The hostility is exacerbated by the expiration date of El Hadj's residence card. Such human quests for identity and belonging are also the theme of Gomis' following films.

In *Andalucia*, the leading character is Yacine, a young man of Algerian heritage who keeps changing jobs. This is due to the inability to settle in what seems like an alien Paris. Through diverse encounters along the way, Yacine meets Djibril, an old Senegalese friend from his childhood. The convergence between the past and the present through this character leads towards a projected future, a place where Yacine finally feels at ease, recognizing himself in the people and spaces around him. This place is not Algeria, but Andalusia, in the south of Spain.[1]

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[1] Andalusia is also where I, Estrella, am from.

The crucial role of time in Gomis' existential cinema also becomes evident in *Tey*, a title in Wolof which translates as *Today*, and where death becomes an unavoidable threat. We meet Satché, a man who returns to Senegal, after being based abroad for years that may have felt like an eternity for beloved ones who remained. However, as he arrives, the joy from both him and those who had long awaited the moment is interrupted by the announcement that he is going to die the following day. Satché thus engages in an already-initiated intimate journey. He wanders around the streets, meeting with people from postcolonial Dakar, a 'ruin of utopia' (de Jong and Quinn 2014). As he does, Satché reviews his life from a present whose future is due to end the very next day.

The geographical location changes in Gomis' *Félicité*, set in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, yet the postcolonial urban condition of inequality experienced by its inhabitants remains the same. In this case, the film is led by a woman, a heroine, whose everyday life struggle is once more put into focus by a particular incident, her son's motorbike accident. With her son at risk of losing his leg, Félicité starts fundraising to gather the amount to be paid in advance for the surgery needed for her son.

I Was Born But … focuses on two young brothers whose admiration for their father is shaken when they see him kowtowing in a subservient manner to his boss. Following a significant tantrum, the boys go on hunger strike, but eventually reconcile with their father, learning valuable life lessons in the process. *Good Morning* updates the story of *I Was Born But …* for a post-war setting, focusing again on two young brothers and their struggles when confronted by the intricate social dynamics and peer pressure found in the world of adults. Their neighbour's television set becomes an object of envy, and just as in Ozu's earlier film, the boys stage a comedic strike against their parents, finally resolved when their parents buy a television of their own. *Tokyo Story*, typically regarded as Ozu's masterpiece, tells a powerful family drama focusing on elderly couple Shukichi and Tomi, and their adult children. As Tomi falls sick and eventually dies, we see the younger generation react in different ways; some begrudge the hassle of putting up with their ageing parents, while the selfless Noriko (widow of second son Shoji, who died in the war) resigns herself to a life of solitude.

In search of a 'cinematic us'

One of the encounters that has led to this analysis took place on 9 November 2013, during a personal interview between I, Estrella and the filmmaker Alain Gomis following a screening of *Tey* and a director's talk at the BFI in

Southbank during Film Africa in London. In the interview, Alain Gomis, who is based between Dakar and Paris, spoke about his first memories of cinema:

> One of my first memories of cinema was a film by Ozu, […] a Japanese film titled *Gosses de Tokyo* [*I was Born, But …*]. It is just the story of two children who change neighbourhood with their family, to Tokyo, in the outskirts of Tokyo. When I watched that film, those two children, I knew them. It was as if it was me. What I mean is that sometimes with films that come from a country which is very foreign to you, you can learn very profound things about yourself. And to me, cinema, like music, has that thing there. You may not necessarily be able to put it into words, but it can foster certain things in you which are links that cross continents, cross countries. It is precisely in that particular moment that I find cinema beautiful. Because for some time we can say 'us', and that is certainly one of the most beautiful words, I think, in every language, to be able to say 'us'. To me, there lies the beauty of cinema (Alain Gomis, pers. comm. with Sendra 2013). [Listen to the original filmed quote by scanning the QR code below.][2]

The Japanese film that influenced the filmmaker at such a young age is one of the landmarks of Yasujiro Ozu's oeuvre, with a remake in 1959 entitled *Good Morning* (Ozu's second film in full colour). When the editors of this volume opened a call for comparative studies of global screen worlds, conducted in collaborative dialogue, in order to 'forge new networks and channels of communication' (Yoshimoto 2013: 60, cited in the Call for Submissions), we felt compelled to revisit this beautiful quote, through a dialogue between two film scholars with regional interests in Japan and Senegal, respectively. Like Gomis, as film audiences and scholars, we have both been moved by films from countries initially 'very foreign to us', quoting Gomis. Screen worlds, as art, are moving images with the ability to resonate across and beyond borders, becoming tactile.

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[2] Also available at (2021): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40UpNuFDUkg.

In search of such a 'cinematic us', we adopt a dialogical, practice-based methodology, in order, first of all, to *perform* each of our own encounters with these filmmakers, thus sharing our positionalities (as white European scholars with a regional interest in screen worlds beyond Europe); and secondly, to try to build a 'cinematic us', through being *in conversation with* each other and the films, without dismissing or hiding the potential rifts and anxieties that may emerge from this endeavour. We have been inspired, in this respect, by a recent special issue on 'Decolonising Film Education' published by *Film Education Journal*, where the guest editors, Jyoti Mistry and Lizelle Bisschoff, adopt a conversational format, to share their approaches to decolonizing film education (2022).

Estrella: I have not been able to forget that interview. Neither have I tried … But having listened to Gomis for two Q&As that lasted about an hour each, after the screening of his films *L'Afrance* and *Tey*, and for almost another hour in a one-to-one interview with me, that specific section of the interview kept resounding, somewhere very visceral inside me. It was that point on beauty, really, the beauty of the unexpected and magical encounter with what we could have thought of as 'foreign' film worlds. But also, Gomis' understanding of what constitutes 'the beauty of cinema', as a moment of encounter, identification and communion beyond geographical boundaries, in the context of an African film festival in London, had a profound impact on me. It had a 'deeply somatic' effect, experienced through the body. This is what Elaine Scarry suggests happens when we encounter beauty (2001: 111). To her, 'when we see something beautiful, we undergo a *radical decentering*' (Scarry 2001: 111, our emphasis), a term which we would like to connect here to that of a 'screen world'. This accounts for diegetic (fictional) and extra-diegetic (non-fictional) beings, such as filmmakers, audiences and academics. It becomes an affective experience, a gesture, a heuristic device through which we can explore encounters even in their apparent dis-junctures. In the words of Elaine Scarry, 'radical decentering' refers to the process of

> letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.
>
> (Scarry 2001: 112)

African cinema is rarely discussed in terms of aesthetics. There tends to be an overly political reading of it, associating it to either entertainment or militancy, in what are treated as complete binary opposites. This is precisely what Manthia Diawara was trying to contest, in his emblematic book *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (2010), an open discussion continued by the work of James S. Williams (2019). Through this comparative study, we seek to engage in scholarship on aesthetics by questioning: how do we recognize beauty across different contexts and film aesthetics? Aware of the problematic curatorial conceptualization and performances of 'world cinema', often understood as peripheral to 'Western' Euro-American cinema, we join the proposal by the Screen Worlds Collective to instead think about screen worlds, as affective time-spaces built horizontally, from an empathetic gaze. This resonates, once more, with Scarry's writing on beauty as an act an experience of radical decentring, when she suggests:

> Radical decentering might also be called an opiated adjacency. A beautiful thing is not the only thing in the world that can make us feel adjacent; nor is it the only thing in the world that brings a state of acute pleasure. But it appears to be one of the few phenomena in the world that brings about both simultaneously: it permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience extreme pleasure, thereby creating the sense that it is our own adjacency that is pleasure-bearing. This seems a gift in its own right, and a gift as a prelude to or precondition of enjoying fair relations with others. It is clear that an *ethical fairness* which requires 'a symmetry of everyone's relation' will be greatly assisted by an *aesthetic fairness* that creates in all participants a state of delight in their own lateralness.
>
> (Scarry 2001: 114)

My first encounter with Alain Gomis' cinema was in a particularly transnational personal context. A few months after returning to London from Dakar, where I had hosted a screening of my documentary film on African migration to Spain, *Témoignages de l'autre côté/Testimonials from the other side* (2012) and worked as a journalist for the cultural section of the Senegalese newspaper *Le Soleil*, I volunteered as a media officer for the 9th African Film Festival of Cordoba-FCAT, which was also screening my documentary. It was then that I first saw *Tey*, followed by a discussion with its producer, Eric Idriss-Kanago. The film left the audience and jury members astonished and was awarded the Best Feature Length Film. A few weeks later, *Tey* reached London screens as part of Film Africa, with Djolof Mbengue present for the discussion following the screening in the Hackney Picture House, East London, translated live by me, fostering an increasing multi-sensory proximity with the film.

The following edition of Film Africa, in 2013, curated a retrospective of Gomis' work, a double bill of *L'Afrance/As a Man* (2001) and *Andalucia/*

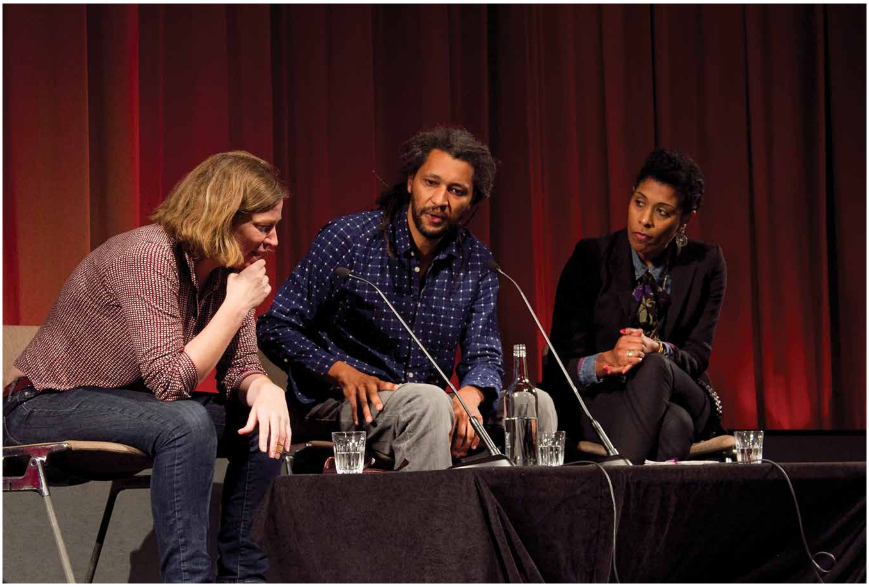

FIGURE 10.2 *Alain Gomis in conversation with Suzy Gillett (left) and Isabel Moura Mendes (right) at the BFI following the screening of* Tey *at Film Africa 2013 © Estrella Sendra, 19 November 2013.*

Andalusia (2007) at the Ritzy Cinema, and of *Tey/Today* (2012) and Ousmane Sembène's short film *Borom Sarret/The owner of the wheelcart* (1963), both followed by a lengthy discussion with Alain Gomis (see Figure 10.2). Crowds of cosmopolitan Londoners kept stopping him as he left the cinema, echoing Satché's celebrated stroll across the streets of Dakar in the film *Tey.* However, Alain Gomis still made himself available for the requested interview with me, which was published in *Le Soleil* on 19 November 2013, with the title « Avec le cinéma, on peut atteindre des liens qui traversent les continents »[3] (Sendra 2013: 16). As the media coverage increased, the reference to Ozu's *I Was Born But …* kept appearing: 'Weirdly, I had the impression that it [the film] talked to me, while it was a silent film set in the outskirts of Tokyo. That really struck me, because I had the impression it talked about me', shared Gomis in an interview with Claude Forest for *Africultures* (2017). Years afterwards, on 14 November 2019, the Raw Material Company in Dakar hosted a film screening of *Gosses de Tokyo/I Was Born But …* (Yasujiro Ozu 1932), curated by Alain Gomis, at the Cinéma Empire, preceded by a talk by him on the influence of this film on his filmmaking.

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[3] With cinema, we can create links that traverse the continents. (Free translation by Estrella Sendra.)

Laurence: The foundational cornerstones of inter-border negotiations between Ozu's cinema and the works of other directors inspired or influenced by his work have been laid in classic discussions such as that by Geist (1983) and her identification of a 'West looks East' impetus in certain styles of European cinema. Likewise, there is a growing discourse regarding current directorial talent that is heavily influenced by Ozu's iconic visual aesthetic, both within Japan – such as Hirokazu Koreeda (Desser 2007: 273) – and without – for example, Wes Anderson (Chamberlain 2015: 44). In 2011, a release campaign by the British Film Institute (BFI) sought to offer a chronological re-appraisal of Ozu's works, pairing together thematically similar works from the director's pre- and post-1945 material.[4] While this did much to widen the accessibility and appreciation of Ozu's films, we suggest that there is more to be done. Much of this revolves around the idea of there being something beyond a quintessential vision of Japan – its affectual, aesthetic, comedic markers – and the sense that while many of these are inherently wrapped up in Ozu's style, it is this very same style that also holds the capacity to transcend national borders.

Close, formal analysis of Ozu's cinema and its aesthetics has had an especially rich history dating back to Richie's 'first monograph' in English on the director, through to Bordwell's *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988) and beyond. These studies have contributed to a remarkably sophisticated body of work, a continuing attempt to get to the heart of the 'structure of feeling' present in its 'minute manipulations' of form (Nornes, 85–6). A sizable body of Japanese scholarship on Ozu – typified by studies such as those by Sakamura and Hasumi (1998), Yamada (2002) and Yoshida (2003) – further adds to the analytical toolkit available when discussing his films, the latter in particular highlighting Ozu's 'uneasy and distorted forms of expression' (Yoshida 2003: 148), something at odds with the films' often placid surface level. As we have attempted to illustrate above, this incredibly strong aesthetic foundation offers one means at building out links to the work of Gomis, to provide a supportive backbone to the 'us' that Gomis felt resonated between these two cinemas from opposite sides of the world.

The selected titles for analysis are informed by my own personal experiences encountering Ozu's work during my time as a student on SOAS' MA Japanese Studies programme in which these films formed part of the core syllabus of material assigned on the Japanese cinema modules. On both initial and repeat viewings of all three films, the sheer aesthetic impulse of Ozu's style was what left the strongest imprint in my mind – something which has become emphasized further on revisiting them for this chapter, and now considering this impulse as a living, evolving quality that holds tantalizing prospects for global synergies when observed in the works of other directors.

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[4] The full press release introducing the BFI's Ozu Collection is accessible at: https://www2.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-press-release-more-yasujiro-ozu-dual-format-edition-releases-from-the-bfi-2011-05-04.pdf – In each paired release, the earlier film had never before been made available in the UK.

While it is too early to make claims about the influence of Alain Gomis' work on others, within the growing literature on his work comparisons have been made between his cinema and that of other Senegalese filmmakers, such as Djibril Diop Mambéty, Ousmane Sembène, Khady Sylla, Hubert Laba Ndao and Joseph Gaï Ramaka, with brief comparisons to the work of further African and non-African filmmakers, with specific reference to the portrayal of Dakar, and the postcolonial urban space, more broadly (Williams 2019: 91–137).

Finding 'us' in the film themes: The centrality of family

Through our dialogue on our initial encounters with these filmmakers, we have argued that finding a 'cinematic us' in Ozu and Gomis' filmography is possible through an act of 'radical decentering' able to establish an 'aesthetic fairness', as a result of an 'opiated adjacency' (Scarry 2001: 114). In one of the most significant academic publications devoted to Alain Gomis' work, Daniela Ricci suggests that *L'Afrance* is 'a universal story of human destiny' (2020: 131). If the work of both filmmakers centres around the interiority of the characters, and the aesthetic offers a means of articulating that interiority, then how does this inner space manifest in the aesthetics of the world they inhabit?

Central to both directors' work is the role of the family, a collective 'us' and what brings us together. Perhaps more crucially, both directors draw our attention to the tensions generated by the individual – the focal point – within the family, and what turns us from individuals into a community, a family. For Ozu, Richie notes, 'the whole world exists in one family' (Richie 1959: 21), and, if other characters do intersect, it is purely to further build on that familial nexus at the heart of the cinematic object. In Gomis, the family becomes a site of performance of the tensions resulting from a world shaped by a postcolonial context, and the multi-temporal expectations of the different family members. Within the focus on family, parent-children relationships are of particular importance.

Both in *I Was Born But …* and *Félicité*, parents are depicted as strict. Yet they all share a deep sense of care and devotion beneath this outer roughness. In *I Was Born But …*, the children are presented in direct opposition to their father and are unwilling to fall into the same predicament as him, caught in a frustrating existence as a dogsbody, beholden to those higher in the social order. A similar dynamic appears in *Félicité,* where a final scene shows a peaceful home setting, featuring Félicité, her love interest and her son, following a stressful period triggered by her son's motorbike accident. What ultimately draws the films together is the clear desire, from the parental generation, for a better life for their children. It is this self-sacrifice, ultimately, that becomes the counterpoint of hope amidst bleak times. In a telling line in *I Was Born But …* we hear the parents observe their children's behaviour with the wisdom of age: 'These problems will be within them for the rest of their lives.'

The separation and reunion – both spatially and emotionally – of parents and children provides a powerful undercurrent to the often more overt themes of duty and sacrifice in Ozu's cinema. For Hogan, these bonds contain a universality to them that is driven by the ethics of attachment, of adjusting to the vulnerabilities of others, and most crucially, of 'fulfilling one's own obligations, whether the other party fulfills theirs or not' (Hogan 2010: 5). This is also the case with El Hadj, the protagonist in *L'Afrance*. The character is overwhelmingly at odds with a myriad of expectations from his family members, shaping his own, which makes it difficult to address the question of return.

Interior and exterior space: Finding Ozu in Gomis' (beautiful) cinema

Despite the historical 'narrative of exclusion' of African cinema in festivals, cinema venues and film studies (Dovey 2015: 50), African film scholars have asserted that 'black African cinema has attained aesthetic and artistic maturity' (Ukadike 1994: 4). It 'has become highly critical (…) to define its own aesthetic preferences with which it chooses to address issues concerning African transformation' (Ukadike 1994: 308). However, as Ukadike notes, 'there is no one African cinema' (1994: 308) and thus no one African aesthetic approach, which is reflected in the discomfort African filmmakers sometimes express feeling when solely labelled as African (Barlet 2000). This chapter seeks precisely to move beyond that label, exploring the possibility of an 'us', in a medium that relies on an audiovisual and multisensory language, thus accessible beyond geographical boundaries. This ability to find an 'us', through identification, is where, according to Gomis, beauty lies in cinema. However, in a recent publication on aesthetics in contemporary African cinema, James S. Williams opens with what could be considered a provocative statement: 'In African cinema, beauty is trouble'

(Williams 2019: 1). The main concern among filmmakers when finally liberated from centuries of colonialism was to use cinema as a weapon for decolonization, 'not only for Africans but also by Africans' (Ukadike 1994: 309). They portrayed 'Africa from an African perspective' (Ukadike 1994: 304). However, seeing this as incompatible with beauty is both misleading and reductive (Williams 2019: 11; Niang 2014: 126).

In our aim to find Ozu in Gomis' beautiful cinema, hereafter we focus on aesthetics, that is, the stylistic approach in their filmmaking practices. Gomis' aesthetic approach has been studied as an example of Naficy's 'accented cinema' (Naficy 2001), characterized by its intimacy, embodiment and multisensorial depiction of displacement (Sendra 2018a; Sendra 2018b), in a Mambétian 'dreamlike vision' (Barlet and Thackway 2013) as well as an immersive liminality (Williams 2019). Similarly, viewership and critical response to Ozu's cinema have been defined by a focus on 'aestheticism' (Nornes 2007: 79), spurred on by landmark treatments such as those by Richie, who famously helped perpetuate the line, as quoted earlier, that Ozu was the 'most Japanese' of all Japanese directors, in possession of a 'real Japanese flavor' (Richie 1959: 18). Indeed, Richie himself would be fundamental in concentrating his critical treatment of Ozu around precisely this question of aestheticism, constructing a sophisticated 'stylistic analysis' which he came to call the 'syntax of his films' (Richie 1963: 11).

The focus on two directors from different geographical locations yet whose films constitute a 'meeting point', in Gomis' words (Gomis, pers. comm. 2013), invites reflection on the aesthetic form of space. People and places mingle throughout the works of both directors – in Gomis' work, *L'Afrance / As a Man* (2001) and *Andalucia / Andalusia* (2007) speak directly in their titles to ambiguous spatial entities that are as much a domain of the mind as they are a real-word locale. His first feature-length film's French title – *L'Afrance* – merges a range of spaces: *L'Afrique* [Africa], *La France* [France], *la France dans l'Afrique* [France in Africa], *l'Afrique dans la France* [Africa in France], *l'A-France* [A-France] and *Françafrique*. The film switches between Paris and Dakar, in flashbacks that are ever-present in the psychological space inhabited by El Hadj, a young Senegalese man who moved to Paris to complete his studies in Higher Education, but who feels a responsibility to physically return to Senegal (Sendra 2018a: 363). In *Andalucia*, the director chooses for the title the space where the main character, Yacine, a French-born citizen of Algerian parents, would find inner peace by the end of the film, through a feeling of unexplained identification, arguably similar to what Gomis described when watching the children in Ozu's *I was Born But* …

In contrast, Gomis' film *Tey*, which translates into 'today', may seem to refer instead to a temporal dimension. However, it cannot be comprehended without a focus on space as well. As James S. Williams notes, 'this meditative study of a young man coming to terms with his own mortality is also a poetic, existential journey through the streets of Dakar' (2019: 107). The postcolonial city appears (see Figure 10.3), like Satché, the leading character, 'in mid-construction', in 'state of decomposition', 'in regression and displacement', through 'topographical hints and signs that remind us that we are actually in Dakar' (Williams 2019: 107–8). It is, borrowing Felwine Sarr's words, a 'palimpsest city', multi-layered, in continuous movement and creation (Sarr 2019: 107). It is an 'Afrotopia', shaped by the delocalization of its presence in a perpetual future (Sarr 2019). Likewise, in *Félicité* (2017), while the film's namesake character is the locus that drives its narrative forward, the events on screen are every bit the tale of its Kinshasa setting as they are a story of its inhabitants. Through the streets, the pockets of domestic space, and the institutional facilities, a collage-like map of inhabitation and the very human lifeblood that runs through it are constructed. It is this same technique that we might read in Ozu – most obviously in *Tokyo Story* (1953), quite literally a story of Tokyo – but also in his other works, in which through the lens of singular families, we are given a kind of filmic, narrative stand-in for the life of the city as a whole.

Holt-Damant's work on the 'constructs of space' in Ozu's cinema is particularly useful here, focusing as it does on his 'drawing out small, unseen details and spatial relationships through a rigorous process of editing'. Much of this is seen as rooted in the drives of Modernism

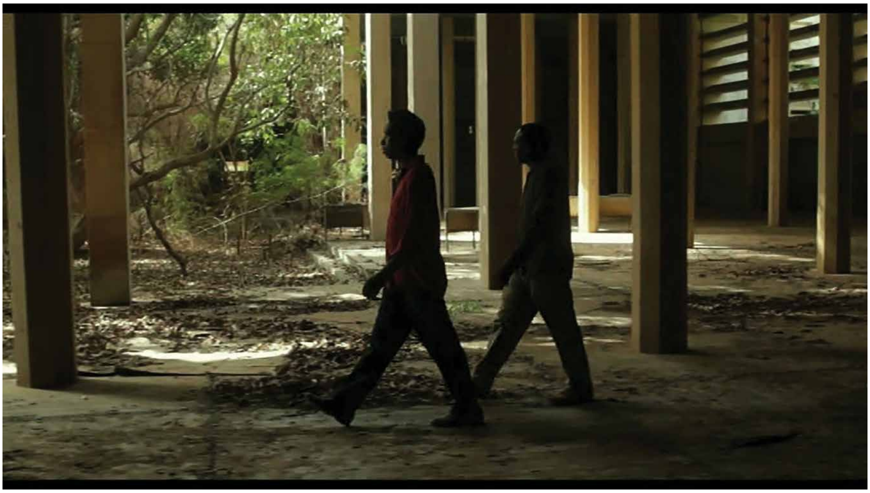

FIGURE 10.3 *Satché (Saul Williams) and his friend Sélé (Djolof Mbengue) walking in the Ancien Palais de la Justice (former Court of Justice), in* Tey *© Sphere Films 2012. All rights reserved.*

that had – from the late nineteenth century onward – been transforming approaches to space from the purely corporeal to something interpreted as a 'subjective experience' (Holt-Damant 2003: 5). In *Tey*, for example, the market as location (Figure 10.4) does not serve as a narrative device for daily shopping scenes. Rather, it is a space to strengthen Satché's psychological anxiety and existential crisis, as he is trying to cope with the idea of his imminent death (see figure 10.4). According to Williams, '*Tey* succeeds in making the cinematic experience of the city more concrete and immediate – an open, mobile space of impressions and sensations', with 'an impressively immersive feel' (Williams 2019: 109). In both *L'Afrance* and *Andalucia*, France is depicted as the 'alien-nation' (Sendra 2018a: 371), whose capital is much more hostile to characters like El Hadj and Yacine, than what appears as an iconic postcard on screen. This fiction remarkably illustrates the reconstruction of identity and the interior transformation of a character caught between a 'here' and 'there', which can just as equally be inverted (Ricci 2020: 156). It leads to a nonlinear narrative where the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred, in the same way as the present, past and future temporalities, all intertwined in the character's psychological experience (Ricci 2020: 156).

This leads to an encounter between an inner and outer world. Drawing on the theories of Walter Benjamin, Holt-Damant suggests it is the focus afforded by the camera lens that would prove crucial to this dynamic, and that by 'examining objects in detail, one could discover an underlying structure which

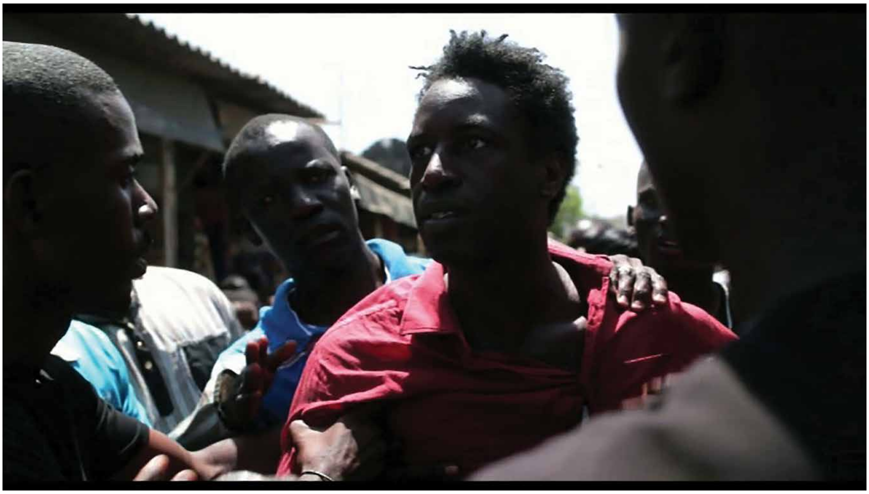

FIGURE 10.4 *Satché feeling unwell in the market, in* Tey, *prior to being rescued by his friend Sélé © Sphere Films 2012. All rights reserved.*

we wouldn't normally notice' (Holt-Damant 2003: 1). This kind of underlying structure is present in the transitory dynamic Ozu establishes in his filmic spaces – one framed by passage between interiors and exteriors, both literally and subjectively. On the one hand, the 'internalised domestic world' of 'the Japanese house, the hierarchical family spanning a couple of generations', and on the other 'an externalized view of the countryside or industrial city' (Holt-Damant 2003: 5–6). It is precisely cinema's capacity – through its ability to 'join' spaces that are in reality unconnected – that facilitates bringing *us*, as viewers, closer to the characters that inhabit these interior and exterior zones.

Void spaces: Seemingly empty yet charged with emotion

The opening shots of Ozu's *Tokyo Story* are of the streets and canals, the forms of transportation that connect them and the people who traverse them – we see trains, boats, children walking to school (see figure 10.5). Very quickly, a visual shorthand is established in which the looser, jumbled angles of the city exterior contrast with a rigid formalism of tight right angles as we are drawn into interior settings. Inside, this composed framing reflects the corresponding routines of daily life – housework, cleaning – and a general sense of domestic tidiness that extends to the prim clothing and school uniforms. And yet, in spite of this apparent surface-level tranquillity, the constant bustle of bodies moving through space returns us, always, to the thrum of the city and its rhythms.

In the cities of Gomis' work – whether it be Paris, Dakar or Kinshasa – the more fluid approach to framing necessarily presents what at first seems to be a more naturalistic urban character, at odds with Ozu's formalism. As suggested by Williams, with reference to the representation of Dakar specifically in Gomis' work (but applicable to Kinshasa and Paris as well), the city 'appears precisely unframable and ungraspable, beyond cognitive mapping' (Williams 2019: 109). Dakar, in particular, represents Felwine Sarr's philosophical conceptualization of the Afrotopia, or, in the words of James S. Williams, 'the afropolis as an anonymous, frameless site of open danger and disorder' (2019: 114). In fact, according to Gomis '[i]f you're trying to find the right image of [Dakar], you can have a thousand images and still not have the perfect picture of [Dakar]. The real [Dakar] exists in the gaps between all those pictures' (Gomis, cited in Williams 2019: 91). It is, as cited before, a 'palimpsest city' (Sarr 2019).

In approaching the fragmented urban space, Gomis employs what Noel Burch names, with reference to Ozu's aesthetics, 'pillow shots' (Burch

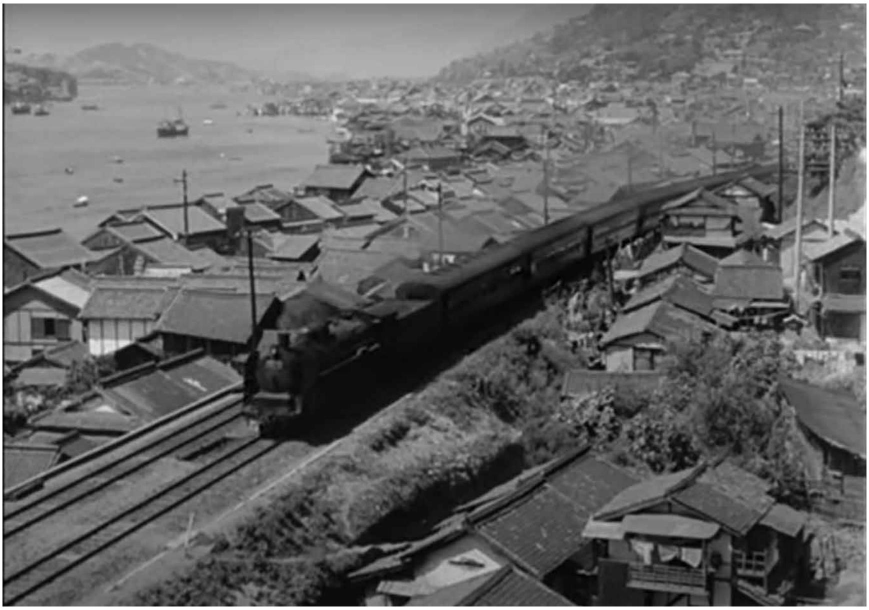

FIGURE 10.5 Tokyo Story *directed by Yasujiro Ozu © Shochiku 1953. All rights reserved.*

1979), that is ‘empty shots’, cutaways, implying a sense of narrative duration (Figure 10.5). These shots act as cinematic pauses from the action, typically focusing on a landscape or object, and, while often on the surface ‘empty’, become charged with meaning when taken in the context of the action they precede or follow. In Gomis’ work, one such example is to be found at the beginning of *L’Afrance.* El Hadj, who we have not yet met, is seen passing by the Eiffel Tower (Figure 10.6) – located in the distance, almost unreachable, yet an ever-(post)colonial presence in El Hadj’s experience of Paris. The space contrasts with the dark images of the streets of Paris later walked by El Hadj, as he feels threatened by the recent expiration of his residence card.

Observation and self-reflexivity emerge again in an awareness of the nature of cinema itself. In *I Was Born, But …,* this is portrayed in its most literal sense as the characters engage in a kind of film-within-a-film experience, watching a movie in which the father figure stars in an embarrassing role that shames his children. In *Andalucia*, we see Yacine stand in a television showroom full of screens, moving images projected back at him. ‘The spectator is searching for a way into the interior’ writes Holt-Damant of Ozu’s similar use of connective framing (2003: 5), but in this scene, we are left to ask who is the real spectator – us or Yacine?

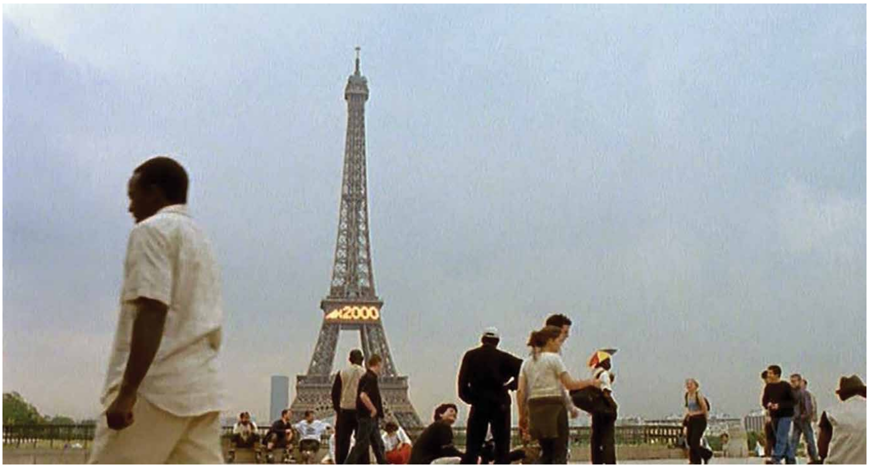

FIGURE 10.6 *El Hadj walking near the Eiffel Tower, where some of his friends will later be seen selling miniature-size Eiffel Towers and souvenirs with the French flag © Sphere Films 2001. All rights reserved.*

A similar technique can also be achieved sonically. In *Félicité,* throughout the film, the narrative will on occasion trade places with sequences of an orchestra performing classical music – completely at odds with the sonic texture of the rest of the film. These scenes break our immersion, as viewers, reminding us of the manufactured nature of what we are consuming despite all their apparent naturalism. Music comes to symbolize a narrative short-hand for characters' 'inner emotional states' and their 'traits, thoughts and identities … at their most intimate' (Vasudevan 2016: 4); thus, we often get what appears to be the truest, most 'honest' view of *Félicité*'s characters in the many scenes soundtracked by the Le Kasai Allstars that take place at the local bar. The music 'becomes' their inner space; senses are given almost physical manifestation by way of the on-screen audiovisual ensemble.

Gomis' corruption or fracturing of this inner space can manifest in particularly striking ways – most notably in *L'Afrance* where, on the arrest of El Hadj, the filmic medium transitions to cheap, low-resolution digital video. We see him confined to the seat of a police car as it manoeuvres its way through the Parisian streets, the hemmed-in framing of the car windows a far cry from the vista-like landscapes seen elsewhere in the film. A further interstice between people and place can be found in gestures. Heat is constant, oppressive, and it is through the mannerisms of the characters swimming within it that the 'temperature' of the city is made real for the viewer on screen and given an embodied tangibility. This focus on gesture as a medium by which to better paint large the characters' emotions for the viewer is also telling in how much of it is delivered through scenes in which there is a distinct *absence* of gesture.

The focus on gesture, and above all else on 'revelation of character' contributes to what we can observe in Ozu's cinema – and by extension, the work of Gomis too – in that the sense of time we observe 'is not clock-time, it is psychological time' (Richie 1963: 14). Or, for example, in Ozu's own words: 'The only way to overcome the cruelty of the everchanging present is to repeat it, to stop the linear flow of time, and to express it in the past tense' (Yoshida 2003: 141). Our experience, as viewers, is a response to this psychological state as mapped out aesthetically on screen to the extent that our viewing experience shifts from the exteriority of 'beyond the screen' to within both its dimensions, and the head-space of the characters within it. For Richie, writing of Ozu's 'portrait'-like cinema, he sees this effect best captured in the many non-spaces of his cinema, the 'waiting, listening' mode of his camera as it records the moments book-ending action and narrative, instead eliciting the 'true emotion' and heart of the characters in the spaces between the 'heights of emotion' (Richie 1963: 13). For some, Ozu's emotional orchestration of these kinds of scenes takes on an almost transcendental quality, encouraging a feeling for 'life as process' (Boyers 1978: 64).

In *I Was Born, But …,* some of the earliest scenes are of the film's young boyhood characters looking on, frowning. They are children, but they understand the rules and inequalities of the society around them all too well. These silences, in what is already a 'silent' movie, speak far more loudly and clearly than the actual written intertitles. Through the silence of these moments, we are invariably given some of Ozu's most emotionally moving, poignant scenes. Elsewhere, for example, in *Tokyo Story* where Noriko cries silently before sleeping, or her reaction on hearing – over the phone – that her mother-in-law is dying. In the latter instance, the silent interiority of Noriko's mind-state is torn apart as the film cuts suddenly to the noise of the city. Despite her inner turmoil, the city around her continues, unabated.[5] These void spaces, seemingly empty but simultaneously charged with emotion, occur time and again in the cinema of both Ozu and Gomis, and hint towards an influence from traditional Japanese aesthetics, as outlined by Geist:

> Ozu's art is informed by ma in its various aspects, particularly those of sabi, an awareness of the ephemeral, thus the importance of living from moment to moment; michiyuki, the regulation of movement from one place to

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[5] While there is not the space to cover it in detail here, it is worth noting that this tone also suffuses Ozu's first post-war film *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (*Nagaya shinshiroku,* 1947).

> another; hashi, the bridging of the void; and susabi, the empty place where phenomena appear, pass by, and disappear … The bridges, corridors, and alleyways that recur throughout Ozu's films are spaces that lead from one place to another. The recurrent trains in Ozu's films evoke both michiyuki and the empty space of susabi.
>
> (Geist 1983: 235)

It is in the light of analysis like this that we can question to what extent aesthetics are tied to nationality. Are we moving away from this as lines become increasingly blurred in this web of connectivity and influence? Reading the works of Ozu and Gomis through the lens of postcolonial discourse offers one potential avenue to exploring this interstice of aesthetics and nationality. While postcolonialism does not, perhaps, manifest as overtly in Ozu's cinema as it does in that of Gomis, we believe searching for it forms part of an important re-balancing as highlighted by the likes of Hogan, who comments that 'post-War Japan is rarely, if ever, examined in the context of postcolonial theory and criticism' (2010: 36). Those that have analysed Ozu's films through this postcolonial lens, such as Kate Taylor-Jones, see his work as characterized by the 'loss of one colonial narrative and the imposition of another' (Taylor-Jones 2018) – a transitory, exchange-like quality which we would seek to unpack further below.

It is worth noting that Ozu himself served in the Japanese Imperial Army from 1937 to 1939 – suggesting a possibility to read particular undercurrents of (post)colonial melancholy and/or consciousness in his work. It is these underlying aspects that hold further potential when reading his films in the context of cinematic resonances in Gomis' films. In Hogan's insightful reading of a 'different' kind of postcolonialism in Ozu's cinema, he rests his understanding of the term on an explication of 'cultural ethics' that sees manifestations of the postcolonial condition as fundamentally rooted within humanity itself.

> Colonialism did not begin with Britain and France, nor is it confined to a few paradigmatic cases. Colonialism is, in fact, vast in its historical and geographical scope. Postcolonial theory has, in this respect, greatly underestimated the extent of what might be called 'the postcolonial condition,' which is, in effect, a recurring subtype of the human condition.
>
> (Hogan 2010: 18)

This linkage in conditionalities between the postcolonial and the human is important because it speaks to a highly embodied and symbiotic representation of both that is not limited by historical or geographical specificity, but rather, a commonality of mind-state and body-state observable in the way characters inhabit the cinematic spaces they are situated in. Taken more broadly, we might consider whether screen worlds themselves – of the kinds seen in drawing comparison between Ozu and Gomis’ work – almost become symbiotic with each other. As filmmakers – separated both spatially and temporally – create these symbiotic connections when they make films that have an aesthetic influence underpinning them, does the relationship take on an almost living quality that feeds the contextual and physical association to the advantage of both?

In 1959, Ozu would ‘remake’ *I Was Born, But* … as *Good Morning*, transposing the film’s rebellious brothers from the black-and-white, silent movie world of the 1930s into the bright, sunny full-colour optimism of Japan’s post-war reconstruction. This temporal relocation would arguably trade in the societal ‘indictment’ present in *I Was Born, But* … for ‘satirical diversion’ (Richie 1959: 22) – the darker aspects of social commentary present in Ozu’s 1930s version of the tale would now find themselves subsumed within a more overt attempt at filmic comedy – an element we will cover in further detail in the subsequent section.

In *Good Morning*, while the setting is still one of out-and-out domesticity, within it, new roles emerge for its characters – most notably, amongst women. Whereas before, women were limited to playing the position of full-time housewife, doting on a husband and sons, now, new expressions of femininity are offered. We see the modern, Western-influenced fashionista, but also the working woman. The irony however, as Ozu is keen to present us, is that the traditional housewives – still very much present in this 1950s vision of Japan – are formidable and empowered in their own way – swiftly dispensing with the nuisance of the travelling salesman who knocks on their doors looking to sell pencils. In *Good Morning*, old and new models of femininity are presented, not necessarily in opposition, but in tandem – it is left to the viewer to ponder how modernity has brought new ways of being to the social conformity of the suburbs.

Tone: Teasing the fabric of the everyday

Despite the thematic focus on existentialism and the human condition in both Ozu and Gomis’ films, there is a shared comedic tone – comedy in itself acting as an emotional force that draws audiences closer together via shared understandings of what we find humorous. Humour is, however, rarely analysed in African cinema (Tcheuyap 2011: 46), for similar reasons to the aforementioned bracketed attention to beauty. In the context of everyday hostilities and struggles, humour does not just have a cathartic effect, but can operate as a self-liberating tool (Tcheuyap 2011: 45). The comedic tone emerges often from the aesthetic approach. Observation is sometimes

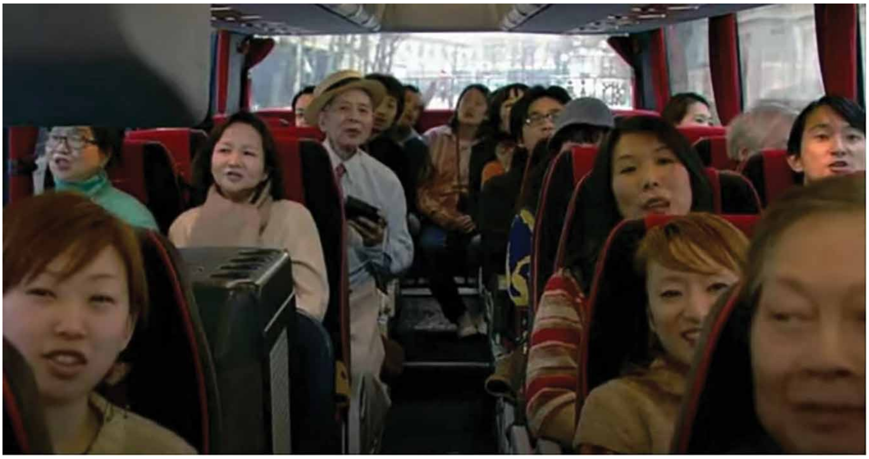

FIGURE 10.7 *Yacine's point-of-view shot of the tourists on the bus where he is acting as the guide, in* Andalucia *© Sphere Films 2007. All rights reserved.*

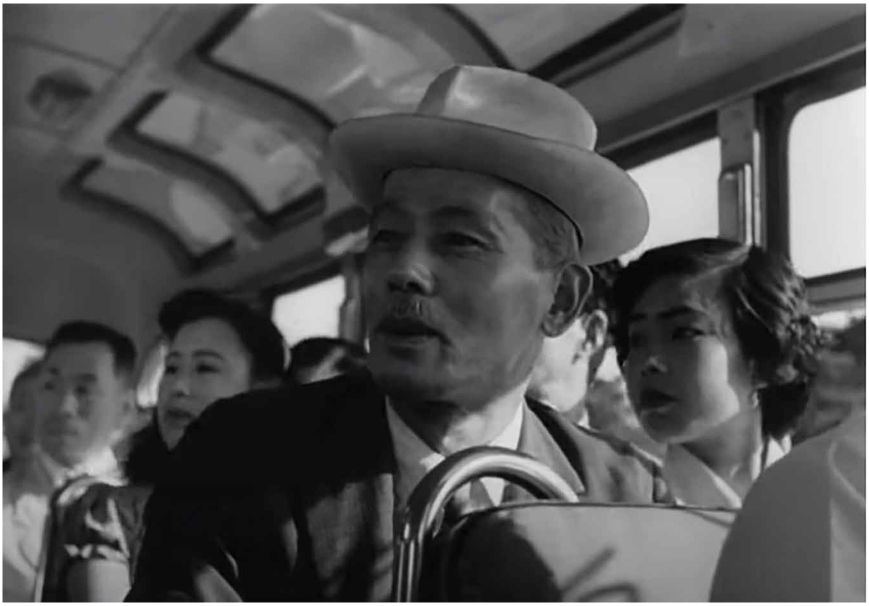

FIGURE 10.8 Tokyo Story *directed by Yasujiro Ozu © Shochiku 1953. All rights reserved.*

turned in on itself in a form of humorous self-reflexivity. For example, in both *Tokyo Story* and *Andalucia*, we are presented with sequences on tour buses that are very funny (Figures 10.7 & 10.8). In the case of *Andalucia*, the tourist gaze of the passengers on the bus, visiting iconic Paris, is subverted through the use of verbal comedy. Yacine, who has been moving from one sporadic job to another, as part of his inability or unwillingness to settle in Paris, takes the microphone and makes the tourists repeat a nonsensical song – incomprehensible to them because they do not speak French.

At times, comedic moments are mediated by a helper, a secondary character that relieves various forms of everyday tension. Illustrative of this are both the character of Chérif in *L'Afrance* and Tabu in *Félicité.* Both are friends of the main character in each case, who finds certain comfort in the laughter prompted by their friends' actions. Tabu may be, in this sense, one of the most evident examples, in a no-dialogue scene where he makes both Félicité and her son laugh, as he unsuccessfully tries to fix their fridge. The simplicity of this ordinary household chore both contrasts with and accentuates the continuous everyday struggle faced by this single mother whose son has an amputated leg, as a result of a motorcycle accident, and the injustice of the health system.

The comedic performances are not always in direct dialogue with the characters, like the moment where Chérif, a Senegalese man based in Paris, is trying to explicitly flirt and dance with almost every woman at his friend's wedding. Chérif is not what Alexie Tcheuyap calls a 'puppet comedic archetype' (2011: 50). He is rather a character performing 'context-specific verbal and visual strategies to generate a comic effect' (Tcheuyap 2011: 57). For example, in *Andalucia*, when Moussa, Djibril and Yacine are working as extras in a rather racially problematic French film, Yacine (of Algerian heritage) ironically asks Djibril to bring him a Coke, shortly after a [French] film crew member had disrespectfully asked him to give him an instrument, as if he was his 'slave/help'. Having just complained about the humiliating costume design, Djibril and Yacine cannot help but laugh at the situation. This, like the various performances embodied by Yacine in his different jobs, constitutes 'spectacular music shows within the narrative themselves, dealing with comedy in a meta-fictional way' (Tcheuyap 2011: 61). In *I Was Born, But …*, such meta-fiction only works as comedy for some of the spectators within the fiction, when Yoshi's projected performance is the object of laughter by his boss and colleagues, which makes his sons, Ryoichi and Keiji, realize that he is being humiliated, due to class difference. The children themselves face a similar situation, bullied by their peers at school, treated as outsiders who have just moved to the outskirts of Tokyo. This sad reality is nonetheless approached humorously, when the children state, when asked if they liked going to school: 'We like the way there, and returning home, not what is in the middle.'

Visual and verbal comedy, Tcheuyap suggests, can also 'be identified in the choices for the names of places, objects and characters' (2011: 58). It is worth nuancing this statement here in that within the broader characterization of comedic material, it is the sharper, more bittersweet tones of irony that often seem to surface more readily within both Ozu and Gomis' films. The comedy associated with naming is already evident in the aforementioned title of Gomis' first feature length film, *L'Afrance*. In *Félicité*, both Félicité and Tabu are not random names, but carefully orchestrated to identify the characters. Félicité, which translates into Felicity/Happiness, is a strong woman who is first heard when singing at a bar. Throughout the film, she engages in a continuous struggle, in order to collect the necessary funds for her son's operation. A range of sonic timespaces, often in dreams, provide the only form of *félicité* that seems possible. In contrast, her friend Tabu has no filters. He expresses himself loudly, asserting his identity, 'I am Tabu, Tabu Fatou', in the midst of diverse bodies in the overwhelming capital of Congo, Kinshasa.

It is in the closing moments of what has come to be Ozu's most famous film, *Tokyo Story*, that we are offered perhaps the essence of this humour-inflected perseverance in the face of life's adversities and unfairness. Amidst the subdued melancholy that suffuses the household following the death and funeral of the family matriarch Tomi, daughter Kyoko asks the pointed question: 'Isn't life disappointing?' Her sister-in-law Noriko replies with a smile, 'Yes, it is, isn't it?' Richie observes this distinct tonality as a 'resigned sadness, a calm and knowing serenity which prevails despite the uncertainty of life and the things of this world' and attributes it to the Japanese notion of *mono no aware* or 'sympathetic sadness' (Richie 1963: 24). For Richie, there is an element of distance to this tonality – a sense of detached uninvolved-ness – but we would contend that the charm of Ozu's cinema is that it leaves this open to interpretation. There is, even, the scope to read Noriko's statement as a subtle nod to the quasi-colonial post-war state of Japan, defeated in battle and now undergoing an occupation of sorts by the triumphant United States. For Noriko, the loss is more than symbolic – her soldier husband lost his life in the war and she is left behind as the grieving widow. Are Ozu's characters really as calm and serene as they initially appear, or is there something barely repressed hidden beneath?

Perhaps because of the constant, oppressive grind of everyday life, the films are not without their moments in which characters are invited, or tempted to let loose – typically aided by alcohol. In *Félicité*, the character with notorious alcohol consumption is Tabu, one of the frequent customers at the bar where Félicité sings. However, these moments of inebriation are often bittersweet – the freedom and often farcical slapstick of the drunkard tempered by the nuisance they create for others around them. In these moments, they have 'broken' with the unspoken rules of society around them, and pay the harsh price for doing so – the regret is felt on behalf of us, the viewer, as much as it is by the characters themselves. In other words, the verbal and visual humour contributes to the multi-sensorial depiction of psychological displacement, a bittersweetness even, experienced more prominently by the main character.

More broadly, it is often the moments of unpredictable roughness that break through most effectively amidst the broader texture of the films' narratives. We see this in the fights that break out between the children in *I Was Born, But …,* but also in the strange incident in *Andalucia* where Yacine attacks and robs a motorcyclist, only to instantly regret his decision and check his victim is unhurt. The effect of these moments is to lend a kind of randomness to proceedings, at once full of the childlike innocence of play, at others, a frightening primal atmosphere that hints at barely repressed emotion. In *Félicité*, we see the unfortunate effects of this balancing act taken to extremes, when a group of thieves stealing from market stalls are caught by a crowd of onlookers and beaten bloody. This 'rough justice' is a recurring theme throughout Gomis' films, and is presented in direct opposition to the quieter, often more foreboding 'justice' of civil society, in which the silent social contracts of society – as in Ozu's films – keep the city and its individuals moving along their respective tracks and life, albeit begrudgingly.

Above all, Ozu and Gomis' films remain suffused by the fabric of the everyday, the mundane, the ordinary (Figures 10.9 & 10.10) – something Geist picks out

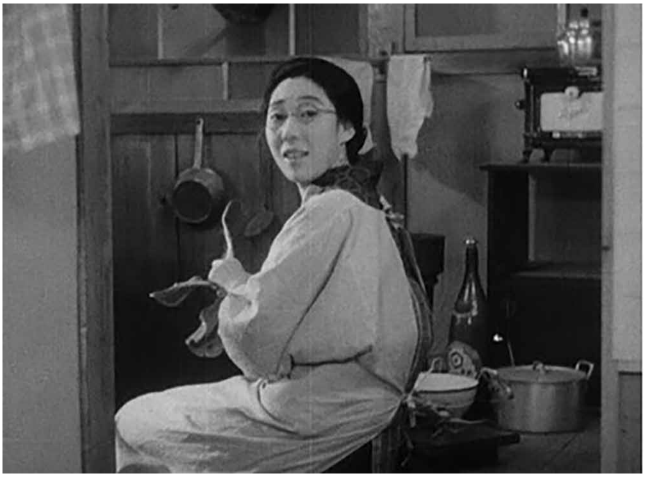

FIGURE 10.9 I Was Born But … *directed by Yasujiro Ozu © Shochiku 1932. All rights reserved.*

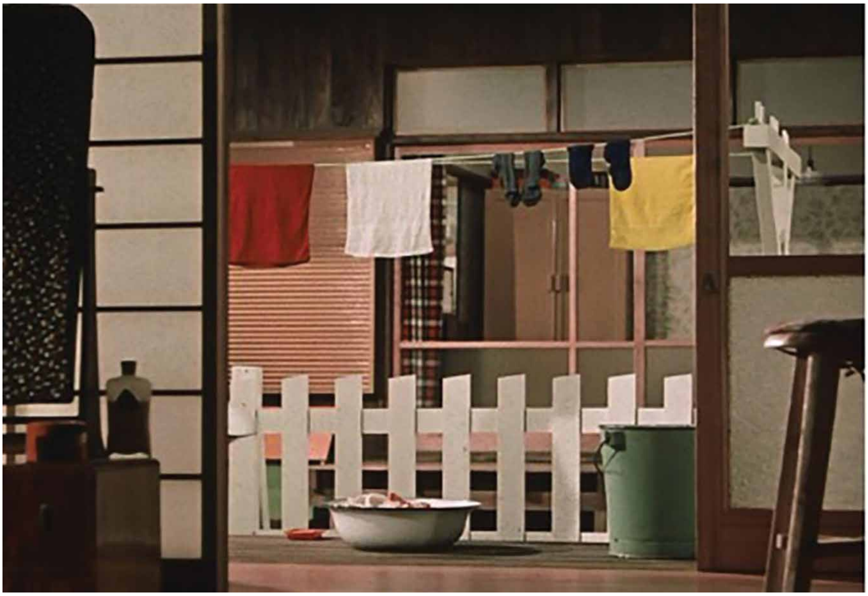

FIGURE 10.10 Good Morning *directed by Yasujiro Ozu © Shochiku 1959. All rights reserved.*

in Ozu's specialization in the *shomin-geki* (commoner) genre that was popular in Japan's postwar period, with a particular emphasis on family narratives (Geist 1983: 234). Williams emphasizes the 'presentness' in *Félicité*, since the film is 'firmly committed to the material present and allows the everyday to come into aesthetic view in both human and non-human ways' (Williams 2019: 270).

We might consider, in bringing this section on tone to an end, whether the humdrum of the everyday offers any hope of salvation for the protagonists of the two directors' films. Here, we might look to Geist's interpretation of Schrader and Richie's reading of Ozu, and in particular the emphasis on Zen Buddhism's influence on both the aesthetic and tone of his films. Famously, Ozu's grave would bear as an epitaph the Japanese character 'mu' (emptiness/nothingness), and Geist notes, 'For the traditional Japanese artist, emptiness and silence are positive elements in a composition; he composes as much with emptiness and silence as with form or sound' (Geist 1983: 234). In Ozu's films (and those of Gomis too) pauses and silences are incredibly frequent, with dialogue often falling into the gaps in-between these non-spaces, as discussed earlier in relation to Ozu's mode of 'waiting, listening'. In a key scene in *Félicité*, the title character visits a rich man's house to beg for money for her son's operation, and there is a striking juxtaposition between her standing silently in front of him, before eventually being dragged away, kicking and screaming. The tension between the extremes of stoic silence and violent outburst makes each in their own right all the more impactful.

Crucially, these silences possess a form of their own, whether that be in the enforced silence of the two brothers in *Good Morning* – an act of rebellion against their parents – or the thoughtful, pensive silence of Noriko in *Tokyo Story* as she returns home by train following her mother-in-law's death. In the latter case, this silence opens up possibilities, as viewers are left to consider whether the film's heroine will ever break free from the shackles she has confined herself to – unwilling to desecrate the memory of her dead husband by 'moving on' in her life and finding a new partner. For Gomis, silence offers a very literal 'escape' in the final act of *Andalucia*, where protagonist Yacine steps out into a literal 'void', his body levitating soundlessly into the air as he walks across a backdrop of empty, parched landscape.

This quasi-'enlightenment' seems to offer a kind of imaginative freedom in comparison to his continued hardships throughout the film, but is tempered by its highly fantastical nature.

Conclusion

Nornes writes of how a mid-1990s re-evaluation of Ozu would be instrumental in bolstering the Japanese director towards the hallowed status he now holds, aided by both a 'publishing spree' of books about Ozu, but also a stream of cinematic 'homages' from European directors such as Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch (Nornes 2007: 78). With Nornes' comments in mind, we might ask to what degree Gomis' own influences from Ozu can be seen as homage, or as something more? In answering this, and drawing on our analysis above, we would suggest that it is the clear universality in the applicability of Ozu's aesthetics, themes and tonality that allows what Richie identified as his 'syntax' to be both specific, and wide-ranging in nature. Moreover, beneath the overt cinematic surface, deeper resonances ensure that this universality is not merely visual or even textural in nature, but also something to be felt on an emotional level. It is an act of 'radical decentering', which fosters an affective experience of beauty (Scarry 2001). In this sense, universality becomes a kind of pan-humanity; Gomis' filmic continuation of Ozu's imagery, aesthetic and tone as born in the minds and hearts of his characters, but also in his own appreciation of the Japanese director's films from a young age. Thus, Ozu's style is not merely 'applied' to Gomis' films, but wholly and fully embraced and embodied. It is because of this that Gomis' cinema – clearly – does not feel like a quintessential vision of Japan merely transplanted and mapped onto France or Africa. Rather, it speaks to an 'us' that exists beneath the surface of these nations and locations, interior and exterior space melding into one – all in aid of fostering our link, as viewers, with the characters on screen before us.

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11

Feeling absence in the screen worlds of Wong Kar-wai and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun

Xi W. Liu

Introduction

In an interview, Chadian filmmaker Mahamat-Saleh Haroun said: ‘My favourite refuge was a Lebanese theatre managed by a Lebanese man. I used to go there every evening and the programming included Bollywood, Westerns, and kung fu films from Hong Kong. By the time I became a teenager, I decided to study cinema’ (Dalle Vacche 2008). Similarly, in the Q&A video *Artist to Artist: Ten Questions for Wong Kar Wai* (2020), Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai also said: ‘My mother liked films. She brought me to the cinema almost every day … By then the idea of world cinema didn’t exist. We watched films of different genres and languages. Cantonese, Mandarins, Hollywood productions and even European cinema. I enjoyed them all. That was the world I wanted to be a part of.’

Both Haroun and Wong are directors who have been inspired by, and in turn inspire, global cinema. Their works offer deeply personal and culturally resonant narratives that reflect their unique backgrounds and experiences and engage with complex and wider reading topics such as emotions, human relationships and socio-political contexts. Both of their childhood immersions in global cinema profoundly influenced their artistic journeys and both artists have resonated with global audiences.[1] Wong and Haroun's works share an ability to transcend cultural boundaries, connecting with audiences on an emotional level while also offering a window into their distinct Hong Kong and Chadian contexts. Their films invite viewers to engage with diverse perspectives, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of global screen worlds.

This chapter is focused on exploring how themes of emotion, affect and absence allow us to carefully approach these two directors' works in conversation with each other. This is not about a desire to generalize film emotions across cultures; rather this chapter carefully approaches Wong and Haroun's special film styles and observes their similar affective emotional essence, and represents how the framework of *feeling-absence* allows us to engage and converse with both directors in powerful and affective ways. Beyond their 'official' appreciation at prestigious Western film festivals, there lies a rich tapestry of themes, aesthetics and emotional depth that both directors bring to the screen. By initiating a dialogue between Wong Kar-wai and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's films, I aim to explore the shared elements that underpin their cinematic expressions in terms of homesickness, unrequited love and loneliness. This exploration will uncover how their films, rooted in their respective political contexts, resonate across different spaces and times, demonstrating the power of cinema to bridge diverse worlds.

As a point of my own positionality, as a Chinese woman working inside a UK university setting, my own scholarship has been based on understanding global film as an affective experience. Whilst my field of study is Chinese cinema, I have long held a fascination with cinema as a *global* experience. My engagement with this project allowed me to enrich and develop my knowledge of other spaces that fall outside of my everyday working experiences. While the films of Wong and the world from which they come are second nature to me, I was drawn to the work of Haroun, finding resonance and similarities, not via plot, place or the industries but from the affective message that I see (and feel) as embodied in these two directors' respective films.

In terms of methodology, this chapter offers a comparative approach as a means to track the affective resonance within the work of Haroun and Wong. As I will argue, tracking the affective resonance allows us to chart the affect in-between the chosen screen worlds; it does not simply aim to mark a specific emotion embodied within the specific film texts but explores how different aesthetic styles can be responded to and engaged with on an affective level. Affect 'operates beyond subjectivity within the materiality of the film itself, through an immanence of movement, duration, force, and intensity, not through a semiotic regime of signification and representation, but sensation' (Kennedy 2002: 101). Inspired by affect studies, the exploration of feeling-absence decodes the affective response by analysing the cinematic techniques used to create it. Moreover, what I term 'feeling-absence' in the screen worlds, using Félix Guattari's words, references what 'one gets to know … not through representation; but through affective contamination' (1995: 92). Instead of reading the *representations* of absence, feeling-absence explores the *sensation* of an affective state. Via a comparative reading, Wong and Haroun's films can therefore bring different film aesthetics together and present how feeling-absence resonates within and pervades their screen worlds.

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[1] Wong's *Ashes of Time* (1994) won the Best Cinematography prize at the Venice Film Festival, and he won the Cannes Film Festival award for Best Director for *Happy Together* in 1997. His *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *2046* (2004), and *My Blueberry Nights* (2007) were also all nominated at Cannes. Haroun won the Best first film award at the Venice Film Festival for *Bye Bye Africa* in 1999 and won the Jury Prize at Cannes 2010 for *A Screaming Man*.

The experiences of absence, as Anna Farennikova defines, 'are conscious perceptions that represent a particular object or a group of objects as missing from the perceived scene' (2013: 431). For Farennikova, experiences of absence do not mean perceiving something as non-existent. She proposes the 'mismatch model' to explain the phenomenology of absence, which locates the perception of absence in the mechanism of mismatch that then 'subserves violation of expectation in failed searches' (441). That is, the experience of absence is based on something that is expected to be there but in fact, is not. Matthew Ratcliffe points out that feeling-absence is a 'need for something that at the same time presents itself as unobtainable' (2015: 219). For Ratcliffe, feeling-absence shows the desire for something that is, in reality, impossible to obtain. In light of this perception of absence, this chapter aims to explore how feeling-absence is evoked cinematically in the diverse works of Wong and Haroun and how feeling-absence manifests across different screen worlds. I argue that tracking the feeling of absence can activate the sensory exploration of a specific screen world. This sensory exploration can reveal the affective responses between films and highlight the affective dialogue in the screen worlds. As I will explore, this approach allows us to find new resonances between Wong and Haroun's film works.

Although comparing Wong and Haroun's films inevitably draws on an informed understanding of Hong Kong and Chadian cultural-historical background, it does not mean arbitrarily putting their works in an oppositional cultural system, nor does it mean indiscriminately following the regional and economic divisions that pack the 'third-world cinemas' together to fantastically read the 'marginal'.[2] What I argue is that the respective and very specific different cultural-historical backgrounds that forge aesthetic styles and affective expressions can also, simultaneously, echo across cultures. Patrick Colm Hogan, in his *Understanding Indian Movies*, notes that our understanding of all the cinema 'must first of all be based on universal principles, on ideas, sensitivities, impulses that we share, whatever our national origin or cultural milieu' (2008: 6). This kind of emotional echo can open up our viewpoints as a means to begin the understanding of others' screen worlds. As Mark Betz suggests,

> I would insist that engaging with and characterizing a mode of contemporary cinematic production beyond Europe as modernist should not perforce bind it to the strictures of a historical or geographic stagism, but instead emphasize the degree to which *historical time* is *palimpsestic* and *dispersive* in all cultures, how aesthetic forms may be translated across cultures in multiple circuits of exchange and appropriation.
>
> (2010: 40)

In the light of this focus on aesthetic form as a means of exchange/communication, I read feeling-absence as a specific aesthetic and affective expression that can be seen and perceived across different filmmakers' creations. With this in mind, I will offer a close-reading of Wong's *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and *Happy Together* (1997) alongside Haroun's *A Season in France* (2017) and *Dry Season* (2006) to decode the emotional connections that each film carries – in short, *feeling-absence* in their different aesthetic expressions. These films, rooted in different cultural and socio-political contexts, offer distinct yet resonant explorations of homesickness, unrequited love and loneliness within the stories about lost homelands and vanished colonial eras. By close-reading these films, we can decode the emotional connections they carry and how feeling-absence manifests in their aesthetic expressions. Wong and Haroun's films, while culturally and geographically disparate, share a profound engagement with themes of loss, longing and the search for meaning in the absence of fulfilment. This exploration will illuminate how feeling-absence functions as a shared affective experience, across cultural boundaries and will enrich the understanding of film emotions in diverse cinematic contexts. I suggest that these screen worlds not only showcase audiovisual images of different regions but also cinematically build up global sensory connections. This sensory connection is not based on a transnational or transregional path that is geographically, economically and politically drawn (see Higbee and Lim's [2010] concepts of transnational cinema). Rather, the sensory connection is textually based and represents the emotional appeal between global screen worlds. By examining Wong and Haroun's personal experiences and their works, it becomes evident that each uses a distinct aesthetic style to create characters that reflect specific cultural and historical situations in Hong Kong and Chad. However, as I will explore, their films also serve as excellent examples of showcasing the affective resonance within the zone of feeling-absence.

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[2] The question on 'how to engage with non-western cinema' refers to an important methodological concern in film studies. The pioneering works on national cinema and third-world cinema are indeed against hegemonic norms of Hollywood style but easily globalize and homogenize world cinema and cultures (see Vasudevan 2000; Grant and Kuhn 2006).

It is worth noting that the four main cases in this chapter cannot represent all of the screen worlds of Wong and Haroun. Popular works such as Wong's *The Grandmaster* (2013) and Haroun's television film *Sex, Okra and Salted Butter* (2008) could extend the film perception of art-house cinemas to the wider debate of global popularity. However vital this could be, this chapter cannot engage with it inside this narrow scope; therefore, I will take the initial step of exploring feeling-absence within focused case studies. The intent here is therefore not to present a general statement of universal feelings, but to highlight key instances where the aesthetic expression of feeling-absence becomes particularly salient.

In terms of chapter structure, I will first explain the rationale of the idea of 'feeling-absence' and how to align it with film analysis. In the second section, I will focus on homesickness, unrequited love and loneliness as three typical emotional expressions central to the study of feeling-absence, drawing attention to how Wong and Haroun's films portray these themes. I want to examine how these directors' screen worlds, which are based on very different historical and cultural backgrounds, can present similar affective responses, thereby demonstrating the ability of feelings to transcend national borders.

Feeling-absence

Absence is one of the key concepts in global film studies but it is a highly nuanced term – deeply based on the context we are examining. Cuban film theorist Gilberto Perez (1998) theorizes film itself as a mix of presence (materiality) and absence (ghostliness). For Perez, absence refers to the acceptance of fragments in film-watching that 'film is an art of absence, of partial views, an art that hides more than it shows' (1998: 387). In Perez's discussion, absence at a representational level means emptiness or a missing part on the screen, which somehow can trigger the expectation of presence. Film as a medium seeks to juxtapose such contradictions – absence and presence, seen and unseen, reality and illusions. Within the discussions of film aesthetics, a number of Chinese film scholars consider absence as the unseen emotional elements maintained alongside the audiovisual images (presence) on the screen (Wang and Wang 2000; Liu 2008; Liu 2022). In the light of this, absence is not simply a non-existent element, but a perceivable affective factor that cooperates with audiovisual images subsuming the whole film-watching experience. Engaging both ways of thinking, I regard absence as the perceptible missing part on the screen that evokes a specific feeling of absence. I read absence as potentially present at all levels of cinematic techniques, and emotional appeal altogether to explore how the screen creates the world of missing (i.e. aesthetics of absence) which echoes with feeling-absence.

The sensory perception of absence has received sustained attention in recent philosophical discussions (e.g. see Soteriou 2011; Farennikova 2013; Cavedon-Taylor 2017); however, the affective experience of absence has not yet been integrated into film reading. As an affective state, feeling-absence does not refer to a single feeling. There are discussions about absence-related themes such as feeling lost and nostalgia (Trigg 2006; Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010; Marchesini 2015). Roberts and Krueger (2021) propose the idea of 'pro-attitudes' that on the one hand show 'a variety of attitudes in favour of something'; while on the other hand, it includes a complex awareness that 'the absent thing cannot be made to be present; it cannot easily be achieved, generated or brought about' (187). In other words, feelings of absence embody a pro-attitude towards unreachable things. Feeling-absence is a (helpless) acceptance of a situation where expectation and demand can never fully be satisfied. In this way, feeling-absence gathers a group of feelings that share a similar sense of an unfulfilled desire. Roberts and Krueger (2021) have discussed several affective categories of absence such as grief, depression, loneliness, yearning, homesickness, unrequited love and nostalgia. These feelings are, to some extent, the painful awareness of the absence of some object, person or feature. Following Roberts and Krueger's discussion on the emotional experience of absence, I argue that feeling-absence as a specific analytical framework allows us to analyse how various affective expressions repeatedly, and increasingly, maintain an affective resonant in the chosen screen worlds. I am going to focus on the sense of homesickness, unrequited love and loneliness in Wong and Haroun's films. Importantly, tracking feeling-absence in screen worlds is not only about observing what is presented in the mise-en-scène but also what is absent from them and how. It is worth asking how their works manifest feeling-absence within the recreation of the lost homeland and vanished eras in the screen worlds.

Wong's aesthetic style is inextricably linked to the modern history and politics of Hong Kong. The year 1984 was a remarkable year because that year the Sino–British Joint Declaration set the conditions for the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. For Hong Kong, 1984–97 was the transition period within the 'mood of scepticism', because the process of the transition 'proved too complicated and unwieldy' – so the sceptical mood became engraved in cinematic expressions (Teo 1997: 160). Wong is representative of this period in that his early works recorded that sceptical mood by focusing on the problem of identity in Hong Kong. His film characters are quite complicated. He uses his characters and cinematic techniques to create feelings, moods and atmospheres (Brunette 2005; Bettinson 2015; Chaudhuri 2016). Wong's films capture the feeling-absence through their exploration of unfulfilled desires and fragmented identities. Therefore, reading affective messages can be seen as one of the most resonant ways to decode Wong's film aesthetics.

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun was born in Chad in 1961. After being injured during the Chadian civil war of the 1980s, Haroun moved to France and studied film at the Conservatoire Libre du Cinéma in Paris. In 1999 to pay tribute to his deceased mother and make up for the unbearable feeling of loss, Haroun returned to Chad and made his first feature film *Bye Bye Africa*. After a prolonged absence due to the civil war, this 'return' inspired him to go back to Chad and make films to 'bring Africa into humanity' (Haroun 2007). For Haroun, the notion of a specifically African cinema undermined his desire to promote and enhance the cinema of Chad as he said, 'There is no African cinema. There is cinema in each country' (Haroun 2013). So, as James Williams suggests, Haroun's mission is, at least partially, an 'ambitious political project to make Chad "exist" visually to the outside world' (2014: 34). Haroun is therefore invested in the concept of a national cinematic framework as a means to promote a specific cinematic representation of Chad. However, Williams also argues that Haroun is not simply promoting an unquestioning vision of a nation, as his works can be seen as actively challenging Pan-Africanism and what he calls the 'folklore of the collective' (2019: 188).[3] Haroun's films address themes like family ethics, civil war and social inequality, portraying a nuanced vision of Chad highlighting the emotional and political expressions of his missing and his homeland.

Wong and Haroun's films invite viewers to engage with the intangible experience, prompting a deeper reflection on the nature of absence and its impact on human feelings. By analysing Wong and Haroun's films, the following sections explore how cinematic techniques resonate with feeling-absence, revealing the emotional depths and political significance embedded in their works and how these works evoke a powerful emotional response, making the invisible palpable and the silent resonant.

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[3] Also see Malausa (2010) which is cited in Williams (2019: 188).

Homesickness

The feeling of homesickness, as one of the categories of feeling-absence, involves a kind of longing – 'a desire for the comfort and familiarity of home – coupled with an awareness of how difficult it would be to realize this end' (Roberts and Krueger 2021: 188). Roberts and Krueger point out that the situation for the homesick individual is 'the *distance* that lies between one and home' (188). Here this distance can be spatial as well as temporal (see Sendra and Green 2025 in this volume) – an idea I return to. Christopher Thurber defines 'homesickness is the distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home' (2005: 555). In Wong's *Happy Together* and Haroun's *A Season in France*, Hong Kong and Central Africa, the representations of protagonists' homes, are presented as intangible, invisible and fantastical places.

Happy Together tells the story of a gay couple from Hong Kong, Lai Yiu-Fai and Ho Po-wing, whose relationship is marked by frequent separations and reconciliations. Lai and Ho travel to Argentina (where most of the film was shot) in an attempt to mend their relationship after Lai stole money from his father's friend's company, but things quickly fall apart. Although Lai always wants to return to Hong Kong (he keeps working to save money for a plane ticket), he seems unable to reconcile himself with the concept of going home.

Happy Together shows the tension between the desire to escape and return, which is clearly entangled with the 1997 political issues facing Hong Kong and therefore offers a clear imagining of feeling-absence. For Teo, *Happy Together* shows the theme of exile and the 1997 deadline 'that was casting a shadow over many Hong Kong lives' (2005: 99). Similarly, Jeremy Tambling interprets the film as a 'road movie' and argues that being on the road inherently means 'being marginal, rejecting the politics of home' (2003: 36). The political shadow traps the individuals in a state of exile. Here, an exile state does not imply that the two protagonists arrive at a dream place and start a new life. Instead, it refers to a situation different from choosing to leave on one's own initiative and completely severing connections with Hong Kong. 'The more we want to escape the more we became inseparable from Hong Kong' (Pang 1997 cited in Teo 2005: 99). However, the inseparable connection does not mean people can easily go back. In the film, Lai and Ho's exile is fraught with cues of the sense of loss. They plan to go to Iguazu Falls.

Once they arrive, they will go back to Hong Kong. However, they get lost on the road, which also causes their first separation in the film. Teo (2005) argues that the couple is lost in time as well because the time and seasons in Argentina are opposite to those in Hong Kong. A tracking shot of the Hong Kong skyline rendered upside-down presents Lai's imagining of Hong Kong from Argentina's perspective. This powerful sense of geographical dislocation finds its affective correlation with Lai's own desires. The longer their journey, the more they sense their loss of home. This ongoing loss dispels the dream of returning and prolongs their state of exile. Thus, the sense of homesickness in this situation is evoked by their inseparable connection to Hong Kong and the indefinite postponement of their return. Feeling-absence is manifested in accepting that the desire for a feeling of home can never be fully satisfied.

A Season in France triggers a sense of homesickness within the ruthlessness of world politics. Haroun makes a clear political statement about the inhuman treatment of illegal migrants (an action that risks imprisonment under France's immigration law, see Williams 2019: 301, note 16). In the film, Abbas flees with his family from one of the civil wars in the Central African Republic. During their flight to France, Abbas' wife is killed. However, Abbas' asylum application is rejected, along with his subsequent appeal, resulting in an 'obligation to leave' notice within thirty days. Throughout the film, Abbas and his two children are shown continually seeking new apartments to live in whilst always dreaming of a better future. When they move to a very small flat, Abbas asserts that they will have a big house in the future. Four close-up shots showcase the only decorative ornaments they have: a football poster, a clothing hook, a fish tank with a small goldfish and several books. With an L-cut, Abbas says that 'all this is temporary. We will have a big apartment one day, with a bedroom each', followed by a medium-long shot of Abbas and his two children sitting on a stack of mattresses with no bed. His daughter starts to imagine the house, hoping that it looks like their home in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. In this scene, the audio message is effectively constructed through simple shots of their current possessions. This mismatched audiovisual information, highlighting the absence of what they desire, reflects their longing not just for the future but also for the past. Having already lost their home, they can only build new ones through their imaginative impulses and hopes. This scene can also be seen as Haroun's self-reflection, as he says, 'I lost my country, so I try just to rebuild it by fiction with my movies' (Haroun 2007). Although the protagonists are from the Central African Republic, instead of Chad, the similar home loss experience has been shared with many African countries who have experienced war during postcolonial times. Haroun utilizes children's imagination to portray a new home and we see the children's innocent imagination of home contrasting with the callous reality that the refugees face. Similar to *Happy Together*, the characters' longing for the future and nostalgia for the past embody the feeling of absence. In both films, their respective situation(s) of displacement forces them to accept the fact that their longing and hopes cannot be fulfilled.

Wong and Haroun's cinematic expressions of homeland absence diverge in their specifics but converge in their emotional resonance. In Wong's *Happy Together*, Hong Kong is depicted as a place difficult to return to, embodying a complex interplay of desire and political exile. Lai and Ho's struggle reflects the entanglement of personal longing with the geopolitical uncertainties of 1997 Hong Kong. On the other hand, in Haroun's *A Season in France*, the Central African Republic is a place from which the protagonists are irrevocably severed. The home can only be reconstructed through the characters' imaginations, highlighting the brutal reality of displacement and the refugees' longing for a lost past. Despite these differences, both films evoke a sense of absence stemming from the protagonists' separation from their homelands. Wong and Haroun depict their protagonists' unreachable destinations – whether it is the familiar yet inaccessible Hong Kong or the irretrievably lost Central African Republic – showing that the characters' visions of a new home are ultimately unattainable, thus encapsulating the enduring human experience of homesickness and exile.

Unrequited love

The pervasive theme of feeling-absence also manifests in the realm of unrequited love. Daniel Contreras describes unrequited love as an 'unfulfilled desire' for a relationship with another (2005: 15), and Roberts and Krueger argue that 'unrequited love feels different from reciprocated love – at its core is the painful awareness that the object of someone's affection does not feel the same way about him/her, and that they are powerless to change this' (2021: 188). The unfulfilled desire reflects the same deep longing and unattainability seen in the quest for home. In *Happy Together* and Haroun's *Dry Season*, the sense of unrequited love embodies aesthetic expressions shaped by political contexts. The ambiguous emotions tied to the 1997 transition in Hong Kong and the postcolonial period in Chad are mirrored in the films' portrayal of complex, unstable and uncontrollable relationships. By analysing the queer couples in *Happy Together* and *Dry Season*, I aim to trace how unrequited love permeates these uncertain circumstances, revealing how political and personal upheavals create an environment where the desire for connection remains unfulfilled, highlighting the pervasive sense of longing and loss in both films.

It is worth noting that the unrequited queer love in *Dry Season* and *Happy Together* does not follow the classic mainstream narrative about the conflict between heterosexuality and homosexuality (see Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* or Wanuri Kahiu's *Rafiki* as obvious examples of this). Rather, both of them very intently bring attention to the relationship between the protagonists themselves instead of the struggle with the hetero world that surrounds their respective relationships. *Happy Together* can be seen as one of the most important queer movies in Sinophone film history (Berry 2000; Yue 2000; Kim and Atanasoki 2017). By considering the implication of two men's love in the film, Jeremy Tambling argues that to be on the road to Iguazu Falls, which can be seen as the main motivation for the characters, is already 'going outside the boundaries of heterosexual society' (2003: 36). The story happens on the road that consists of two men's relationship, instead of two men fighting against the hetero-society. Lai and Ho's exile, to some certain extent, cleans up hetero-homo struggles as they are on their own path which is far away from the hetero-normal discipline. *Dry Season* was made and released in 2006, although homosexuality was not positively accepted[4] in Chad; there was no law against same-sex sexual activity in the country until 2017 (Williams 2019). The film explicitly presents a male gaze on male beauty and the erotic desire felt by men for the male body (Williams 2014, 2019); accordingly, it leaves enough space to portray a complex, unrequited love between the protagonists without hetero-interruption.

In Haroun's *Dry Season*, the very dramatic unrequited love happens in a revenge story that twists the complex potential of loverhood *and* fatherhood that develops between the protagonists. Before he was born, Atim's father was killed by Nassera during the civil war. When he grows up, Atim's grandfather asks him to kill Nassera to avenge his father. So Atim pretends to work for Nassera to look for the right moment and dramatically, a love bond develops as they engage in their day-to-day lives. Nassera initially treads Atim like his son to make up for his own lack of children and Atim appears to embrace this role – including taking care of Nassera when he sprains his waist. However, the father/son dynamic quickly takes on a more erotic angle. When Atim applies medicine to Nassera's waist, there is a close-up shot of Nassera's bare back that includes in its viewpoint the gaze of Atim. This shot, as Atim's subject point of view, shows 'an erotic interest in the surface and contours of Nassera's flesh and frame' (Williams 2019: 199). Even though the film explicitly sets revenge as the goal for Atim, the erotic shot implicitly implies a new, more complex interest he has formed in Nassera. Conversely, the film does not hide Nassera's desire for Atim. He shows his jealousy when Atim talks to another man. When drunk, he directly asks Atim, 'Do you love me? Not even a little bit?' Atim does not answer and takes Nassera home. In this scene, Haroun only uses one long-take medium shot that steadily and peacefully records their dialogues and movements. In the beginning, Nassera is alone in the frame, sitting on the hood of the car. Atim then enters the shot from the left side to take Nassera home. When Nassera asks, 'Do you love me?', Atim does not answer and briefly exits the shot from the left side. He then re-enters the frame, and Nassera drives him home. The camera follows the car, panning to the left, and shows the car leaving in the dark. In this scene, Atim's entry and exit visualize a sense of complex and ambiguous love marked by evasion and potential betrayal. Love, in this context, becomes an endless state of absence, explicitly showing a desire for love but intentionally hiding any actions that would move towards a positive enactment of this love.

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[4] According to the survey about Perceived Acceptance of Gay People, only 3 per cent of participants in Chad thought the city or area they live in is a good place for homosexuals. See LGBT Rights in Chad. https://www.equaldex.com/region/chad (Accessed 7 February 2023). Chad criminalized same-sex sexual activity for the first time with the passage of the revised Penal Code in 2017, Art 354. Then under Penal Code 2019, same-sex sexual activity is prohibited, which criminalizes acts of 'sexual relations with a person of the same sex'. From Human Dignity Trust's web page. https://www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/chad/ (Accessed 23 August 2022).

This theme of feeling-absence, present in their ambiguous love, also extends to complex notions of fatherhood in Haroun's works. In *Dry Season*, the absence of Atim's father and Nassera's longing to claim Atim as his son/lover underscore the fractured, disturbed and vulnerable nature of masculinity in a postcolonial context. This aligns with Haroun's recurring exploration of missing fathers, as seen in his other work, *Our Father/Abouna* (2002), which metaphorically addresses the colonial relationship and its psychological impact in postcolonial times (Dima 2018). The absence of the father figure represents not a nostalgia for the colonial past but a confusion and struggle in the present. Nassera's wish to legally adopt Atim symbolizes an attempt to rebuild a father-son relationship amidst the war-torn confusion of the 'postcolony' (Williams 2014: 34). In other words, the missing parent represents current disarray rather than nostalgia. In *Dry Season,* Nassera's desire to claim Atim as his legal son embodies the effort to reconstruct a father-son relationship in a postcolonial context. As Williams argues, it is a utopian hope in Haroun's works that

> the erotic restaging of father/son relations through an act of spectatorial seduction is central to Haroun's project, which asks whether the actual disappearance of the emblem of patriarchy can ensure the lifting of the rule of the Father.
>
> (2019: 193)

I suggest that in *Dry Season*, the ideal new rule of the father is best described by the metaphor of a beautiful bubble – it temporarily magically floats in Atim and Nassera's homo-relationship but bursts at the end of the film. Feeling-absence in this situation does not embody a negative sense of loss but dispassionately re-examines the necessity of the rule of the father and the impacts it has. In other words, feeling-absence itself is not a result produced by a specific missing item or moment, but rather it produced in this process of examination – embodied in their nuanced push-pull relationship.

At the end of the film, Atim finally catches Nassera and takes him to see his grandfather. The grandfather uncompromisingly commands Atim to shoot Nassera. However, Atim does not shoot Nassera but rather shoots twice to the sky to delude his blind grandfather. A long shot shows Nassera lying on the ground and raising his head to look at Atim. Then followed with a point-of-view long-take shot in the final scene of the film, Atim holds his grandfather's hand and walks to the far side of the desert. Initially, this farewell scene can be seen as an optimistic ending in that Atim is freed from violence and revenge, and he makes decisions instead of following his grandfather's instructions and hatred for his family. However, the potential of this new love also ends at the same moment. Haroun's *Dry Season* reveals how personal and political upheavals contribute to an ongoing sense of longing and unattainability. The protagonists' relationships, whether marked by unfulfilled love or the attempt to reconstruct familial bonds, highlight the pervasive and multifaceted nature of feeling-absence.

As Haroun (2007) explained in an interview at the French Institute, 'the absent father is the emptiness of the reference. If people do not have any references, it is difficult to build something'. By using Haroun's (2007) metaphor, Atim can be seen as the 'generation of the desert':

> In the desert, you try to build your own life and own future. It is very difficult to do because you don't have any past. The past is just this father who has been killed. So, you are an orphan. The future and the presence of your current father gives to you is just to kill the man which means that is not your present and it is not a future. So, you have to create your own way.

Haroun's metaphor of the absent father as an 'emptiness of the reference' resonates deeply with Atim's experience. Atim's sense of orphanhood, as described by Haroun, extends beyond the literal loss of parents to encompass a metaphorical absence of direction and purpose. This orphanhood reflects a broader societal condition where traditional structures and references have been eroded or destroyed. Atim says, 'I never knew my father, he was killed before I was born. That's why I'm called Atim, the orphan. My father's killer was never charged. He lives in total freedom.' Atim's father's death occurs against the backdrop of the Civil War in Chad (1965–79), following the country's independence from French colonial rule in 1960. Atim can be viewed as representing the subject who is born into the specific postcolonial context of pre-war Chad. His situation also metaphorically represents the ambivalences felt by those who are displaced from the precolonial origins of the context into which they are born, which is towards the precolonial past (the murdered father) as well as the postcolonial civil war present (the loving/controlling relationship represented by Nassera). Feeling-absence in this way is embodied by the unfulfilled love that is pushed and pulled by the irrevocable pre-postcolonial origin and inescapable postcolonial present.

In *Happy Together*, the turbulent relationship between Lai and Ho embodies the unfulfilled desire for happiness. As Tambling notes, 'the partner and the desire never converge' in the film (2003: 73). For Tambling, having a sexual partner is only the substitution for the desire for something else. Lai's desire to have happiness in a partnership is more than just sex. He hopes that happiness and partnership can exist at the same time. The opening sex scene shows that Lai and Ho are united but then quickly we see them split apart on their way to Iguazu Falls. Lai's desire cannot be fulfilled. This sense of unfilled absence is shown at various points in the film. Going to Iguazu Falls represents a 'happy-together' desire for Lai and Ho; yet it is never achieved. Symbolically, as Teo (2005) suggests, Iguazu Falls are not only the symbol of hope but are an illusion that only manifests on the night lamp (which shows two people seeing the Falls together). In the end, Lai sees Iguazu Falls on his own. It then elicits a sort of confusion of love desire – physically Lai arrives at the symbolic destination of finding happiness; psychologically the happiness cannot be fulfilled without 'being together'. In the scene of Iguazu Falls, the long take of the aerial shot captures the waterfall cascading down with immense natural force, while its unfulfilled abyss seems to gaze back at the viewers. The greater the falls cascade, the stronger the unfilled feeling it evokes. Feeling-absence in this way transposes from a lonely man to a powerless state in facing an irresistible force of nature.

The gaps in the relationship between Lai and Ho become even more apparent when Lai meets Chang, another younger man (this time from Taipei), who is also working in Argentina. Chang seems to offer the potential of connection, happiness, and also movement, as the dynamic football game they all play to the soundtrack of *Happy Together* heralds. The possibility of a relationship with Chang is a chance for Lai to fulfil his desire for love and escape the feeling-absence space. However subjectively Lai can only see or feel happiness from Chang, he is unable to fully experience it himself. In their farewell scene, Lai and Chang's relationship is constructed in an incompatible pattern by the colours of the lights. Lai and Chang hug each other in an overhead shot. The bright yellow lights and cold blue lights diagonally divide the room into two parts. Lai stands in the blue light and Chang stands in the yellow. Whilst they embrace, Chang temporarily comes to Lai's side and is bathed in the cold blue light that covers Lai. The meaning of the colours is perhaps a clear reference to cold and warm and the colour-constructed geometric composition of this scene confines Lai's position. He does not step into the side which offers what he most admires, the potential of warmth, love and feeling – Lai stays in his old state – feeling-absence.

While Haroun symbolizes relationships within a complex colonial-national structure, Wong directly addresses love and desire through the conditions of being together and experiencing happiness. Despite these different approaches, both filmmakers depict the feeling of absence clinging to unrequited love, regardless of its form. This shared outcome can be interpreted as a metaphor for how Wong and Haroun's films exist in an affective space forged by this pervasive feeling-absence. In this context, feeling-absence acts as a space where affective resonance takes place across the screen world, creating a poignant emotional space for their characters.

Loneliness

The theme of feeling-absence continues into the exploration of loneliness. Robert and Krueger explain that 'episodes of loneliness involve feelings of a lack of power to express oneself, for example, for those involve a sense of exclusion and alienation from the society in which one lives' (2021: 197). In *A Season in France*, this concept is vividly illustrated after Abbas and his family are forced out by their landlord. A long-take close-up from behind shows Abbas' face in the mirror cabinet. Close-ups of facial expressions can easily deliver an emotional message, while mirror shots can complicate the film perception as the subject of the shot is more than the character himself that also is self-reflection of himself. Abbas stares at himself in the mirror but quickly opens the cabinet with a sense of disgust to disrupt his own gaze. Normally, mirrors (in reality) and mirror shots (in films) function as a tool for self-awareness and self-identification (Boyle 2017; Brunette 2005; Provencher 2016). For example, in Wong's films, 'all the most selfish characters are narcissistically obsessed with mirrors' (Brunette 2005: 19). However, Abbas refuses to see himself whilst he faces an unsolvable living problem that he and his children have nowhere to live. Williams mentions that '*A Season in France* captures in acute detail the reduced horizons and enforced immobility of the migrant condition' (2019: 188). There is no choice for Abbas and his family to stay or leave as they are constantly being driven away. After Etinne's refuge is maliciously burned, Abbas asks him to leave France together because there is no place for them. Etinne turns back a question about where they can go and complains that 'our country has gone. Central Africa is just an illusion. Africa is an illusion'. They belong nowhere. For Abbas with no sense of belonging, it is hard to survive in France, let alone have the power to express and identify himself. The self in the mirror can only make him question and deny his own subjectivity – he himself literally starts to embody feeling-absence. The avoidance of facing himself increases this feeling of absence and both his physical belongings but also his self-identification are gradually reduced in equal measure.

In Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild*, one of the obvious rhetorical functions of loneliness is Yuddy's self-referential metaphor – a bird without legs. Yuddy was an adopted child and he has always wanted to know who his real mother is. When he finally gets his real mother's address, she refuses to see him. In this film space, motherhood is seen as the key factor to ground a person and inscribe a sense of identity. *Days of Being Wild*'s Chinese title is *A Fei Zhengzhuan*. *Fei* in Chinese literally means fly. *A Fei* in Cantone is a local idiom that means young people who are old enough to fly away from their parents but once flown, they are seen to degenerate into socially unacceptable modes of behaviour (Teo 2005). So, negatively, *A Fei* represents idle youth. Yuddy is portrayed as an unacceptable rebel. His tragedy is portrayed as the story that 'there's a bird without legs. It can only fly and fly. When it's tired it sleeps in the wind. It lands on Earth only once in its life. That is when it dies'.

The film uses Yuddy's voiceover twice to discuss the image of the bird, highlighting the contrast between his rebellious nature and his fate. The first instance occurs in the first half of the film when Yuddy, bored, lights a cigarette upon waking up. This voiceover transitions into the domestic song 'Maria Elena', to which he begins dancing the mambo. In a long take, Yuddy dances in front of a full-sized mirror and moves around the room. Unlike Abbas, who avoids looking at himself in the mirror, Yuddy enjoys his reflection. However, this does not mean Yuddy accepts his fate like the lonely bird. Instead, the song's pacing, with its moderate tempo and dynamic swells, mirrors the flow of Yuddy's movements, contrasting his boredom and annoyance with his lonely fate, showcasing his rebellion against loneliness.

The second time is shown towards the end of the film after Yuddy's death, accompanied by a tracking shot of a rainforest in the Philippines. This shot echoes the opening scene of the film with a creamy green vision with a smooth guitar song called 'Always in My Heart' (by Los Indio Tabajaras, a guitar duo of two brothers from Ceará, in the Northeast of Brazil). Despite the seamless blend of colors and music, this cross-regional combination of a specific geographical scene and distinct folk music style creates a diasporic audiovisual experience within a Hong Kong story, highlighting 'diasporic and postcolonial cultures' (Yue 2016: 241). In this poetic scene, Yuddy's destiny is calmly presented, showing that he is never grounded until his death. The parallels between the opening and ending scenes form a closed loop of his journey. Even though he fought for his fate, his loneliness is underscored by his lack of connection to the ground. Metaphorically, Yuddy exists between heaven and earth, never able to settle in one place, and remains disconnected from the world, entirely alone.

In both films, loneliness becomes a dominant mode of experience. Both Yuddy and Abbas hope to relocate themselves into a stable milieu, aiming to seek refuge and kinship, but they are both unable to transform their dreams into reality. On the screens, camerawork, sounds and editing accompany Yuddy and Abbas' stories, extending their loneliness beyond the characters' experiences and broadly permeating the perception of films. As a result, feeling-absence echoes across the screens. Through the sense of characters' alienated circumstances, these two films resonate with each other on an affective level that embodies feeling-absence across the screen worlds.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the concept of feeling-absence in Wong Kar-wai and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's films extends the notion of simply missing something in post-war and (post)colonial times. Instead, it represents a multi-layered longing for something simultaneously present and out of reach. This chapter does not argue that these two filmmakers create similar screen worlds through similar histories, performances, camera movements, or narratives. Rather, Wong and Haroun use distinct cinematic techniques to evoke an emotional effect that resonates across their respective works.

Comparing the similar affective experiences in Wong and Haroun's films shows a deeper understanding of feeling-absence in post-war and (post)colonial contexts. Whether expressed through homesickness, unrequited love or loneliness, feeling-absence emerges as a recurring pattern in the dialogue between Wong and Haroun's films. Feeling-absence can be seen as a starting point for exploring the resonated and varied emotional space they create. Rather than generalizing Wong and Haroun's films, feeling-absence is presented as one particular aspect of the myriad of simple and complex emotions in their works. It is not a defining characteristic of their distinct styles but an important theme that facilitates a dialogue between their films.

Through their exploration of feeling-absence, these filmmakers illuminate the shared experiences of longing, displacement and the search for belonging in screen worlds.

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SECTION FIVE

Cross-cultural fun and fandom across Africa and Asia

12

K-Drama audiences in Madagascar and Northeast India

Zoly Rakotoniera and Thongbam Saya Devi

Introduction

Mahafaly ny mahita fa misy zavatra tsara foana amin'ny fiainana na dia misy ratsy aza. Ao anatin'ny K-Drama no ahitana tantara ratsy fiafara, mety hoe misy maty na misy fisarahana, nefa tsy maintsy misy zavatra iray tsara mitranga foana ka manonitra iny ratsy iny.

It is heartening to see that there is always something good that comes up in life even if something bad happens. We can see sad endings in K-Drama, in which people die or there is separation, but there is always a positive occurrence that can compensate for the negative one.

Miza, project interviewee

For many people around the world, watching Korean Drama (henceforth K-Drama) has become an extremely popular pastime. This chapter focuses on understanding this popularity amongst audiences of K-Drama in two distinct contexts in the world – Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar and Northeast India – where we, respectively, live. In keeping with the conversational focus and methodology of this book, our conversations have existed in multiple spaces: between each of us as individual researchers and the subjects we interviewed; between the two of us as we sought to navigate the writing and organization of this chapter; and finally, between us and the wider project team as we listened and engaged with others throughout the workshops. In this chapter, we attempt to provide an answer to the question of why K-Drama appeals to diverse audiences and what this tells us about K-Drama as a transcultural screen world *par excellence*. While we show that the popularity of K-Drama in these two contexts depends on many similar factors, we also reveal that there are specific, distinct reasons in each context for the special attention and devotion that K-Drama receives. In a broader sense, our chapter explores a range of issues related to identity, cultural proximity, transportability and globalization.

K-Drama presents a challenge to how we define screens and our relationship to them in a context in which, as Wasson (2012: 142) has noted, screens are 'multimedia sites incorporating aesthetic, improvisational, adaptive, and creative practices'. K-Drama has a vast reach across the globe, and viewers engage with these narratives both in full and fragmented ways – for example, via advertising, curation through fan sites and illegal downloads. While K-Drama does not constitute 'cinema' in the traditional sense, its popularity far surpasses that of the kinds of screen narratives that Film Studies so often engages with. Expanding our conceptual frameworks from 'film' or 'world cinema' to 'screen worlds' thus allows K-Drama's ubiquity and impact to come into view.

K-Drama forms part of the 'Korean Wave' – or 'Hallyu' in Korean – a term used to describe the pervasive spread of Korean popular culture outside Korea. The term originated in 1998 via Chinese media, and now applies to 'a range of cultural products including Korean pop music (K-Pop), films, animation, online games, smartphones, fashion, cosmetics, food and lifestyles' (Kim 2013: 1). As with other screen worlds, political and economic elements have played a key role in the rise and growth of the 'Hallyu' phenomena; the screen became the site of communication of a very specific, 1990s, post-Cold War era of cosmopolitan globalization, during which time many countries opened up their cultural markets to foreign imports. As a result, increased international competition resulted in more investments in the culture industry and therefore more choice for cultural consumers. In this sense, 'Hallyu' was an ideal example of the broader Korean culture industry taking advantage of the changing market situation (Shim 2006). For others, 'Hallyu is part of the complex and dynamic process of cultural globalization marked by new digital communications technologies and modern systems of circulation' (Yang 2012: 112).

The 'Hallyu' phenomenon has been the subject of numerous academic analyses. The development of transnational 'Hallyu' fandom (see Lee et al. 2015; Kanozia and Ganghariya 2021) and idol-fan relationships, particularly in the era of social media (see King-O'Riain 2020), is perhaps the most relevant to this study. In this chapter we are defining fans as committed consumers of a specific popular cultural form, whose 'relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of affect or mood' (Grossberg 1992: 56). It is the extensiveness of their practices, the intensity of the meaning-making process and intimacy established with the object of their affection that separates fans from general audiences (Kelly 2004: 7). Much of the discussion concerning the global circulation of media has focused on cultural products crossing national boundaries, and consequently the concept of 'transnational fandom' was born (see Iwabuchi 2002; Wood 2013; Yoon 2018). However, the word 'transnational' holds a complex and problematic allegiance to the idea of nationhood so Chin and Morimoto (2013) have argued for the use of a transcultural rather than transnational framework, stating that a fan's subjectivity is far more complex than identification through national belonging. Indeed, as we show in this chapter, fans of transcultural and border-crossing texts enjoy a 'subjective moment of affinity' (2013: 99) with the text, regardless of the place of its origin, and, at the same time, seek to incorporate and place the texts inside their own specific spaces and experiences.

Morimoto (2019, 2021) has critiqued the Anglo-American orientation of fan studies and treatment of fandom as a cohesive community, arguing that fans come from diverse cultural contexts, so fandom should not be seen as encompassing 'undifferentiated communities of shared affective interest' (2021: 74), but rather 'as composed of intersecting cultures in the contact zones of online fandom' (2021: 75). Similarly, Siuda (2014) argues against the possibility of global fandoms and instead emphasizes that while transnational communication between fans occurs, local differences determined by 'economic, cultural, political and historical factors' complicate the emergence of a homogeneous global community in lieu of one based on 'the similarity of conditions in which people happen to exist on a daily basis' (Siuda 2014: 298). Local fan practices, modes of consumption, understanding and interpretation as well as access to media content vary too much for fans to be perceived as one community; hence whilst we can find certain commonalities and links across contexts, we must not ignore the very specific, grounded and heterogeneous nature of fandom.

Situating K-Drama

Northeast India and K-Drama

Northeast India is the easternmost 'frontier' of India and is made up of eight states. It is home to over 220 ethnic groups and communities and an equal number of dialects. Given the diversity of this region, this chapter does not intend to imply that the Northeast is a homogeneous entity; however, for brevity, using the blanket term is unavoidable. Physically and culturally distinct from 'mainland' Indians, Northeast Indians are closer to neighbouring countries such as Tibet, Myanmar and Nepal – not only geographically, but also ethnically and linguistically. As such, various aspects of everyday life such as religious rituals and practices and food habits bear similarities to those of the neighbouring countries. The region is marked by a turbulent history in relation to the Indian nation. While the people of mainland India could relate to a 'common past', being unified geographically and to an extent, culturally and politically, since the precolonial period, the Northeast remained secluded and unaffected by any outside influence (Lal Dena, Online). Being one of the last regions to be taken over by the British and the area where the exercise of colonial power was at its weakest, the Northeast had different acts and regulations, its own issues and problems, and a separate struggle against the British. Since independence, Northeast India has been subject to oppressive military measures designed to contain secessionist movements. The disappointment with the integration and the failure of the government to respond to the 'intricate realities' of the Northeast remain in the minds of the people, making them harbour resentment and separatist desire (Fürer-Haimendorf 2018). The conflict and political unrest brought about by separatist and secessionist movements have meant that modernization in this region has been frequently disrupted and people from the region face racial discrimination and harassment in Indian metropolitan cities and other parts of India.

Northeast India receives a flow of commodities such as clothing and electronic items and popular cultural media such as (often pirated) films, music and television from East Asia via the Indo-Myanmar border markets in Manipur and Mizoram. This has meant that while the rest of India has been only gradually starting to embrace Korean entertainment through K-Drama and K-Pop during the last decade, it has been exceptionally popular in Northeast India for two decades already. Broadly speaking, three phases of the arrival and infiltration of 'Hallyu' can be observed. The first wave occurred relatively early in the 2000s and was concentrated in the Northeast, particularly the states of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. This wave was mostly driven by films and television dramas, namely *Autumn in My Heart* (2000), *The Classic* (2003) and *Stairway to Heaven* (2003). 'Gangnam Style' (2012) would mark the second wave, when K-Pop became a global sensation. Subsequently, the promotion of Korean media in India was aided by both the Indian and Korean governments (Jin 2016; Ju 2020), with the Narendra Modi government's 'Act East' policy promoting closer relations with Southeast and East Asian countries. Finally, the third wave has been driven by the recent boom in popularity of K-Drama after the Covid-19 pandemic and has been further fuelled by the popularity of renowned filmmaker Bong Joon-ho's Oscar-winning film *Parasite* (2009) and the most recent Korean worldwide hit, Hwang Dong-hyuk's TV series *Squid Game* (2021–5).

Madagascar and K-Drama

The fourth largest island in the world, Madagascar is located in the Indian Ocean, off the eastern coast of Southern Africa and along the Mozambique Channel. The Malagasy population is the outcome of Indo-Melanesian and African mixing as well as Indian and Arab migration from the first millennium until the sixteenth century. Contacts with Indian Ocean neighbours and later European influences became more visible especially with the advent of Christianity and colonization; Madagascar became a French colony in 1896 and gained independence in 1960. Contemporary Malagasy society displays a confluence of cultures with more than eighteen ethnic groups and many distinct regional cultures; however, Malagasy people also have a 'fundamental cultural unity' (Ramandimbilahatra 2010). In Antananarivo, the capital of the island, one feels more of the French and Asian cultural influence, while in some coastal areas one feels more the African and Arab influence.

In Madagascar, the popularity of K-Drama has been steadily growing in the twenty-first century. Broadcast on TV channels, borrowed from movie clubs or watched on the Internet, K-Drama has managed to break through the dense entertainment system of Antananarivo. It has thus provided a real challenge to Malagasy and American series on an unprecedented scale, and signals larger institutional, social and global transformations. Madagascar shares with Northeast India a common point in that Psy's song 'Gangnam Style' became a 'Hallyu' landmark in the country, becoming the first Korean song to gain fame in Madagascar (Christelle 2021), inspiring fans' interests in K-Pop and, later, in K-Drama. In 2014, a show dedicated to Korean pop culture – called 'Hallyu' – was broadcast on the local TV station, Dream'in TV; this show helped fans tap into their passion for Korean culture. In 2020, a K-Pop lockdown contest was organized by the Embassy of South Korea and attracted 700 participants

(Christelle 2021). In September 2020, the opening of the King Sejong Institute, a public Korean language and cultural institute affiliated to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Antananarivo, has further developed the interest in ‘Hallyu’ in the capital city of Madagascar; the institute has around 300 students at the time of writing. In particular, the movie club of King Sejong Institute is a significant space contributing to the popularity of K-Drama in the city; it screens movies and series every Friday afternoon.

Methodology and data collection

Since this is an empirical audience study, we each needed to gather data on the relationships between fans and K-Drama in Northeast India and Madagascar respectively. Our research participants for this study were selected based on their self-identification as regular consumers and/or passionate fans of K-Drama. A combination of personal contacts and social media outreach to gather data was used for the Northeast Indian side. Initially, the researcher contacted friends and mutual friends who were known for being K-Drama fans. These individuals shared the survey with their own networks, thereby expanding the reach of the study. In addition, we reached out to all the Northeast Indian K-Drama fan pages on Instagram, requesting them to share the survey with their followers. This approach ensured a diverse and extensive sample of respondents who are passionate about K-Drama. For the Malagasy side, the respondents were approached during Film Studies classes and movie screening sessions of the King Sejong Institute.

In Northeast India, a qualitative survey was used. Data collection consisted of a two-stage approach: first, an initial questionnaire was circulated, which received ninety responses; that was then followed by semi-structured interviews with twenty participants, conducted between December 2020 and May 2022. In Madagascar, data gathering took place between March 2021 and September 2022. The latter study had a similar sample size, with ninety-four Malagasy men and women who self-identified as regular K-Drama viewers. This sample was then utilized to select at random 30 per cent of the initial ninety-four respondents for a longer semi-structured interview, and this was then followed by a longer interview with just eight participants. In both sample groups, the ages were comparable. Malagasy participants were on average between eighteen and thirty-nine, with 70 per cent of the respondents being students from the University of Antananarivo, from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the Faculty of Sciences. In Northeast India most respondents would be classed as ‘millennial’ or ‘Gen-Z’, with ages ranging between twenty and thirty-five years old. Most of the respondents were from the state of Manipur, followed by Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The majority (83 per cent) of the respondents were female, most of whom rated themselves at 7–10 on a scale of '1' being a casual viewer and '10' being a die-hard fan. They were students and young professionals who have visited or lived in at least one of the metropolitan cities of India. The majority of them were Indigenous people from the Northeast who come from the middle and upper middle class and thus have easier access to education and modern luxuries such as the internet. The participants have lived the majority of their lives in their home towns and most have not been to Korea; only three out of the total ninety participants had been to Korea.

Drawing on this rich empirical data, this chapter now goes on to explore in more depth the impact of K-Drama on Northeast Indian and Madagascan viewers, and endeavours to examine the multi-layered and complex ways in which they negotiate their identities as active consumers of K-Drama.

Understanding K-Drama audiences in Northeast India

The study of transnational media has been approached from two main perspectives – homogenization (cultural imperialism) and heterogenization. While the homogenization approach tends to look at recipients as passive consumers of a powerful single culture (mostly Western), the heterogenization approach returns the focus to the agency of the recipients as active spectators. Early research on the popularity of 'Hallyu' in Northeast India has largely approached the subject with cultural imperialism as a conceptual framework (for example, Kshetrimayum and Chanu 2008, Sunita 2009). However, this perspective undermines other important factors. There are multidimensional power plays at work through which Korean pop culture is produced, promoted and experienced. Contrary to cultural imperialism, hybridization theory understands the dominant media as a hybrid of different (competing) cultures; although this theory has its own drawbacks, it seems more apt to understand the complexity and dynamism of transnational media production, dissemination and reception. In the Korean context, Dal Yong Jin discusses the nature of hybridization in her work *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*. According to her, the hybridization of Korean popular culture has been achieved with the help of various actors from the cultural, political and media sectors (Jin 2016).

Northeast India has a long and rich history of film culture. Hindi and Hollywood films have both been popular, along with regional films and Hong Kong martial arts films. These foreign films were circulated in video parlours in the 1980s and Hindi and Hollywood films also shown in cinemas. However, all media in the Hindi language has been banned in Manipur since 2000 by a secessionist militant group known as the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) in order to stop the 'Indianisation' of the state (Sunita 2010). According to Sunita (2010), 'Hindi films were declared obscene and said to portray feudal values typical of India's Hindi-speaking heartland, and thus had the potential to undermine Manipuri values'.

Similarly, in Mizoram, Hindi serials have been banned on the grounds that they 'promote an alien culture and offend their religious sensibilities' (Kuotsu 2013). The decline of celluloid film theatres and the ban of Hindi films in Manipur and Mizoram coincided with the inwards flow of Korean films and dramas in pirated forms in the states of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. In early 2000, Zonet, a local cable channel, telecasted the Hindi serial *Kasautii Zindagii Kay* with Mizo subtitles. During this time, reportedly the churches in Mizoram saw a huge decline in attendance (Kuotsu 2013). The unprecedented success of the telecast led to social organizations such as MZP and YMA along with the church banning it. Surprisingly, for Korean content that flourished in the following years, there has been no such scrutiny. Dubbed Korean films and dramas were received as 'clean' content as compared to Hindi cinema and Hollywood films while, in fact, they had been carefully censored by local cable providers. Moreover, dubbing and subtitling into local languages facilitated the successful localization of Korean media in Mizoram. As Kuotsu notes, 'the technical possibilities of subtitling and dubbing enable local pirates to "indigenize" films and tele serials with finesse, enhancing viewer participation and pleasure' (2013: 588). The level of localization/indigenization achieved was such that the viewers started identifying with Korean actors and media as their own.

Many Northeast Indians fail to identify with Indian mainstream media such as Hindi serials because they are mostly centred on North Indian Hindu values, cultures and sensibilities. For example, one of my (Thongbam's) interviewees, Abby (twenty-three) told me:

> Mainstream Indian content concerns itself with Hindu family values, class divides in the mainland, or urban metropolitan lifestyles (of upper-class Hindu families), all of which has little to do with me.

However, she added that 'the same can be said for K-drama. It does not represent who I am'. Nevertheless, 47.2 per cent of my respondents said that they like K-Drama more than Hindi and/or other regional media because of 'cultural proximity: similar lifestyle, food, habits, culture and tradition'. The majority also noted that they prefer K-Drama because of 'no/lack of representation of Northeast and Northeastern cultures in Indian mainstream (Hindi) media'. This suggests that for these communities who are marginalized by mainstream Indian media, K-Drama offers a kind of respite from this feeling of marginalization through combining both a sense of an *alternative* to the dominant Hindi media *and* some degree of a feeling of 'cultural proximity'. Notably, 42.7 per cent of my respondents also said they appreciate K-Drama's 'transnational and hybrid qualities: mixture of western and traditional Asian cultures and values', thereby confirming our overall argument here that K-Drama is not to be seen as a form of cultural imperialism in these contexts, but rather as a hybrid cultural alternative.

Despite the obvious cultural differences between Northeast India and South Korea, then, K-Drama seems to offer viewers in Northeast India a sense of (imagined) familiarity, connectedness and belonging that their national mainstream media do not afford them. Many claim to feel a sense of closeness with South Korea. This sense of familiarity seems to have arisen from a perceived similarity in culture (similar lifestyle, food habits, culture and traditions). In fact, 22 per cent of my respondents claim to identify with Koreans as shown in K-Drama. The participants' feelings of discrimination within their own country (for example, towards their physical features and food culture) seem to have enhanced and encouraged their engagement with South Korean culture. For example, Sasha (twenty-three) says she had always felt ashamed of her 'disappointing' nose until she saw similar facial features celebrated and labelled as 'beautiful' in South Korea. Many Northeast Indian and Korean people enjoy fermented food as part of their cuisines for which they are discriminated against in India and Western countries, respectively. With the popularization of fermented and 'smelly' food items like Kimchi by the Korean wave, they feel the stigma around Northeast Indian cuisines has decreased. Binarani (eighteen) claims that K-Drama shows that eating such food items can be 'cool' instead of being 'weird, uncultured, backward, and disgusting' as it is often described by many people in India. It gives them confidence to accept and embrace their own ethnic identity and to feel less pressure to live up to a national identity. When compared to the metropolitan cities of India which many of the respondents have visited and lived in, 80.9 per cent believe that they would fit better in Korean society. Here, it is important to ask: what exactly constitutes this 'Korean' society and how do viewers perceive it?

To many of my respondents, Korean society also seems to represent a modern and highly advanced society with similar traditional roots, embracing family values. 'Hallyu' has certainly shown a form of modernity that many people can relate and aspire to. As many as 70 per cent of the respondents aspire to have similar lifestyles to those portrayed in K-Drama. Some respondents believe the Korean lifestyle could have been theirs had they had the same opportunities and experiences. These people feel they are closely related to the Koreans ethnically (due to their racial and physical attributes) and culturally. Jenny (twenty-eight) feels: 'We (Northeast Indian people) could have had a similar trajectory of development if not for the political and economic issues that we have to deal with every day as citizens of India.' And Sana (twenty-one) notes: 'Modern Korean society is an example of what a liberal society like ours could have been.' Naturally, the viewer's reality and circumstances greatly influence the reception of transnational media. Many turn to popular culture with the hope of filling in the gaps of their quotidian lives. As Neikolie Kuotsu notes, 'South Korea's own negotiation with modernity reflected in its popular culture strikes a chord among viewers who are themselves undergoing modernization' (Kuotsu 2013: 589). As such, the enthusiastic reception of K-Drama goes hand in hand with a desire to engage with alternative modernities.

In this regard, modern Korean culture is seen as an example to emulate. More than half of the respondents identify with 'Korean culture as seen in media or real life' because Korean culture shows a modern way of life that nevertheless incorporates traditional 'Asian' (Confucian) values. Ziko (twenty-three) confides: 'I admire Koreans because they keep up with traditional values like respecting elders even though they live in a modernized world.' Thus, it is not surprising that although many have declared a preference for K-Drama over regional or local media, the majority (80.9 per cent) of them express the desire to uphold ethnic cultures and values. For many, the exposure to transnational media such as K-Drama has played a positive role in learning ways of embracing their ethnic identity. More importantly, participants found an affinity with the characters in K-Drama narratives which in turn gave them confidence in their daily life, and confirmed their aspirations for an alternative modernity. Over 71 per cent of the respondents claim that by following modernized Korean culture (grounded in traditional values) they see themselves as *also* embracing a global/transcultural identity. This highly positive, romanticized Northeast Indian view of South Korea is somewhat ironic given that South Korea is not a county known for its inclusivity or pluralism (Kay 2011). Therefore, we can also argue that the lens via which South Korea is being viewed is one that has been heavily influenced by the glossy promotion of K-Drama itself; notably, many respondents enjoy K-Drama content for its aesthetics and high production values, with 61.8 per cent saying they like K-Drama because of its 'aesthetically pleasing content', and 42.7 per cent saying they like it because they see it as offering ‘better quality content’. Such aesthetics have been partly developed as a conscious project by various cultural and political agencies to make cultural products more attractive to a wider global audience (see, for example, Fortner and Fackler’s 2014 study of the importance of the ‘anesthetization of reality’ in capitalist globalization).

Understanding K-Drama audiences in Madagascar

To date, no scholarly work dealing with the popularity of K-Drama in Madagascar has been published so our study is the first to engage with this phenomenon. As with the work on Northeast India, cultural proximity is a key tool for understanding why K-Drama appeals to Malagasy fans. However, while there is undoubtedly a focus on cultural proximity as part of ‘the tendency to prefer media products from one’s own culture or the most similar possible culture’ (Straubhaar 1991: 85), there are also other, more specific and culturally relevant factors at play; historical experiences, genre preferences and local works all play a key role in K-Drama fandom in Madagascar.

Discussions with the study participants reveal that the most popular K-Drama is *Crash Landing on You* (2019) whereas *Samonta* (2017) is the most popular local drama. Both are available online and through video clubs. The major common characteristics between the two that emerged from the analysis allow us to identify three key areas that help to explain their popularity with fans: melodrama; an idea of a ‘chaste’ romance; and the amalgamation of tradition and modernity through the representation of the female characters.

Melodrama is generally defined as a mode of storytelling that is effective in arousing intense feelings of grief and impulses to weep; Zarzosa says it is ‘a mode that addresses the problem of suffering and stages social ideas to analyze how they generate suffering’ (2010: 243). Abelmann (2003) argues that melodramas are key to understanding Korean modernity, and Hartzell (2019) asserts that it is ‘the operative mode of Korean dramas’ (38). Similarly, even though no scholarly study has been undertaken on melodrama in the Malagasy context, my (Rakotoniera’s) lived experiences testify to its popularity in the Madagascan context. Malagasy series, as exemplified by *Samonta*, ‘highlight how the defining aesthetic strategies of melodramatic film – such as the intensified imbrication of acting, *mise-en-scène*, and music, for the creation of maximal effects of expressivity – have endured and now circulate globally’ (Paul et al. 2022: 15).

In spite of its relatively isolated geographic position, Madagascar is not insulated from circulating series and movies which are globally omnipresent. Unsurprisingly, the most globally viewed series and movies, according to Netflix and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), are those produced in the United States. Around 95 per cent of IMDb's list of the top 100 most watched series are American. The interviewed Malagasy viewers interact on a daily basis with this kind of media content, most notably through television, social networks and the internet. The average amount of time spent by the respondents watching series in a week is twelve hours – a considerable portion of their free time as they attend around eight hours of university classes every day or work full time, and roughly the same as that used by young adults in other countries to watch series and movies. According to Coyne et al.:

> [E]merging adults spend between 1 and 2 hr a day watching television (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Mokhtari, Reichard, & Gardner, 2009), with popular dramas (e.g. Grey'sAnatomy) and sitcoms (e.g. The Office) among the most commonly viewed (Alloy Media & Marketing, 2009).
>
> (2013: 126)

As far as the series watched are concerned, all the respondents regularly watch Korean series like *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020), *Squid Game* (2021) and *Crash Landing on You* (2020) as well as American sitcoms. As in many other global contexts, word-of-mouth recommendations are crucial to how Malagasy viewers choose what they are going to watch; this accelerates the circulation of series among these viewers and can make their preferences homogeneous.

An analysis of the reasons why Malagasy fans love K-Drama can bring further insight to the globalization of their tastes. The in-depth interviews carried out after the questionnaire completion indeed revealed themes related to the way the participants understand and interpret K-Drama and how these series shape their lives. Three major themes have emerged out of those interviews: Malagasy viewers feel that K-Drama has enabled them to understand adult life better, to enjoy life more and to experience the demystification of South Korea as a remote 'exotic' land.

Most of the interviewees mention the fact that K-Drama has offered them valuable life lessons. Santatra (twenty-one), a female university student, is very articulate about the way series such as *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022) and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) have taught her about important life issues. As a teenager, Santatra had health conditions that compelled her to stop her studies for months and which made her feel different from her peers.

She managed to get back on her feet and resume her studies but the feeling of being different still haunted her. Those two series have made her accept who she is:

> *Ny lesona lehibe azoko tamin' i Extraordinary Attorney Woo* and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay dia hoe tsy maninona na tsy mitovy amin'ny olona rehetra aza. Mety ho tafita sy sambatra eo amin'ny fiainana foana na dia miavaka amin'ny lalana nandalovan'ny hafa aza ny lalanao*. [The biggest lesson I got from *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022) and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* is that being different from the majority is not a problem. One can succeed and be happy in life even by taking a different path.]

Miza (twenty), a female university student who is a big fan of Asian culture, also affirms that one useful lesson she has gained from K-Drama is that life is not easy for everybody, whether you are in South Korea or elsewhere:

> *Tsy mora ny fiainana rehefa miha-lehibe ho an'ny rehetra … Misy foana ny tsy fifanarahana eo amin'ny ray aman-dreny sy ny zanaka, tsy voatery hitovy ny zavatra mety sy tsy mety eo amin'ireo … Ratsy eo imason'ny fiarahamonina foana ny hoe vehivavy tsy manambady*. [Life is not easy when you're a grown-up, for everybody … There are always conflicts between parents and offspring, there are always differences of opinion on what is right and wrong … Unmarried women are always stigmatized by society.]

The same message related to life's difficulties is mentioned by Harivola (twenty-three). When asked about the elements of K-Drama that have marked her most, she pointed out:

> *la galère des jeunes, le chômage et la course à la carrière … c'est un peu pareil partout mais au moins chez eux il y a des boulots à temps partiel, nous on n'a pas ça*. [Young people's misery, unemployment, the race for a career … it's rather like that everywhere but at least part-time jobs are available for them, we do not have that.]

This first emerging theme (learning life lessons) is significant as it drives home the idea of how K-Drama serves as a kind of edu-tainment for viewers; they watch it not solely for the aesthetic or narrative pleasure it generates. All the participants' responses are united in emphasizing that the series somehow helped them solve or accept issues they have not been able to deal with in their personal lives, such as differences, otherness, the generation gap or unemployment. They are able to do so by realizing that such life issues can touch 'everybody'. For those K-Drama viewers, the universal dimension of the life messages imparted by the series is key to acceptance. Seen in this light, K-Drama's popularity among Malagasy fans lies in their feeling that it is relatable or culturally proximate; this is very similar to Northeast Indian fans' sensation that, despite the significant differences between Northeast India and South Korea, K-Drama provided them with a sensation of familiarity and closeness.

However, for many Malagasy fans, K-Drama is not just about seeing a distant but relatable place but also about the demystification of South Korea's historical and cultural dimensions. The most recurrent motive for originally starting to watch K-Drama stated by the interviewees is the desire to actually go to Korea one day. Watching K-Drama, however, has challenged that desire. For Mahefa (twenty-two), Miandry (twenty-three), Océane (twenty-eight), Naely (eighteen) and Brice (twenty), before their first encounter with K-Drama, Korea was a dream destination. They saw it as a rich country symbolized by *kimbap*, where people wear *hanbok* and have 'puffy' hairstyles. For Mahefa, such clichés were totally shattered when he started watching Korean series. He argues that the most common type of food eaten by the people featured in K-Drama is *ramen* and that Korean people have very 'westernised looks'. For Mahefa, this knowledge has meant that far from finding more links to South Korea, he no longer dreams of going there.

This impact of a perceived demystification of Korea can be seen in Miandry's testimony. For her, a dominant picture presented in K-Drama series, such as *Crash Landing on You* and *Secret Garden*, is rich people's lifestyles and values:

> *mibahana amin'ireo series ny fampisehoana ny fiainan'ny mpanakarena, mazàna nefa dia tsy sambatra ireo mpanakarena ireo fa toa fianakaviana simba sy mifanimba … Aleoko ihany ny fiainako aty, tsy te hipetraka any aho*. [Representation of rich people's lives is prominent in those series, however the rich are most of the time not happy, they are broken families or the family members are destroying one another … I prefer my life here, I do not wish to go there.]

In this light, the aspects of Korean culture that the participants expected to see in the series are missing. What strikes them are familiar elements such as '*ramen*' and 'western looks'. The absence of positive cultural elements that are discernible by the viewers is leading to the demystification of Korea as expressed by the respondents' change of attitude regarding moving to Korea. Remarkably, this is diametrically opposed to Northeast Indian fans' responses to K- Drama, where the latter seem to still romanticize South Korea; perhaps this is due to the ways in which Northeast Indians project their feelings of marginalization within India on to K-Drama series, investing more in the aspirations South Korea presents for them. Nevertheless, Madagascan and Northeast Indian audiences of K-Drama both equally seem to appreciate the traditional values of K-Drama. According to Santatra, one of the main reasons why she appreciates K-Drama is the fact that she can watch it with her family: *'mamy ery ny fiainana rehefa tafaraka izaho sy ny fianakaviako hijery K-Drama. Mahafinaritra satria tsy misy sary mamoa fady toa ireo hita any amin'ny séries tandrefana.* [Life is beautiful when I am with my family watching K-Drama. It's so enjoyable because it is devoid of explicit scenes that are typical of western series.]' For her and other respondents, K-Drama viewing, thanks to chaste content, has become a family quality time.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the growing popularity of K-Drama in Northeast India and Madagascar. Even though Korean media is foreign in both contexts, strong feelings of 'cultural proximity' to K-Drama were expressed in our surveys and interviews, albeit for quite distinct reasons in each context. By way of conclusion, we would like to tease these out.

In Northeast India the attraction to K-Drama seems to come from deep-rooted experiences of racism within India, and people feeling alienated from mainstream Indian cultures. As previously stated, Northeast India contains people of many diverse ethnicities and cultures who negotiate their identity on many levels – local, national and global. This has often meant that individuals have come into conflict with a broader sense of an Indian 'national' identity. Many people have been subject to racial discrimination in big cities such as Delhi and Bangalore because of the way they look (Rahman 2014; Jha 2020); yet, rather than aim to integrate with the larger, mainland Indian culture, this is seen as a betrayal of their Indigenous roots. This has brought about a renewed interest in Northeast Indians' own ethnic traditions and values. Such revivalist tendencies seem to not have hampered people's aspirations for a global/cosmopolitan lifestyle; rather, these two desires have proceeded hand in hand, with K-Drama providing a model (however romanticized). For those in Northeast India, Korean popular culture has ushered in 'new imaginations, new choices and contradictions, generat[ing] a critical condition for reflexivity, engaging everyday people to have resources for the learning of the self, culture and society in Asia' (Kim 2013: 6–7). By popularizing East Asian physical features, certain food habits and lifestyles, K-Drama has had a positive impact on Northeast Indian viewers who share similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Many respondents claim that watching K-Drama has thus instilled confidence and self-esteem in terms of their looks and culture. As the rest of India is now becoming more exposed to Korean culture, some respondents are hopeful that people from 'mainland' India will become more accepting of them as Northeasterners.

In Madagascar, audiences of K-Drama do not have the same experience of internal marginalization that makes K-Drama feel like a lifeline or a site of aspiration for alternative modernities and experiences. In contrast, it would appear that the 'cultural proximity' experienced by Malagasy audiences when watching K-Drama is far more connected to the similarities in melodramatic storytelling modes in both K-Drama and local Malagasy series. Indeed, rather than expressing a sense of ethnic similarity with the characters in K-Drama (as Northeast Indian viewers have done), Malagasy audiences have experienced the appearances of these Korean characters as 'westernized'. Rather, the impact of K-Drama on the Malagasy viewers is visible through three main themes. First, they say that K-Drama teaches them valuable life lessons that help them understand adult life better. Second, K-Drama has brought about the demystification of Korea after which many viewers do not wish to move there anymore (which is in strong contrast to Northeast Indian audiences, who express the desire to travel to South Korea). And third, despite the demystification of Korea experienced, viewers still seem to value K-Drama's emphasis on traditional family values (as with Northeast Indian viewers), which means that it is appropriate to watch in family settings.

Our research results thus reveal that the reception of transcultural media is highly complex and clearly dependent on the socio-political realities of viewers. Transnational popular culture represents a layered and hybridized product where several elements are at play. While 'Hallyu' has been a popular phenomenon all over the world, the appeal of Korean popular culture is very different from one place to the other. Theories of cultural imperialism, homogenization and even 'cultural odorlessness' (Iwabuchi 2002) are not capable of capturing these granular distinctions. Only empirical research, such as ours, can delve into the nuances of particular viewers' experiences and preferences and thus help to construct more specific, grounded and detailed understandings of global screen worlds.

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13

‘Bollywood be like … ’: Imagined worlds and cross-cultural fandom of Hindi media by ZeeWorld fans in Nigeria

Gloria Chimeziem Ernest-Samuel,
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Georgia Thomas-Parr

Introduction

Today is the fated wedding day of Pragya, as she stands at the top of a flight of stairs, bouquet in hand, wearing a gold sari, pink scarf, red lipstick and, of course, iconic beard. Welcome to the (imagined) world of the virally popular Nigerian social media entertainer, Paul Scata, who is known for his internet parodies as a feminine archetype from Hindi soap operas. The groom, also played by a Nigerian man, waits at the altar in a blue suit. Pragya (played by Scata) descends slowly; so slowly that ‘three hours later’, and she has barely moved down the stairs, to the irritation of her soon-to-be mother-in-law who tells her to hurry up so they can ‘eat jollof rice’.[1] This video (amassing nine hundred thousand views) is typical of the skits through which Scata has gained his viral fame, with posts bearing the title and hashtags, 'Bollywood be like' and 'ZeeTV series in reality be like'.[2] To be specific, Scata is satirizing the Nigerian television channel, ZeeWorld, which is dedicated to Indian-exported, English-dubbed Hindi media content. It is at the site of these flows between different cultural imaginaries that we situate ourselves in this chapter, observing a wider global phenomenon of individuals who find escapism from their own respective contexts that they were born into via alternative, foreign, visual media cultures. For example, take British fans of Japanese anime who engage in cosplay ('costume role-play') which is becoming increasingly popular worldwide. Or, as discussed elsewhere in this volume, Madagascan fans of Korean drama that similarly is captivating a global stage. Our screen-saturated, digital age makes available many different cultural 'mediascapes' (Appadurai 1996) that have not-so-discretely shaped the inner worlds of its inadvertent recipients, many of whom have not physically been to the country of their fascination and, yet, find identification with these distant cultures. A connected screen offers anyone with an imagination access to these distant worlds. So, what are the implications for these fans who fantasize about and perform as fictional characters from media outside their own localities? What does it mean to cross-dress across cultures? These are some of the questions that we hope to raise in our chapter.

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[1] Paulscata1, ‘The Great Kiss’, TikTok, 11 June 2022. https://www.tiktok.com/@paulscata1/video/7107966878886251782?lang=en.

In the case of this study, Hindi (or 'Bollywood') media holds an increasingly influential appeal in Nigeria, catalysing a variety of engagement between users on various social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram. We turn our attention to those who are inspired by the narratives, characters, costumes and songs of Hindi media, in particular, that which is associated with the Hindi television channel ZeeWorld. Using the selected case studies of viral social media creators based in Nigeria, we work to uncover an area that is part of this wider, global phenomenon of what we term 'cross-cultural media fans', used to denote the fan phenomenon of individuals who are captivated by alternative (non-mainstream) foreign media (sub)cultures.[3] If we contend with Arjun Appadurai, as aligned with Jacques Derrida, that culture is 'a dimension that attends to situated and embodied difference' (Appadurai 1996: 13), the social media creators of this chapter are engaging with culture as a situated and embodied difference that they take on in their performances and imaginings of Hindi experiences (both lived and fictional) via their respective positions as young adults in Nigeria. In particular, we focus on two viral TikTok creators who (cross-) dress and perform as character archetypes and tropes that are visible on ZeeWorld series.

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[2] Paulscata1, 'Bollywood Be Like', TikTok, 13 September 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@paulscata1/video/7007413778656627973?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&w eb_id=7213040159960090154. Paulscata1, 'Zeetv Series in Reality Be Like', TikTok, 29 March 2023. https://www.tiktok.com/@paulscata1/video/7216053591738535173?lang=en.

[3] By 'non-mainstream' foreign media, we mean media which is actively chosen by fans that is not widely viewed in their respective contexts. For example, in the UK, mainstream foreign media might include imports from the United States. Non-mainstream foreign media, by comparison, would be Japanese anime titles that are comparatively rare on British television, sought by fans elsewhere via the internet.

ZeeWorld: 'Extraordinary everyday'

Since the global rise of internet use in the early 2000s, certain media cultures have become inadvertently exported via the internet, catalysing cross-cultural fandoms that, in turn, use the internet as a platform for creation and sharing with other like-minded and dispersed fans, who respond in a variety of different ways, generally via the small screens of their smartphones.[4] This is, as Henry Jenkins termed, 'convergence culture' (2006), where different media platforms interact with each other and merge in curiously playful ways, where the boundary between producer and consumer becomes increasingly blurred. In the sense of this chapter, ZeeWorld broadcasts television content that is created for local Indian viewership and then dubbed in local languages, exported worldwide. This then influences user engagement online, becoming ever-circulated between other active participants. It becomes a deterritorialization of media which allows for imaginative escape by Nigerians into, as Arjun Appadurai terms it, other 'possible lives' within Hindi 'mediascapes' – the latter being defined as 'image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality':

> [W]hat they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live … as they help to constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives, fantasies that could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement.
>
> (1996: 35–6)

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[4] The smartphone played a significant role in shaping our chapter here as well, where, following our initial video call meetings on Zoom, we continued our discussion via the voice note option on WhatsApp, with our longest voice note coming to 30 minutes and 14 seconds.

The mediascape of which ZeeWorld is part constructs certain imagined narratives of Hindi possible lives, that are then adapted by Nigerian creators to 'construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, […] assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world' (Appadurai 1996: 35). We thus adapt Appadurai's term 'imagined worlds' (Appadurai 1996: 3) to consider, in this instance, the possibility of imagined *screen* worlds, where individuals can use social media platforms to 'contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them' (Appadurai 1996: 33). In other words, the 'official' narrative that might be presented to young people within their own respective contexts in Nigeria is able to be pulled apart and rebelled against (as well as negotiated and conformed to) via their play with ZeeWorld narratives. So, which aspects of social rebellion do we orientate our discussion in this chapter? That would be expectations of gender, sexuality and marriage that can be re-imagined via 'the boundaries of the gendered moral universe of Indian films' (Larkin 2004: 104), or, in the case of our study, not films, but Hindi television narratives on ZeeWorld.

Our focus in this chapter is interested in the global media flows from Indian to Nigerian television screens, which then become mimicked through mobile phone screens as viral social media content. Likewise, we observe the role that imagination and fantasy play in the convergent and creative interaction between these screen worlds and media fans.

Regarding our selected Nigerian creators, they perform 'possible lives' via the imaginary worlds of Hindi soap operas. These are imaginative processes and performances that are rooted to culture and its imagination between borders, where 'media transform the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds' (Appadurai 1996: 3). These media 'compel the transformation of everyday discourse. At the same time, they are resources for experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons' in which 'self-imagining' becomes an 'everyday social project' (Appadurai 1996: 3; 4). Concerning the selected Nigerian creators in this chapter, this is very much an everyday social project in which imagination is at its heart. We will continue with this train of thread in due course. However, it is necessary to first provide some background information on ZeeWorld and its emergence in Nigeria.

ZeeWorld is a Hindi-media television channel that first launched on DSTV (Digital Satellite Television), a product of Multichoice, a South African-owned media corporation, in Nigeria on 3 February 2015. In March 2019, however, there was a startling outcry on social media when a screenshot circulated bearing the image of the ZeeWorld Africa Facebook page announcing its intention to shutdown ZeeWorld,[5] which would put an end to the Indian soap operas and other entertainment programmes that had been airing on DSTV. The extent of the backlash against this from the ZeeWorld fans reflected just how much of a following that the channel had garnered in Nigeria, becoming one of the most popular places for fans of Hindi media content. Gloria had experienced fanaticism of ZeeWorld first-hand, as it was common to visit any of the hair salons where most of the TV channels were stationed on the ZeeWorld channel, listening in rapt attention as the hairdressers, their customers and friends argued about some of the episodes they had seen.

Although there is speculation surrounding this post as having been a hoax that we can neither confirm nor deny, we are curious nonetheless to consider the political backdrop which might motivate a decision to terminate ZeeWorld in Nigeria. Namely, that Multichoice had introduced some new programmes which included a programme that promoted transgender ideals a year after the Nigerian Senate had passed an anti-gay bill under President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, which recommended a fourteen-year jail term for homosexual people in the country. Consequently, the Nigerian Senate condemned the new programmes introduced by Multichoice and called for the censorship of most of these programmes, which included ZeeWorld. The Censorship board believed Multichoice overshot the initial 60/40 per cent local/foreign content approved by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC). Moreover, Zeeworld was becoming so popular that it was believed that Hindi media was influencing Nollywood content (Oluwasegun 2021). The Nigerian government, using the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), became more critical in authorizing the broadcasting of certain programmes within the Nigerian media space and began to scrutinize the programmes on DSTV. This has certain implications regarding ZeeWorld's place as potentially offering escapism from homophobic legislation in Nigeria.

The shutdown of ZeeWorld, hoax or not, evidently did not come to fruition as we observe in this chapter. In fact, as the Multichoice website indicates, ZeeWorld is the most popular platform for promoting and presenting Indian drama and cultural productions within Africa with approximately 2 million DSTV subscribers in Nigeria alone. It is also globally popular, with 193 countries subscribed to DSTV, thus being exposed to the ZeeWorld series. African nations make up the majority of these nations, with Nigeria having the highest subscription rate followed by South Africa and Zambia in that order. The channel belongs to Zee Entertainment Enterprises, a Mumbai/India-based Entertainment Corporation owned by Subhash Chandra (Chairman) and Punit Goenka (CEO), with offices in Johannesburg, South Africa, through which content is sold to Multichoice. In Nigeria, the ZeeWorld channel is also transmitted on GoTV and StarTimes channels, which make the programmes accessible across the country. ZeeWorld carries 'entertainment programs produced in Hindi and dubbed in English showcasing Indian rich cultural narratives',[6] where the channel lives up to its slogan of providing narratives that are 'Extraordinary Every Day'. We will be returning to this idea of everyday extraordinariness and what it might suggest about young Nigerians' relation to Hindi media content shortly.

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[5] https://www.nairaland.com/5128247/no-more-zee-world.

It should be noted that ZeeWorld's popularity is part of a much wider cultural adaptation of Hindi media in Nigeria (Oluwasegun 2021; Dotun 2021), as well as other African countries such as South Africa. Our study emerges in light of Minuo Fuglesang's (1994) research on young women in the Kenyan city of Lamu who are drawn towards the romantic melodrama of Hindi film culture; who 'actively generate new meanings and pleasures out of the "modern" and "traditional" cultural repertoires, modifying and adjusting the content of the latter to suit their own needs' (1994: cover). Similarly, the examples of our chapter are shown to play with similarity and difference; modernity and tradition, in which '[t]he tension between like and unlike, similarity and distance, is key to the appeal of transnational cultural forms, as it allows imaginative play that is tolerated precisely because it is different' (Larkin 2000: 101). ZeeWorld offers its Nigerian viewers the opportunity to play with gender roles and ideals, social identities and identifications, where the cultural, religious and social ideals that are presented in ZeeWorld may be 'seen as mingling and interacting with existing ideas, actively mediated by the local receivers' (Fuglesang 1994: 11), in which the production of TikTok videos by these fans becomes the output of their playful experimentation with these possible lives as a means of negotiating the identities that are socially imposed on them as young adults.

Indian entertainment content is evidently highly popular among Nigerian audiences in which Bollywood offers an alternative to Western media consumption in Nigeria. These are alternative cross-cultural fandoms that search for media beyond the typically prescribed mainstream entertainment that is available to watch. As scholars have noted, many elements of Northern Nigerian culture find affinity with Indian culture as well, as Ajetunmobi Oluwasegun observes in 'the overlap between (often Hindu-coded) Bollywood and local cultures in northern Nigeria, including conservative sensibilities relating to dress, morality, family relations, gender and marriage' (2021: 18). Abdalla Uba Adamu (2017; 2010) attributes the popularity of Hindi film and music to the similarity of culture between predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria and India – an area that Brian Larkin also observes in his research on Indian films and their migration into Hausa popular culture, such as the bandiri singers who gained popularity in the late 1980s by adapting the songs of Indian films into Hausa language, praising the Islamic prophet Mohammed. Here, Bollywood romance songs were transformed into Sufi expressions of evangelical praise, 'effecting a transformation from the profane to the sacred' (2002: 92). The phenomenon of Hindi songs being used for the advancement of Islam in Nigeria is intriguing, given the political tension between the two religions (of Islam and Hinduism) within India itself.

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[6] www.zeeworld.com.

Tracing the history of Hindi films in Africa, Katie Young (2021) observes that Hindi cinema began to circulate throughout Africa in the 1930s, though the circulation became widespread by the mid-1950s. In Nigeria, Eromo Egbejule (2021) recounts that Bollywood's roots in Northern Nigeria date to the independence and post-independence era in Nigeria, when Lebanese and Syrian merchants brought videotapes of Hindi films to the region. Here, the predominantly Christian southern Nigeria was more receptive to Western influences, whereas the conservative North came to value Indian films. Adamu (2017) even goes so far to say that the North and South bear so many differences in their culture and matters of state and policy so as for the two regions to be as different from one another as separate countries. Nonetheless, as we observe, Hindi media is also increasingly popular in southern Nigeria, as the TikTok creators of this chapter are based in the South. Hindi media then has the ability to resonate beyond the cultural and religious differences both locally within Nigeria (i.e. North vs South) and between India and Nigeria itself. Why might this be the case, and what might it reflect of certain trends in contemporary Nigeria, especially in the digital, screen-saturated age? One of the answers to this question that we posit observes the fascination with Hindi media as being rooted in a postcolonial affinity between both India and Nigeria, found in 'negotiating times of profound change, first coming about through the colonial encounter and subsequently due to the forces of nationalism and then globalization' (Oluwasegun 2021: 18). This transition from (and tension between) the traditional to the modern is encapsulated in many narratives of Bollywood and Hindi media.

Throughout this chapter we raise questions of postcolonial hybridity to consider, as Mathias Krings writes in *African Appropriations*, 'the myriad ways a *single* cultural product may be appropriated – that is, interpreted, reworked, and adapted to suit social contexts, interests, and media environments once it has entered transnational circuits' (2015: 2). This study similarly follows Krings' direction in focusing on 'how people in Africa appropriate and make meaning out of foreign life-worlds' (2015: 7), honed down to look at individuals in Nigeria who consume and creatively respond to Hindi media content as disseminated via ZeeWorld. This creative and parodic play with other cultural media is a pan-African phenomenon where our study of ZeeWorld works to illustrate, 'African ways of dealing with cultural difference' in which 'African cultural producers mediate between two contrasting life-worlds' (Krings 2015: 2).

It is important for us to also highlight the important role that Hindi media and music plays in everyday Nigerian life. From personal experience in South East Nigeria, Gloria notes the extraordinary impact that Northern Indian popular culture has on everyday life in Nigeria. For instance, it is common for many Nigerian children to wake up to the sound of Hindi music from their phones. Hindi media is fascinating to many Nigerians, and, as such, its videos and music have become synonymous with attention and visibility itself. In fact, when watching the videos for analysis, Gloria's ten-year-old son ran into the room because he recognized the song and wanted to ask, 'Where did you get this song from?'

Notably, gaining attention (and with that, more views, more followers; more engagement on social media) is to centre one's content on Hindi media. So much of Bollywood media is, after all, spectacle: the songs, the dances and the acting. The spectacularity of the sharp colours of the costumes and excessive splendour of jewellery also factor heavily into viewers enjoyment of Bollywood, in which we are, in Benedict Anderson's words, 'faced with a world in which the figuring of imagined reality [is] overwhelmingly visual and aural' (1991: 22). The social media creators of our discussion gained viral fame *because* of their engagement with ZeeWorld, in which the songs, dances, dress and performance that signify Bollywood are distinctively attractive to many Nigerians.

Hindi media fans in Nigeria

Fandom as a concept has been used to define people who have an 'intense affective bond with a particular property, whether or not they share those feelings with anyone else' (Jenkins 2015: 16). We align ourselves with the view that fans are not passive; they actively participate in the production of fan culture and, by extension provide potential insights into cultural and social developments locally within Nigeria as well as globally, involved and engaged in assimilating, sharing and reproducing the content for the entertainment of the fan community. Researchers in cultural studies believe that media audiences and fans are not merely interested in the marketing of media texts; rather social and cultural factors affect and influence fans' consumption of media texts. Stuart Hall, for instance, aligns social and semiotic codes as an influence on audience/fans' choice of media text to produce, consume or rework texts. Thus, there are 'elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a re-creation of recognizable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding' (Hall 1973: 513). Jenkins' research also suggests that fans embrace textual elements they can identify with and appreciate.

We consider Jenkin's theory of fandom as forming the basis of this discourse, particularly its relation to participatory culture. Participatory cultures involve fans acting not only as consumers but also as producers and creators of some form of creative media.

Participation in fan culture involves what Jenkins describes as 'a form of collective experience […] a shared activity' (2015: 23). In fan cultures, the collective productions may be creative and artistic expressions in forms of fan fiction, fan art, fan video, cosplay, folk songs and so on. Discussing popular culture as 'routes' and 'roots' of cultural identities, John Storey observes that 'consumption is a significant part of the circulation of shared and conflicting meanings we call culture' (2003a: 78). People communicate through what they consume. And consumption is a form of production. Thus, consumption becomes perhaps the most visible way through which the audience stage and perform the drama of self-formation. On top of this, we raise the idea of cultural roots as being dynamic across mediascapes, in which, via imaginative practices, one can take on the identity of another possible life from an outside culture. This is a process of negotiation that is founded in difference from the fantasiser's individual and physically contained national context. In the case of the social media creators of this study, through Hindi media, they imagine themselves in the position of its protagonists, offering forms of escapism from daily life in Nigeria.

Another important theory that has helped us to frame our analysis is Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which he defines as the ability to achieve desired goals through attraction rather than force. Usually, the attraction is connected to the culture of a nation, political values and international policy. Soft power is akin to cultural influence that encapsulates non-military approaches to issues that include cultural power and economic influence. Indian culture's resonance in Nigeria may be considered as a form of global flow as well as cultural globalization influenced by information and communication technologies. The creative engagement by young people from post-independent Nigeria symbolizes this interaction, giving the impression that they are responding to their independence by making decisions about the type of foreign content or cultural products to consume or engage with.

Another element that concerns us is the fact that this is soft power that bears a curious relation to the hard power experienced under a colonial regime that effectively imposes its culture on the country of its control. By contrast, although ZeeWorld has in some sense been exported by India for Nigerian viewership, we nonetheless consider fandom of Hindi media and songs as being *actively* chosen. Whereas Oluwasegun (2021) observes the phenomenon of Hindi media and Hindu religious influence in Nigeria as being evidence of cultural diplomacy, our position is from a bottom-up orientation in discussing ZeeWorld fans as actively searching for engagement with Bollywood content beyond that which is accessible. Furthermore, we ultimately agree with Fuglesang's argument that this phenomenon cannot be pessimistically framed as simply a case of cultural imperialism of Bollywood media into Nigeria. Rather, the existence of Hindi media channels is responding to viewer demand within Nigeria and across Africa as a whole, where viewers are actively choosing to engage with Hindi media for reasons that are important and personal to them. The content of these programmes 'satis[fies] fundamental needs in [fans'] lives and function as important points of orientation' (Fuglesang 1994: 157). This bears certain implications when approaching this phenomenon through a post- and de-colonial lens, in which we consider the popularity of Hindi media as being tied to matters of independence from colonization – an autonomous adaptation of Hindi media for the purposes of imaginative, creative escapism from daily life in Nigeria, of which a digression from Western cultural influences via the spectacle of Hindi media may be read as temporarily masking (and transcending) its colonial past. With its cosmopolitan sensibility that nevertheless exudes cultural, historic, religious and Indigenous pride, might then, Hindi media appeal in Nigeria as a form of subconscious post-independent protest? Might this also mark a desire for a pre- and postcolonial union that is ultimately ambivalent to ideas of the Commonwealth? Given that both Nigeria and India share histories of colonization by the British Empire – something that Larkin has also identified in his work as contemporaneously manifesting as the 'the perceived tension between traditional culture and a modernizing Western one' – we explore Hindi media as inspiring a 'landscape of desire and spectacle and a field for nostalgia and memory' (2000: 99) within Nigeria. The excessive and glamorous splendour of the traditional dress worn by our selected case studies in their performance of ZeeWorld and Bollywood narratives, characters, songs and dances, acts as an affront to colonial power, while also exuding a zeitgeist of modern, globalized subjectivity that has taken hold in Nigerian media fan subcultures.

Method and case studies

TikTok is the social media platform of our analysis, which, incidentally, was launched in September 2016, the same year as ZeeWorld (Juwariyah et al. 2021). Songs and music are a key aspect of TikTok's interface, which aptly lends itself to an engagement with the musically oriented form of Hindi media. Indeed, Nigeria aside, there have been other viral TikTok videos from across Africa that have gained global attention – most notably, two siblings from Maasai in Tanzania who became famous in India and worldwide for their lip syncing of Bollywood anthems.[7] Fans of Indian media can more effectively play with these elements of song and spectacle via TikTok emphasizing song and sound as much as the element of video.

For this chapter, we selected four videos from two viral Nigerian creators on TikTok, which were chosen for the curious insights that they may provide into this phenomenon of Hindi fandom in Nigeria. Both creators, who go by the name Paulscata1 and Bollyfreak25, playfully engage in performances that are tied to cultural, religious and traditional representations of Indian femininity as it is disseminated in ZeeWorld television series and, more widely, Bollywood blockbusters. We analysed the selection of videos with the following themes in mind: hybridity, mimicry, gender performance and postcolonial subjectivities. Indeed, we selected these two creators specifically because they both creatively respond on social media to ZeeWorld series; they have viral followings, and a common theme in their work is the playful, romantic, parodic and imaginative experimentation of merger and difference between the two cultures of Nigeria and India as imagined via the latter's mediascape and fictional characters. At the time of writing, Paulscata has 552K followers on TikTok with his videos garnering 4.1 million likes. Bollyfreak25 has 215K followers and 1.6 million likes. For the most part, Paulscata1 and Bollyfreak25's content engages with ZeeWorld tropes which we observe as being the reason for their viral fame and the interest circulating their videos.

ZeeWorld series, as with soap operas and telenovelas, are known for their predominantly female viewership. Our study emerges out of a wider recognition of the trivialization of romantic popular culture for its association with female fan cultures. Trivial they may be categorized, yet we argue for the insight and intrigue that it bears on contemporary Nigeria, in which Hindi melodramas 'permit the emotional negotiation of contradictions between moral standards, discrepant messages, desires and gender ideals' offering the ability to 'experiment in a playful manner'; functioning 'as a much-needed site of identity exploration, as the figures of the song lyrics and films become idols and objects of identification' (Fuglesang 1994: 12). It is important to note how ZeeWorld series, known for their feminine fanbase, are largely denigrated by others which feed into a more persistent global phenomenon of the devaluing of girls' and womens' cultures in general (Fuglesang 1994).

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[7] BBC News, 'The Maasai TikTokers Wowing Bollywood Fans', 22 December 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59690317.

This chapter emerges alongside an adjacent research project conducted by Gloria and Fadekemi who interviewed fans in southern Nigeria about their motivations for watching ZeeWorld series, the results of which will be discussed elsewhere. ZeeWorld, as a phenomenon of feminine fandom, is the context from which our two TikTok creators emerge, in which Bollyfreak25's content may be interpreted as fanatic homages to Hindi media (with some satirical elements), whereas Paul Scata's creations are satirical mockeries of ZeeWorld characters and narratives. Although we do not go into detail of the (namely gendered) differences between these two creators, who are, respectively, female and male, we nonetheless highlight the importance of these areas as shaping their creative choices and reception by other users on TikTok.

For the case of this chapter, we will be exploring the depiction of femininity. However, it should be noted that both TikTok creators engage with cross-dressing practices as well, that is, an excessive, drag-like performance that differs from their gender identity in daily life. While it is beyond the scope of our chapter to go into the masculine element here, we welcome future studies to witness the performance of Indian masculinity by young Nigerian women, in which the user, Bollyfreak25, is part. The second user that we engage with, Paul Scata, who is from the Imo state in Southern Nigeria, is known for his spectacular and melodramatic performance of feminine stereotypes in ZeeWorld series. In an interview on TVC (2022),[8] Scata discussed his background as an Instagram creator of Indian skits. He started creating TikTok videos in 2017, motivated by his love for Bollywood movies, especially the songs and dressing. ZeeWorld series, conversely, irritated him with their over- the-top narratives: 'I love the [Bollywood] movies, but I don't like the [ZeeWorld] series'; 'they are too dramatic and too slow' 'my skits are based on the [ZeeWorld] series'. Intriguingly, Jenkins (2015) asserts that fan culture is often motivated by a complex balance between fascination and frustration. In his opinion, 'because cultural materials fascinate fans, they sustain their interest. Because they are also frustrating, fans often rework them' (Jenkins 2015: 14). These opportunities enable fans to speak back to the text and to equally assert their agenda, which are often different from the original texts produced by the encoder. These fan-producers indulge in what Jenkins (2013) termed 'textual poaching' because they copy or 'poach' Indian-styled creativity in producing their own media texts in a bid to assuage their thirst for Indian entertainment content. In other words, the fans appropriate Indian creativity and indigenize it to further satisfy their appetite for Hindi culture. These media texts are forms of affective appropriation created to make a positive sense of a cultural production that fans love, so that the text may be wholly accepted and adopted by the fan/audience.

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[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kASWif26t0 (Last accessed 23 May 2023). TVC is a television station based in Lagos, Nigeria.

Identification, cultural imagination and other possible lives

> ‘Where is your father from?’
> ‘From Ewarobia.’
> ‘In Nigeria, here? In Anambra state?’
> ‘Yeah.’
> ‘Where is your mom from?’
> ‘From Ewarobia too’.
> ‘So, how are you Indian?’

The above conversation is taken from a viral spoof video by Josh2Funny (2022) in which a Nigerian man auditions for a competition by singing ‘Hasi Ban Gaye’, a popular Hindi song composed by Amal Malik. When asked by the audition panel about his national identity, the entrant professes that he is Indian. Upon further questioning, he defends his imagined national identity by saying, ‘I used to listen to this song. That’s what makes me Indian’; ‘My mom used to watch ZeeWorld ….’ In his view, him and his mother are ‘Indian by watching’ Hindi media. Spanning YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, the video amassed millions of views. As we observe, fan responses to Hindi media online are seemingly rooted in a desire for cross-cultural union, where India becomes a fantasy on which ideals of self- actualization and wholeness are projected.

This sentiment manifests itself in a video by Bollyfreak25, titled, ‘For those asking about my Nationality … ’[9] (see Figures 13.1 and 13.2). The video opens with her pointing to Nigerian flags with the states of her parents’ origins written underneath (Benue and Ondo), in which she feigns disappointment, before the message enthusiastically reads: ‘But I always say I’m from … ’ with Indian and Nigerian flags underneath. With this in mind, we feel drawn to discussing the topic of union between Nigeria and India as it has become prevalent in fan performances responding to Hindi media that encapsulates a cultural and imaginative longing for Nigerian fans. This manifests in Bollyfreak25’s cosplay and performance as characters from ZeeWorld and other Hindi-based media, where she often performs these dialogues in fluent Hindi, with one of the comments on her videos reading, ‘You speak just like one of them [an Indian person]’. The following observation by Appadurai resonates in this instance:

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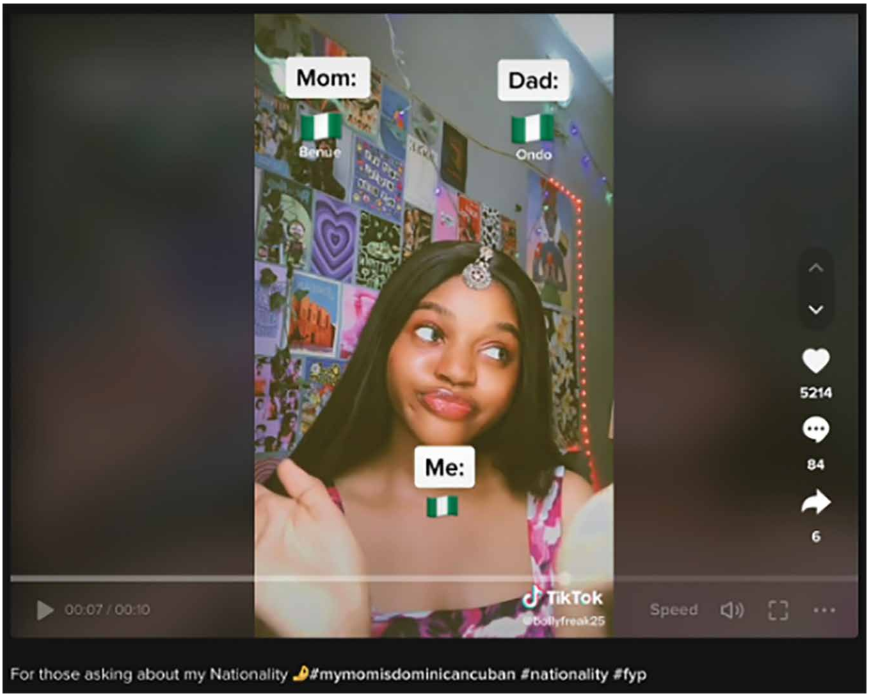
[9] Bollyfreak25, ‘For Those Asking About My Nationality’, TikTok, 20 March 2023. https://www.tiktok.com/@bollyfreak25/video/7077157645194448133.

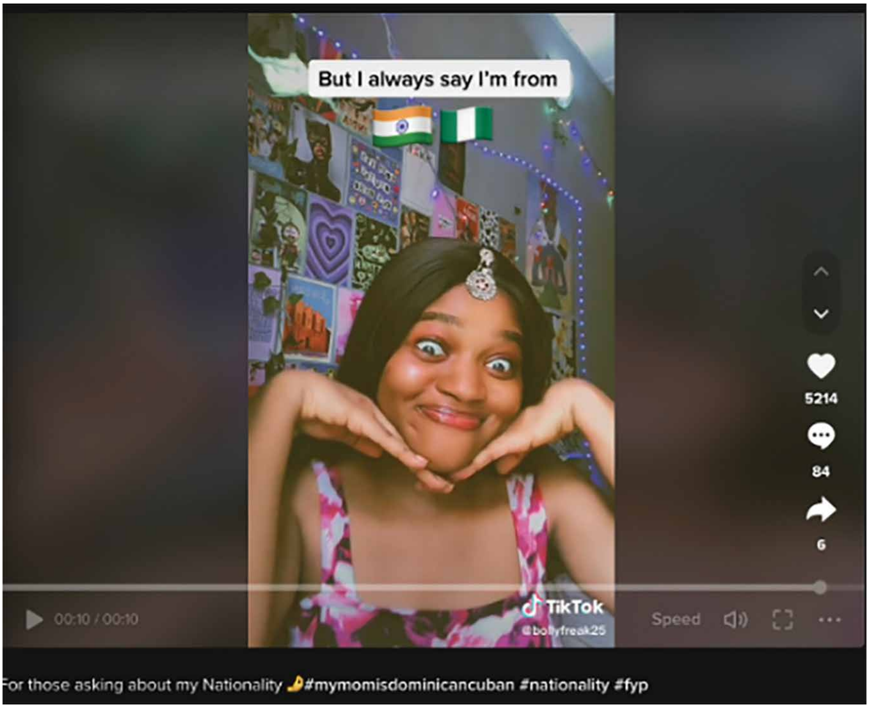
> One of the principal shifts in the global cultural order, created by cinema, television, and video technology [...] has to do with the role of the imagination in social life. [...] In the past two decades, [...] the deterritorialization of persons, images, and ideas has taken on new force [...] More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies.
>
> (1996: 53–4)

This deterritorialization of media via different screen technologies is now shaping a variety of ‘possible lives’ that can be lived and imagined across the



For those asking about my Nationality 🤌#mymomisdominicancuban #nationality #fyp

FIGURES 13.1 AND 13.2 *@Bollyfreak25. ‘For those asking about my Nationality’, TikTok. Posted: 20/03/2022; Accessed 21 March 2023. Available at: https://www.tiktok.com/@bollyfreak25/video/7077157645194448133.*


But I always say I'm from 🇮🇳 🇳🇬

For those asking about my Nationality #mymomisdominicancuban #nationality #fyp

globe. In this case, Bollyfreak25 imagines and fantasizes about her possible life as being of both Indian and Nigerian heritage – forming an imaginative and hybridic union of the two countries. We recognize that the term 'diaspora' refers to the physical and mass displacement of people from their homeland often due to war, political instability, or the search for economic opportunities. However, if we are to consider the impact that technology might be having on the dissemination of media globally, where 'the images, scripts, models, and narratives that come through mass mediation (in its realistic and fictional modes) make the difference between migration today and in the past' (Appadurai 1996: 6), we might begin to consider this as having certain effects, particularly regarding cross-cultural fandoms. Through the media that finds its place in fans' hearts via, say, mobile phone and television screens, migration is made possible with one's imagination, where one forms, over time, an identificatory homeland outside of the place of one's birth. A simulated diaspora perhaps, where a nostalgia for an unlived past and an alienation from within one's actual home country is felt.[10] The contemporary shifts in global media are affective in the extent that, for many fans, the ardent engagement of another culture's media might inspire cathartic and diasporic feelings without having experienced physical mass migration or dispersion, and yet one longs for a distant and foreign 'homeland' that is beyond their daily reality.

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[10] Deleuze: simulation 'does not replace reality [...] but rather it appropriates reality in the operation of despotic over coding, it produces reality on the new full body that replaces the earth'.

Krings builds on Appadurai's term, 'possible lives', which denotes the multitude of identities and aspirations that we can pursue in our place as subjects in a globalized world. For those with access to media-disseminating technologies, identity is no longer fixed; it becomes a practice of imaginative and agentic self-definition and identification. We are living in a time where other 'possible lives' are becoming readily accessible to those with a connected screen. Might that affect of diaspora or displacement be felt by those who find home in their creative imaginings of, and engagement with, media of another culture? Is it possible for people to become part of other imagined communities even though one does not live within its geographical borders? This could very well be a phenomenon of the internet, digital, 'screen' age.

This sentiment of cross-cultural longing for union becomes even clearer in one of Bollyfreak25's other videos, titled, 'A Bollywood Love Story', which is meaningful when considering the idea of postcolonial, cross-cultural possible lives and imagined worlds. The video opens to the popular Hindi song, 'Kesariya'. A woman (dressed in blue sari) and man (with a bindi and scarf) walk past each other, their scarves becoming knotted together as they walk past. This has become a trope of ZeeWorld fan creations (see also Paul Scata[11]), which references the Hindu marriage ritual of granthi bandhanam, where the bride and groom follow each other in a circle with their scarves tied by a knot. In this video (see Figures 13.3 and 13.4), the man and woman (played by Bollyfreak25) untangle the scarf only to find that their bracelets have also become knotted together. Upon untying the bracelet, the woman falls into the man's arms, and their necklaces become entangled. Intriguingly, on one of the necklaces hangs a pendant of the African continent, now knotted with the pearl necklace of the sari-wearing woman. A Hindi-African meet-cute. 'This is destiny', he says, as she coyly whips her braids behind her and walks away. The video is a 'mashup' response to ZeeWorld media and more widely Hindi film, as the song was taken from the film, *Brahmastra* (2022), which differs from the soap opera-type content that is available on ZeeWorld. Nevertheless, the video includes the hashtags #ZeeWorld and #ZeeWorldlovers, which shows that this content is designed to appeal to ZeeWorld fans, who represent a wider base of fans of Hindi media.

We might observe this as being part of a much larger phenomenon of romantic plots concerning Hindi mediascapes and Nigerians, the most popular recent case being, *Namaste Wahala* (2020) as an example of cross-cultural meeting between India and Nigeria. Here the two protagonists of this film represent the two countries respectively, in which their falling in love is accompanied with musical numbers that combine song, dance and dress from both India and Nigeria. Romantic and imagined narratives between Nigerian and Indian characters might be considered as forming a postcolonial union that is unconcerned by colonial British (and more widely, Western) influence. Translated as 'hello trouble', the film's title, 'namaste wahala', combines the two languages of Hindi and Nigerian Pidgin English. The sensuality of Hindi songs (Larkin 2000: 92) evoke and represent a level of romance and expression of love, connection, union that resonate across borders, finding union beyond colonial parameters – the joining of two members of a heterosexual unit in marriage, with ritualistic effect. Here 'marriages become the meeting points of historical patterns of socialization and new ideas of proper behavior' (Appadurai 1990: 292). This is a form of postcolonial hybridity that becomes reified in the performances by ZeeWorld fans on TikTok, to imagine possible lives where colonial influence does not exist.

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[11] Paulscata1, 'Bollywood Be Like', TikTok, 13 September 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@paulscata1/video/7007413778656627973?lang=en.

FIGURES 13.3 AND 13.4 *Tangled necklaces. Note the pendant of the African continent in Figure 13.3 @Bollyfreak25, 'A Bollywood Love Story', TikTok. Posted: 23/12/2022; Accessed: 21 March 2023. Available at: https://www.tiktok.com/@bollyfreak25/video/7180432158991994117.*

Mimicry and hybridity

We move on now to a discussion of another of Paulscata1's TikTok skits (see Figures 13.5 and 13.6) in which Scata, dressed as Pragya, calls her friend Tina to 'come to ZeeWorld street', as she has seen her boyfriend with another woman. However, Tina takes an eternity to reach her – a satirical nod towards the stylistic form of ZeeWorld series used to enhance their suspense – slow-mo running to the same melodramatic soundtrack used in ZeeWorld series. 'Six hours later', and Tina arrives at the scene to find Pragya, passed out on a pile of logs, after falling from exhaustion. This is typical of Scata's performances as Pragya across the body of his social media, where Pragya epitomizes feminine melodrama in ZeeWorld narratives, captured by her exaggerated breathing via her heaving chest, her frantic body movements and over-the-top reactions and, most prominently, her exclamation of the Hindi negation 'nehi!' meaning 'no'. The parody of ZeeWorld series is also enhanced further by the editing of his videos, in which freeze and replay scenes abound. That is, certain actions and shots are replayed up to five times to emphasize the melodrama, sustain audience interest and heighten the parodic suspense. These aspects form the language and syntax of ZeeWorld series that fans recognize in their appreciation of Scata's videos.

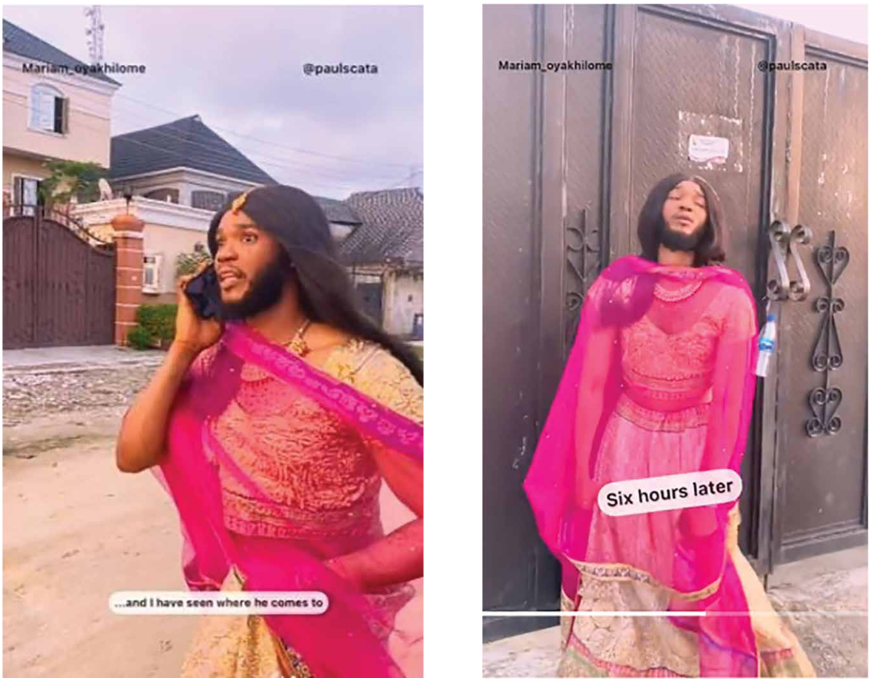
It should be noted that Paulscata1's performances emerge within a wider context in Nigeria of male-to-female crossdressers, such as Idris Onukeye, popularly known as Bobrisky, and Chief Imo, who similarly perform skits as women, as well as the phenomenon of Yan daudu in northern Nigeria, which translates to 'men who act like women'. Here we have different layers at play: the repetition and mimicry of gender performance (Butler 1999) and the repetition and mimicry of (post)colonial subjectivity (Bhabha 1994). Intriguingly however, the language and culture that is mimicked is not of the colonizer, but actively chosen from another culture that had experienced colonization by the same imperial power. In this case, 'the power of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and power' (Michael Taussig in Larkin 2004: 105). Scata draws on the power and character of Pragya as a force that can disrupt the logic and structure of postcolonial daily life.

We see the following displayed in these TikTok videos: style and clothing, language, religious ritual, and virtue and values pertaining to gender and marriage. These performances have the ability to playfully destabilize any political structures of empire that have established themselves and are considered to exist in Nigeria post-independence. As mimicry is a mode of becoming, where we can come to know ourselves through a distant, yet resonant, Other, what implications might there be, in a postcolonial, globalizing context, for this mimicry of an Indian, feminine archetype? There are different intersectional nuances at stake here as well – the fact that Scata is a young, assertedly straight, Nigerian man performing as an Indian woman caught in heterosexual and melodramatic narratives, in which Bollywood simultaneously represents the traditional and modern; the Indigenous and cosmopolitan. In Scata's mockery of the Bollywood representation of traditionalism, gender and familial roles, and romantic prudishness, he also acknowledged in his 2022 TVC interview the comments on his videos by Indian users calling him 'racist'. This is evidently a complex situation where different levels of power are at stake, in which, regardless of his intentions, his videos have viral resonance in which some users identify with or find offence in his performances.

As Fuglesang notes, Bollywood media evoke in its female characters 'virtues of sexual purity, modesty and obedience to authority' (1994: 169) This purity, modesty and obedience to authority of feminine characters is parodied by Scata, and yet has the offerings of something deeply subversive: an undermining of the structures of postcolonial reality, logic, and time via the excessive, spectacular and feminine icon of the Othered woman who threatens to undo the fabrics of society in her unmarried state. Playing with these themes and characters of ZeeWorld narratives also brings into question the destiny of young Nigerians and their relation to societal (and indeed familial) expectations of marriage and courtship.

One of the striking commonalities between the videos of our selection is the element of hybridity and mimicry, in which we see a curious blending of different cultures that actively blur binaries of power. For instance, in the video of the above discussion, the two major characters bear commonly used names in Nigeria and India. One is Tina (a likely shortened name for Augustina, Justina, Clementina or Martina, which are all Christian girls' names in Southern Nigeria). The other is Pragya, a female Indian name – which is presumably inspired by the existing character of Pragya in the ZeeWorld series *Twist of Fate*. When Tina arrives, Pragya has lost her memory from passing out and struggles to recall who she, herself, is. 'Who am I?' she asks. As a way of triggering Pragya's memory of who she is, Tina reminds Pragya of their 'favourite Indian song', to which a Hindi song accompanies the TikTok video. While the soundtrack used in the editing is Hindi, 'hari' (a term often used eulogically as a term for removing sins), Pragya has adapted the words to refer to a Southern Nigerian staple food made from fried cassava: 'garri, garri, garri!'. The accompanying lyrics are subtitled at the bottom of the video: 'there's no food sweeter than garri'.

This has the added element of relating to what Larkin identified in his study of bandiri musicians in Northern Nigeria, 'with its evangelical goal of using



FIGURES 13.5 AND 13.6 *Paul Scata as Pragya. @Paulscata1, 'Bollywood be like', TikTok. Posted: 03/09/2021; Accessed 20 March 2023. Available at: https://www.tiktok.com/@paulscata1/video/7003789678834896134?q=paul%20scata%20bollywood%20be%20like&t=1685366705742.*

popular Hausa songs and Indian film tunes to bring youths back to religious practice' (Larkin 2002: 99). The irony being, in this case, that Scata (originally Paul Ekejiuba), is from the Imo state in Southern Nigeria, and therefore not related to those practices of transforming Hindi songs for the purposes of Muslim praise. Instead, this is a praise of garri, a Nigerian snack food. We find this interaction to be particularly intriguing when considering the element of colonial erasure and memory, in which this scene might be interpreted as encapsulating the sensibility of being born into a postcolonial context, where one's cultural history and memory is revived via the thought of one's cultural food, and via the popular music of another colonized Other. This blending of culture (Nigerian food with Indian music and costume) ties more widely into a postcolonial ambivalence, to which we further our attention in this section.

Being the case that our chapter focuses on mimicry, it is important for us to further address the postcolonial issues that might be at stake here, in which mimicry and hybridity may be seen as the symptom of negotiating individual and collective independence from a history of colonization. As Krings observes (adapting Appadurai's concept of 'possible lives'), there are forms of mimicry that

> allow access to, participation in, and the experience of – essentially contact with – other 'possible lives'. The imagined possibilities offered by foreign media are therefore brought even closer to a local audience. Such mediations between the foreign and the familiar contribute to the construction of local modernities which do not deny their difference from the life-worlds they copy from; by copying from and contacting these very life-worlds, however, they also express a difference from their own past.
>
> (Krings 2015: 3)

The possible lives that Paulscata1 imagines and enacts in his performances display a similar mediation between the foreign and the familiar that expresses a difference from their own past via the copying of another difference culture. In particular, Paulscata1's hybridity is demonstrated through his costume and performance, in which Homi K. Bhabha's discussion on hybridity has framed our discussion here. Just as 'national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities – modern, colonial, postcolonial, and native' (1994: 152), we find this two be the case in one particular video of Scata's, in which, dressed as Pragya in sari and other splendid jewellery,[12] he is questioned by other female characters (all played by him, in different forms of Indian traditional dress) as to where he got his outfit from. The video parodies ZeeWorld in its use of repetition of one particular shot: Pragya with her heaving chest as she breathes exaggeratedly, a trope in many of Scata's videos, as a way of satirizing and parodying the female characters in ZeeWorld series with their hysterical reactions to seemingly trivial encounters. 'Where did you get this dress from?'; 'Did you steal it?' – Pragya exhales sharply – 'Did you rob a bank?' – Pragya exhales sharply – 'Where did you get this dress from?' – Pragya exhales sharply – and so on.

The editing of the two shots of repeated questioning and exhaling culminates and converges to create a dizzying spectacle of excess, until Pragya finally reveals that 'I got this [Indian sari] from Nigeria. Yes, Lagos, Nigeria'. The video then moves into a promotion for an Indian boutique shop in Nigeria, in which Scata is evidently advertising for a company of where to buy his apparel that he uses in his performances as Pragya. The video continues with Pragya wearing her usual heavily coloured dress and make-up

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[12] https://www.tiktok.com/@paulscata1/video/6991177208370892037?lang=en.

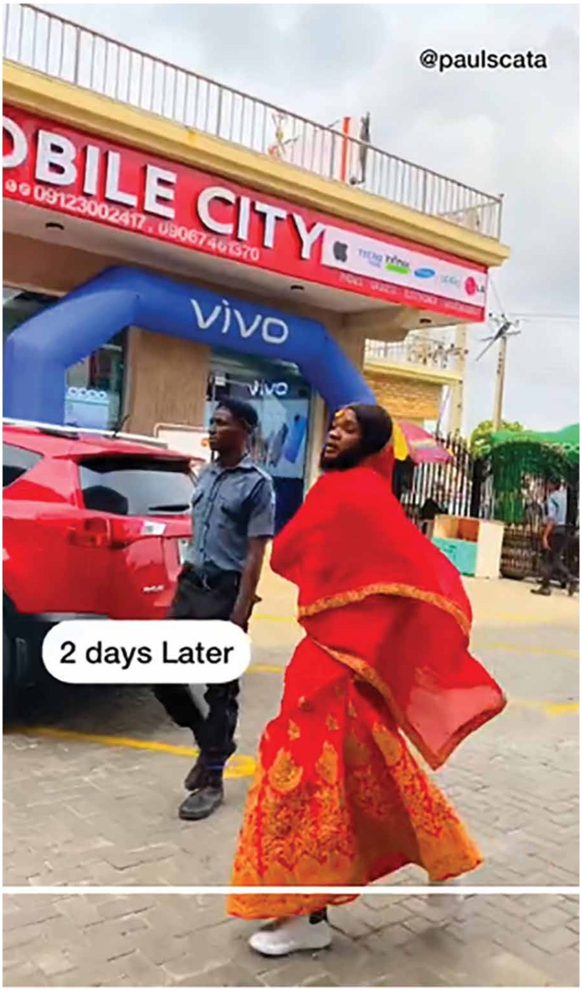

FIGURE 13.7 *Pragya walking. @Paulscata1, Untitled, TikTok. Posted: 31/07/2021; Accessed: 19 March 2023. Available at: https://www.tiktok.com/@paulscata1/video/6991177208370892037?lang=en.*

hybridically combined with white trainers, walking through Lagos in order to find the shop of his advertising (see Figure 13.7). The contrast of the gold and red sari with his white trainers that he wears teases us in its hybridic contrast between the traditional/Indian and the modern-capitalist/Western-colonized, providing an insight into new imaginaries that are formed in varying playful and postcolonial ways. As Scata's and Bollyfreak's videos show, these imaginative performances of Indian cultural pride take place within the context of modern Nigeria, often to comedic effect.

Whereas the colonizer imposes, the appropriator embraces, and the nuances of power need to be recognized here. This is an appropriation of one formerly colonized culture from another, in which Krings observes,

> If *appropriation* is defined as 'the act of claiming the right to use, make or own something that someone else claims in the same way' […] why should members of marginalized societies … appropriate things from elsewhere differently than members of hegemonic societies? And why should they not thrive on the 'borrowing of power' through their acts of appropriation? (2015: 17)

We agree with Krings' position that appropriation need not solely be an act of hegemonic reinforcement by cultures who once (and still do) occupy dominion: the borrowing of power can be directed towards those cultures that exude soft power. In this case, it is the borrowing of the soft power, cultural pride and spectacle that is visible in Hindi media.

We were intrigued to find these complex layers of imitation that occur when Scata dresses in traditional, Indian and feminine clothes in the surroundings of daily life in Nigeria. For instance, the humorous absurdity of Scata's performance comes through in his interaction with the people in his surroundings, in which he touches the feet of a Nigerian taxi bike driver and puts his palms together in Namaste greeting. This is in reference to charanasparsha, a bowing combined with the touching of feet, which is usually done as a sign of respect for one's elders. However, in this case, Pragya performs charanasparsha on random members of the public; a hybridic spectacle where ZeeWorld and Bollywood narratives are met with the mundanity of everyday life in Lagos. Rather than Paulscata1 imitating the culture and behaviour of the historical colonizer (which, in the case of Nigeria and India, was British), this is, evidently, an imitation of the culture and behaviour of another formerly colonized culture (India). From this, we observe the layers of complexity that seem to indicate a demonstration of post-independent power and presence, in actively choosing the culture of another country to imitate that had similarly been Othered by British imperialism. It therefore has the effect of subverting and challenging any persisting hegemonic influence in the agentic choice of mimicking the culture of another Other. Mimicry, in this sense, is 'a sign of inappropriateness […], difference [and] recalcitrance' (Bhabha 1994: 86). Here, Scata becomes hybridic in the sense of his costume which blends Western, Indian and Nigerian influences, thus revealing a postcolonial in-betweenness; an ambivalence that ultimately challenges colonial dynamics of power.

Finally, it should also be noted that Scata's mimicry of an Indian female could potentially be read as epitomizing the feminized subject in Orientalist discourse (Said 1978). In this sense, the power binary between colonizer and colonized is subverted further via the mimicry of the feminized Other, which, as such, offers to undermine the colonial logic further. Might it be an escape from the colonial and political shapings of contemporary Nigeria, to imagine and become an identity of a subject of another colonized country through a potentially pre-colonial fantasy? This is a complex and nuanced phenomenon, nonetheless, as the motives of Paulscata1 can also be read as ultimately furthering the trivialization of women and the media of their interest. This space of performance is liminal, as the characters exist in a space of both pre- and postcolonization: a world – or possible life – that exists outside of the Nigerian context in which Western historical and cultural imposition permeates at different levels. Hindi media may appeal because of the traditional ideals (via costume, ritual and performance) that offer an affront to (as well as the ability to become hybridic with) postcolonial modernity.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we reflected on the variety of layers that underpin ZeeWorld and Bollywood fandom in Nigeria as bearing curious significations when considering the shared and yet separate colonial pasts of India and Nigeria. We observed that the spectacularity of Hindi media and songs affords attention like no other in Nigeria, in which TikTok creators gain viral followings for their engagement with ZeeWorld tropes that are generally centred on gender roles, romance, marriage and melodrama. From this, we highlighted the element of mimicry and its relation to gender performance and drag as well as (post)colonial mimicry.

Here we argued that Hindi media offers an escape from daily life in Nigeria which has necessarily been shaped from its colonial past. By contrast, Indian culture becomes a defiant canvas on which Nigerians can project their desires for liberation away from the mundane restrictions of daily life – a field of possibility and imagination.

We would like to end our discussion with a reflection on how we came into this project, which essentially began as a seedling of inspiration from Gloria's students in Nigeria discussing their personal interests in ZeeWorld. Gloria and Fadekemi, both having roots in Nigeria, might be termed acafans ('academic fans') of ZeeWorld series, as they both regularly consume ZeeWorld programmes beyond the research context. Georgia, UK-based, more recently became a fan of Hindi films prior to this project, and was introduced later on to the world of ZeeWorld. Through this experiment, we became intrigued by the various overlaps between our respective fields and interests in which ZeeWorld was the magnet that pulled the fibres of our research backgrounds together. Firstly, Fadekemi's research into the costumes of Nollywood and their historical effects was particularly appropriate for observing creative fan practices and responses to ZeeWorld media and its characters. Conversely, Gloria's work into the representation of women in Nigerian media also laid some core foundations to our discussion in this chapter – particularly those surrounding women's depiction and reception via media and narratives within and beyond a Nigerian context. Finally, Georgia's research into UK-based cosplay and media fancultures added another layer into the mix, in which we began to consider another phenomenon at large: the phenomenon of media-based subcultures with members who are heavily influenced by a media culture that is separate from the context in which they were born.

Coming into this project, we grew to appreciate technology and its ability (issues of copyright and distribution aside) to offer different mediated worlds to anyone with a screen and internet access. Where previously the 'birth of the imagined community of the nation' might have arrived via 'print-capitalism' (i.e. the novel and the newspaper), by contrast, in the present day, screen media and internet technology have taken imagined communities (nations) to another level of accessibility, making it even more 'possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways' (Anderson 1991: 27). Technology has expanded the scope of imagined communities, and the case of Hindi media's offering of escapist pleasures to local Nigerian audiences is indicative of this. We are now increasingly afforded the choice to consume those media, cultures and media subcultures that we wish to consume, respond creatively to, and mimic; ever-becoming in our fanatic, cross-cultural and imaginative hybridity, scanning the global media screenscape for whatever else might captivate our interest.

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