African film in the 21ˢᵗ Century: some notes to a provocation

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Abstract

As a transnational cinema event, the release of Marvel Studios' *Black Panther* (2018) is arguably a monumental moment in the African experience of cinema. Coincidentally, this is followed in 2019 by the 26ᵗʰ edition of the bi-annual festival of Pan-African cinema, FESPACO, which will mark fifty years of the festival's existence. In addition to the programme of screenings, African filmmakers, critics, theorists, among others, are expected to gather in Ouagadougou to engage with issues of *memory*, *identity* and the *economy* in relation to the idea of a sustainable and diverse Pan-African cinema. These issues have long been prominently placed on the agenda of those concerned with African filmmaking. That they remain a preoccupation of current debates, suggests their persistence, and perhaps, an urgent need for these debates to move beyond the metaphorical polarities of 'dog eat dog' and 'dog eat nothing'. These 'notes' are therefore, in anticipation of new perspectives that would shape the futures of African filmmaking. Importantly, a perspective will be sketched to help frame an approach to the idea of Pan-African cinema as a global and transnational economy – cultural, financial and ideological.

Keywords: African film, *Black Panther*, Pan-African cinema, FESPACO, Nollywood, Wakaliwood.

Introduction

In the attempt to discover an agenda for African Film Studies as an institutional practice within Pan-African cinema, the position of films or filmmakers (where ever that might be located across the years since the exhibition of the first moving images) will have to be accounted for within the inescapable factors of Africa's history and ongoing social transformation. Here, we consider African filmmaking and the notion of a Pan-African cinema as an emergence over three historical periods to the present. The first period between 1895 to 1955 demarcates a moment from the birth of the moving image, encompassing the cinema's spread into Africa and its formalization within the prevailing regimes of colonial power. The establishment of the (British) Colonial Film Unit in the 1930s, and its African operations which were formally ended in 1955, symbolizes an overarching and dedicated effort to determine and to define the African presence in cinema.

The second period is framed between 1955 – 1995. In the context of major global political shifts, including the rise and triumphs of nationalist movements against colonialism and the emergence of new nation states, notably Ghana in 1957, the new African cinema presence begins to take shape. Paulin Soumanou Vieyra's *Afrique sur Seine* (Senegal/France, 1955), *Moi, un noir* (1957), Sembene's *La Noire de/Black Girl* (Senegal/France, 1966), and *Le Retour d'un aventurier* (Moustapha Alassane, Niger/France, 1966), are all notable. So too is the coming into being of the Carthage Film Festival (1966), FESPACO (1969) and FEPACI (1970).

This second period is equally defined by the first attempts to theorize an African cinema. Among the 'theoretical positions' (Zacks 1999) taken, Ferid Boughedir's 'The Principle Tendencies of African Cinema' (Martin 1982. 79-81) is an important intervention. These ideas were first presented in 1976 as part of Boughedir's doctoral thesis *African Cinema and Decolonisation*. Here, an attempt at 'a classification of African films, not by theme, but according to the theoretical positions of their auteurs and their effect on the public, that's to say, according to their ultimate function' (79) is introduced. Boughedir is responding to films made between 1963-1983. Later, a set of 'themes' are identified (Boughedir 1992), organised around an apparent 'confrontation' between 'old and new'; 'tradition' and 'modernity'. However, it is the way in which individual filmmakers have structured these confrontations in film texts and their identifiable tendencies that is Boughedir's concern. The term 'author's cinema' is used in this context to define the African films in existence. This seems more relevant in attempting to indicate the conditions within which the filmmakers operate: the general absence of an infrastructure for film production, rather than to place any individual filmmaker as an 'auteur'.

Manthia Diawara (1992) offers another approach that begins to develop a critical perspective on the conventions and iconography which suggests ways of defining what might be termed the African cinematic space. Diawara's categories are discussed with reference to 'narratives' (Ch. X, 140-166). His focus is on films made up to 1989 and their 'thematic diversification' which makes categories of recognizable narratives, as an element which offers significant appeal to different audiences. This approach distinctly goes beyond some of the apparent limitations in Boughedir's work, in engaging with the complexity of various texts, including issues of modes of address, spectator positions and narrative structure.

Another important contribution is made by Teshome Gabriel, who can be credited with globalising the idea of Third Cinema. Through his writings (Pines & Willemen 1989, Gabriel 1982), Gabriel developed the formative ideas articulated by Solanas and Getino (1969) in relation to Latin America, to encompass concerns of African cinema in particular, and 'Third world' films in general. It is also within this second period that issues of 'national cinema' become significant as the politics of the post-colonial unfolds, and the ideological influence of Pan-Africanism takes on an urgency.

The London conference, *Africa and the History of Cinematic Ideas*, signalled a significant point in 'the continuum of debate and discussion' (Givanni 2000. xii) on African filmmaking. Occurring as it did in 1995, the year marking the centenary of cinema, it also marked a critical juncture that would precipitate radical and rapid changes in technology and film culture, which would resonate to define the challenges of the twenty-first century. This includes not only Nollywood and all that is associated with its proliferation, but also a plethora of new aspirations and the demands of a 'New African Cinema Wave' (Diawara 2010), for example. The third period of 1995 to the present has produced an impressive body of work, of which Haynes 2016, Harrow 2013, Krings and Okome 2013, Bâ and Higbee 2012, Şaul and Austen 2010, Barrot 2008, Pfaff 2004, Haynes 2000, Harrow 1999, Barlet 1996, and Sherzer 1996, are indicative. Most of these are principally concerned with the influential presence of Nollywood.

There is still much to be done in foregrounding and correcting the unsatisfactory state of 'African film studies' (Petty 2012). As Haynes (2010) notes it 'is time to roll out the full disciplinary apparatus of film studies and apply it to video films' (13). By extension, keeping the issues and perspectives in historical focus is critical to the development of knowledge around 'the ongoing process of establishing national cinemas and a viable Pan-African film economy' (Bakari 2017. 201), in which the histories and filmmaking practices of Africa would have to be reconciled. As Deshpande and Mazaj (2018) write in relation to India, 'conflating all cinemas of Indian filmmakers into Bollywood misplaces a complex variety of representations' (145). Comparably, even as 'Africa is not a country', the deterministic labelling of one type or brand of films as being representative of, or authentic to an African cinema, is equally misplaced.

Black Panther and the future of African cinema

In contemporary culture, nothing has highlighted the African immersion in cinema as a global experience, more poignantly than the event of *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018). Across a wide range of responses, the phenomenon that marked the film's entry into film history suggests that a certain plateau, even if limited in scope and vision, has been arrived at in the global economy of film. As the records now indicate, this film set unprecedented records and established new benchmarks for the Hollywood blockbuster. From an African perspective, there is much that can be noted, not the least being the potency of cinema as a big-screen 'event'. Arguably, from the retrospective position of *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) an iconic (and perhaps ironic) counterpoint could be highlighted in view of the comparable epic scale, global reach and definitive discourse, of each text. Both films in many respects, can be seen to exemplify, possibly the highest achievements in cinema of their time.

In contrasting, but tantalizing ways, both films are significant moments in the 'reimagining of Africa'. *The Birth of a Nation* has long established its notoriety in film studies. This film is generally noted as the Hollywood production that along with its cinematic merits, is a prime progenitor for what a reviewer of *Black Panther* termed, 'the slew of other questionable Western cinematic attempts to deliver "Africa" on screen'. Similarly, in the same review, *Black Panther* is noted as 'an opportunity for continental Africans and diaspora to offload socially sanctioned climactic expressions of individual and collective excitement and expectations, (and) anxieties about a fictionalised Africa' (Ademolu 2018). As the history of African fandom will no doubt record, the worldwide release of the film instantly became 'a global event for black culture' as another reviewer observed (Chutel 2018). In the bacchanal of the occasion, the popular mantra that was both literally and metaphorically declared from New York to London, and all points encompassing Kisumu, Harare and further south, and looping back across the Caribbean, could be summed up as 'we are Wakanda'.

The film's first accolade is arguably its predominant Black cast, bringing stars who have box office potential alongside those termed as up-and-coming, and unknown others who would go on to gain a degree of stardom. The distinctly African discourse of its story and plot is also inescapable. Cultural references, colloquialisms, mythologies and the designed look of the film, suggested an unprecedented commitment to authenticity. For the film industry, *Variety* magazine (McNary 2018) reported that advance sales had set new records for Disney-Marvel's Marvel Cinematic Universe movies and outpaced 'all other first-quarter releases in the company's 18-year history'. The momentum gathered pace, to a crescendo of the film's worldwide simultaneous release on Friday 16th February. On 17 February, *The Hollywood Reporter* (McClintock 2018) reported that within twenty-four hours more records had been broken and film industry history was re-written, as '*Black Panther*

had already become the highest-grossing title in history at 33 AMC theatres in the USA'. The shattering of records trend continued, with USA box-offices 'grossing $192 million for the three-day weekend and a projected $218 million for the four-day Presidents Day weekend'.

Writing in *Time* magazine ('The Revolutionary Power of *Black Panther*', 11 February 2018), Jamil Smith seems to capture the moment, and anticipated much that was to follow across the spectrum of reviews and commentary offered in response to the impact of the film's release. The perspectives that have become evident are a reminder of dominant place of cinema (and audio-visual production) in contemporary life, in all of its global and transnational complexity. The critical discussion centres around a futuristic, mythologized Africa, whose authenticity offered validation and resonance in the contemporary popular culture of Africa and its diasporas. It is therefore instructive to note what may well be the sum of the initial responses to *Black Panther* in the moment of its release. In an attempt to capture the magnitude of the meaning of the moment, Andrew Stewart, a reporter and filmmaker writing in the radical magazine *CounterPunch* declared, 'Black Panther: Afrofuturism Gets a Superb Film, Marvel Grows Up and I Don't Know How to Review It'. By way of an introduction, his attempt to review the film was prefaced by the idiosyncratic admission that 'the film is a stunning, jaw-dropping work that defies every logical mode of analysis Your Faithful Critic would employ regarding any other film, including many other films made by Black directors and starring Black actors.'

Underpinning Stewart's review is the history of the Hollywood industry and its production of, and relationship to images of Africa and Africans across a range of identities. Inescapable and integral to this is the history and production record of Disney studios, the corporation that is the parent producer and property owner of the film. This is a complex history of a sophisticated industrial apparatus that has established itself over the last one hundred years at least. Within this time Hollywood has adapted to changing cultural circumstances. It has transformed itself in response to political and economic needs; and maintained itself in a position of dominance within the national institutions of the USA. *Black Panther*, with its black director and cast, emerges from this context as a major disruption, particularly in a climate where there is a persisting debate about whether or not 'black lives matter'. Yet, it should be noted that the now established *Black Panther* is a highpoint in a new stream of a Black presence in 'Hollywood' in this current century. Other films in this trend are *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Moonlight* (2017), *Get Out* (2017), *Girls Trip* (2017) and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018).

As the debates continue about *Black Panther*, the tendency towards a consideration of the construction and rhetoric of film as 'text' is significant. Issues stemming from the process of articulating what is being signified and the range of meanings that can be produced by as many different and diverse individuals, in as many contexts across

the world, appear to be of critical concern. Having proven the economic potential of a film with 'a predominantly black cast', Jamil Smith (2018) makes note of a more significant aspiration in relation to the USA, by highlighting a necessity for movies about 'black lives' as 'part of showing that they matter'. In relation to Africa, the reiterated history and politics of Africa and Africans in film, is amplified. This is indeed critical to any engagement with what can be termed 'African film' or a 'Pan-African cinema'.

Among the reasons that could be listed for the phenomenal impact of *Black Panther*, is a recognition of the epic scale on which this blockbuster conveys representations of Africans. The narrative foregrounds a recognizable subjectivity that meaningfully informs the mythology at the core of the story. Working within the discourse of the superhero, the characters display a sense of cultural autonomy not usually associated with black characters in the genre, or in 'Hollywood' cinema generally. The film's particular 'Afrofuturistic' aesthetic brings articulation to a cluster of performative tropes within popular culture around which contemporary intersecting identities are configured. As such, the film serves as an affirmation of an existing and already imagined autonomous African 'modernist' identity. As a cinematic experience, this is achieved in ways that resonated, not simply as a global reality, but also in ways that emphatically signified 'that our humanity is multifaceted' (Smith 2018), complex and indeed sophisticated.

The mystery of *Who Killed Captain Alex?*

It is therefore ironic that in considering the diversity of films made in Africa and by Africans over the decades, the complexity of the African experience and the efforts to establish an African presence in the global landscape of film culture, continues to be hamstrung in the paradigm of 'development' strategies and ideologies. These strategies are evidently managed to favour the perpetuation of 'poverty'. They tend to maintain the dominant ideology of the global status quo. A major contestation surrounding the African presence in the cinemas of this 'globalized' world, is therefore bound up with the ways in which speaking 'rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally' (Mbembe 2001. 1). Hence, across spheres of social interaction, and distinctly within the representations and expositions of cinema, there is an acknowledged presumption of a hierarchy of value and of being, that is predisposed to a notion that African expressions or manifestations of African agency are obliged to function within what Dovey (2015. 108) observed, from a Eurocentric vantage point in the instance of a Swedish/Ugandan encounter, is a 'fetishized racial difference'.

Mbembe (2001) in this discussion on the 'postcolonial', denotes a contemplation on 'power and subjectivity in Africa', and makes some observations that seem extremely useful to an understanding of the significance of how as a negative sign, the image and identity of Africans was structured into in the apparatus of 20th century audio-visual media culture. Hence,

> In several aspects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origins of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity. And Africa, because it was and remains that fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and what it thinks it signifies, is not simply *part of* its imaginary significations, it is *one of* those significations (2).

Mbembe is here introducing a foundational framework for a revised interrogation of the 'postcolonial'. A critical point relevant to the processes of cinema, may be deduced from conclusions offered on the '*idea of a common human nature*', in relation to the position and meaning of Africa. Mbembe may well have been writing about the structured location of 'Africa' within politics of global cinema by stating:

> By imaginary significations, we mean "that something invented" that, paradoxically, becomes necessary because "that something" plays a key role, both in the world the West constitutes for itself and in the West's apologetic concerns and exclusionary and brutal practices towards others (2).

For those of us who are students and scholars of cinema, the perversity and genius of Hollywood should be familiar. The potency and attraction of the narratives of this and other cinemas of the 'West' can be discerned by recall to narrative strategies, genre conventions, character representations and the regimes of stardom and glamour, that have come to prominence over the decades. Accumulatively, these constitute the paradigmatic matrix into which *Black Panther*, for example; the work of African cinema 'pioneers', as well as Nollywood and its progenitors, have become vectors for disruption, by both fate and design.

During the 1950s, a young French ethnographer found his calling in a transgressive use of the camera in his fieldwork. This was Jean Rouch, credited as a seminal figure in the French New Wave and architect of the cinema verité approach to documentary filmmaking. In developing his challenge to established practices in ethnographic filmmaking Rouch's work can be regarded as an attempt to redefine ethnography with or by using film/audio-visual technology. This work can be seen to have had consequences for the ethnography/anthropology fraternity, documentary filmmaking, and for African cinema. In the first instance, Rouch abandoned the

orthodoxy that 'the figure of the ethnographer guarantees the authenticity of the observation' (Eaton 1979. 48). Instead, he inscribed himself in the process, as a participant among those being studied and also as a factor in the 'data' produced. Whether or not he remained an observer mattered less than the fact that his 'participation', it was assumed, would yield contestable data to be presented for critical attention. As such, his work from the mid-1950s became 'orientated towards fiction film construction with methods of ethnological film' (Marie 1976.38). Eaton (1979), reflecting on a 1960s interview (*Movie*, no.8, April 1963), also notes that the systematic approach of Rouch could be described as one,

> '…in which Rouch plays a shaman, the master of ceremonies at a cinematic ritual, stimulating and entering the trance with the camera as the magician's instrument wielded so that a new truth can be revealed which is not the 'truth' of the pro-filmic event, but the 'truth' of cinema itself – 'cinema is the creation of a new reality' (52).

Notwithstanding Ousmane Sembene's critique of Rouch and his status in relation to African cinema (Murphy 2000, Diawara 1992); his films *Moi, un noir/Me, a black man* (1957) and *La pyramide humaine/The Human Pyramid* (1959) can serve as important reference points in developing an understanding of both 'Africa within politics of global cinema' as noted above; and dynamic processes that constitute African presences and identities in cinema as a modern global experience. These presences are shaped through encounters determined by various kinds of migration and travel. Hence, to elaborate on Cham (2004. 48), 'what constitutes African cultural, symbolic and intellectual thought' has been shaped over time by factors and forces from within and from beyond its continental boundaries. The process exists and continues as a normative means of cultural production and transformation. What has come into contention however, in the colonial and post-colonial epochs, are the terms under which the otherwise normative encounters have occurred, and the consequences of such.

Importantly, both *Moi, un noir* and *La pyramide humaine* are concerned with contemporary life in 1950s urban Africa. As is also evident the photographs of Malik Sidibe (Mali), the music of 'Highlife' (Ghana) or the chronicles of *Drum* magazine (South Africa), for example; post-war mid-50s to mid-60s African expressive cultures, as can be observed in aspects of cinema where it existed, exhibited tendencies towards 'an implicit subversion of institutionalized assumptions about Africans, and there is a sustained interrogation of the processes of (colonial) appropriation and domestication, which are constituent elements of modernity' (Bakari 2007. 503). These two films were shot in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. In *La pyramide humaine* Rouch attempts to find the 'real' perhaps, in the 'strained relations between Europeans and Africans at an Abidjan high school' (Stoller 1992. 46). It can be argued that because

of the ulterior motives embedded in Rouch's practice, which could be defined as ethnography by fictive means, the film loses both coherence of and relevance to that moment in an African society, when a camera was placed in a privileged position in relation to the life before it. The effort at the time, suggests an attempt to say something about the 'Europeans' in relation to the 'Africans', but little or nothing is said about either.

In *Moi, un noir* a different potential is signified. Referred to as an 'ethnofiction film' (46), a sense of collaboration is evident in the 'life and adventures' being depicted. Importantly, among the 'actors' is Oumarou Ganda who will go on to fulfil a significant role in an emergence of 'African cinema'. The 'actors' are described as being 'asked to play out their lives in front of the camera' (Eaton 1979. 8). In depicting themselves the 'actors' chose to present their 'life and adventures' through the constructed/imagined personas acquired through their journeys and encounters in the twentieth century urban milieu. Principally, the cinema is implicated.

Oumarou Ganda is therefore himself as 'Edward G. Robinson', others are equally themselves as 'Tarzan', 'Dorothy Lamour' and 'Eddie Constantine'. These are by no means arbitrary affectations, but signifiers of a certain literacy and knowledge, acquired as modern subjects appropriating and domesticating cultural 'goods' (Appadurai 1986) that are of value and use as means in the negotiation of their contemporary predicaments. The evident strategies of narrative construction and of representation can be seen to address the 'spectator' from the position of a 'performative' subjectivity. Equally, this subjectivity can be considered as being informed by knowledge distilled though a 'resistant spectatorship' and a transgressive subculture or counter-culture, which cannot be dissociated from the context of the imposed regimes of 'colonial' order within which life is experienced. The collaborative tendency that could be regarded as being 'accentuated' (Marie 1976) in *Moi, un noir* as a marker of the Rouch method, offers a very different and subversive proposition when viewed from the perspective of African participants. Thus, what comes to the fore is a number of assumptions and questions about cinema, its spectatorship, and its pleasures. Ultimately, this is about the ways in which African agency is claimed and used within and around the colonial/post-colonial apparatus, of which cinema has had a defining role.

The *Black Panther* moment is a significant instance of contestation within this apparatus. So too is Nollywood cinema, another significant counterpoint. These films are principally emanating from Nigeria, with Ghana also recognized as an equally important hub of influence. The impact of this 'most visible form of cultural machine on the African continent' (Krings and Okome 2013. 1) now makes its presence felt as a 'transnational practice' fuelling important national (Ethiopia, for example) and regional production (East Africa, for example). The sheer scale and reach of what is now known as 'Nollywood' has left film criticism and the established institutions that

would constitute an 'industry', struggling to reconcile the various evident histories of filmmaking with the demands for cinema in Africa and across its diasporas.

Today, Nollywood is a global phenomenon. It is 'pan-African', it is transnational, and in the age of digital technology, its influence continues to be registered, not least, by the ways in which it 'has served as a model of film production and inspired the growth of local film industries' (1). These local manifestations of the Nollywood influence are indeed much more than the proliferation of a model of success. What now calls attention among many aspects, are the complex and diverse expressions of 'national cinema' and the internal, regional and global engagement that the films of these nascent industries produce. One such national context is Uganda in East Africa. From this society has come what is arguably the most notable Nollywood-inspired film of the twenty-first century to date, *Who Killed Captain Alex?* (Nabwana IGG, 2010). It is widely recorded that the film was made for a budget of about $200.00. While its revenue may remain undetermined, its YouTube views stand at about 2.5 million, and 10.7K Vimeo (with accessible download) plays (August 2018).

The description of the film as being 'Uganda's first action movie' however, belies the complexity that should be apparent if a more considered and cinematically informed engagement is granted to the film, beyond its quaintness as an example of an idiosyncratic African ability for adaptation and appropriation. In its broad outline, the narrative concerns Captain Alex, ostensibly Uganda's top soldier, who embarks on a mission to destroy an adversary, Richard and his Tiger Mafia. Richard's crime organization controls the city of Kampala from a scattering of derelict and semi-built structures. Captain Alex does not get Richard but captures his brother. On getting this information all demonic hell is unleashed from Richard's mind, body and soul literally, as he sets out for revenge using 'action movie' means. His passion is pushed to, or perhaps goes beyond its limits when it is discovered that Captain Alex is found dead. It is even more infuriating that no one is sure who killed the captain. More 'action movie' methods are employed towards solving the mystery. These are executed in a cartoon-like fashion with the help, or not, of Captain Alex's brother, a Ugandan Shaolin Monk. The Ugandan military is however after Richard, and eventually tracks him down, (again) 'action movie' style. In the end, Richard is captured by the military (government perhaps) and the city is placed under martial law. The mystery of who actually killed Captain Alex remains unsolved.

The narrative draws on the characteristics of the action movie genre. It is also structured around a strategy of storytelling that features the 'veejay' as the principal narrative voice. Along with the central role of the 'veejay' voice-over provided by VJ Emmie, the spectacle that the film offers is built around parodic representations and exaggerated performances. Here, Hollywood, Hong Kong and Nollywood are all made obvious as counterpoints of knowledge, fantasy and spectacle.

From the opening minutes, the film's underlying motivation is made obvious. This is conveyed by a caption, which in effect signifies the filmmaker's determination to tell a film story against the odds and his intention to continue making films in spite of limited resources and technological capacity. Viewers are warned that they would have to make do with all that has survived of 'a lost film'. The original, as the caption states, was seen by audiences 'throughout the slums of Uganda' and now, all that was left 'is a low-resolution DVD master'. This we are told is due in part, to the 'harsh working conditions. But Nabwana IGG also erased his computer to be able to make his next action film…' With this, the sound track dissolves from background sounds of village life to the propeller rattle of a helicopter. Against the blank screen, the iconic sound-image of helicopter gunships from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) cannot be mistaken, providing of course there is pre-knowledge of Coppola's film. Where knowledge of that specific film is absent, any action movie would do. Such is the nature of contemporary audio-visual literacy. If there is any doubt about this, in *Who Killed Captain Alex?* there is enough to confirm the implicit candid approach to cinema and film culture.

In essence, along with the spectacle of what could well be termed a performative deconstruction of the action movie genre, the film thrives on the characteristic 'veejay', an East African innovation. The foundations of the Ugandan 'veejay' as a cinematic technique can be located around at least two significant cultural vectors. One is evident in the Tanzanian response to the popularity of Nollywood films, while the other is rooted in the consumption of 'foreign films' among African audiences, where European languages are still secondary to national or indigenous languages. In East Africa, particularly in Tanzania and Uganda, something special seems to have emerged. As Krings (2010) observes in the case of Tanzania, cultural producer or perhaps distributors, aimed to enhance the consumption of these films 'by tackling the biggest obstacle to their local reception: the English language' (77). This need gave rise to an act of 'remediation', involving not simply the presentation of a transcription or translation from one language to another, but significantly, the adding of new content. In the first instance, this may take the form of the dubbing of 'an additional sound track of Kiswahili voice-over and comment' (77). Additionally, in the context of a live presentation of this new content in 'video parlours' for example, the 'narrators' or the 'veejays' took on a definitive status in the mode of consumption that developed around the event of presenting the film and its new content, which includes 'ad-libbing, adding observations and personal commentary, and adapting the stories to a local hermeneutic framework' (Krings 2013. 306).

In practices that may be termed as 'transgressive spectatorship', the 'veejay' role can be mapped onto a contestation of the conventional assumption that 'the audience in a cinema room must watch the film individually and keep silent throughout the screening' (Bouchard 2010. 95). An innovation such as the 'veejay' can now be seen to include and to extend 'the practice of adding an oral commentary to popular film

screenings' (106). Here, Bouchard refers to instances where from the positions of colonial authority, 'commentary aims to control the film's discourse' (99); or alternatively, an 'Audience-generated commentary' that ultimately seeks to wrestle the text away from the (or any) authority and to achieve through interaction or identification, a more satisfying or appropriate experience of cinema. In Uganda and Tanzania typically, a type of 'events cinema' came into being with practices of spectatorship structured around the presence of the 'veejay' or 'video narrators'. Beyond the needs of African-American audiences that mainly inform the critical discussions of Bobo (1998), bell hooks (1992) or Diawara (1988) for example, there are indeed other viewing practices that have become necessary; and have come into existence on account of a wider need to exercise strategies of 'adaptation' and 'appropriation' (Dovey 2015). In *Who Killed Captain Alex?* this veejay's presence becomes a generic convention of Wakaliwood films and a subject of interest in the study of African cinema.

In the context of Uganda, *Who Killed Captain Alex?* emerges from the home village of Nabwana, Wakaliga, hence, the name 'Wakaliwood'. It is not an affectation, but the branding of a specific location of production. Here, Isaac Nabwana set up his Ramon Film Productions as a 'self-taught' filmmaker. Along with his fascination for action movies and Nollywood films, he would later, while producing his own films, attend Uganda Film Training Institute. Stepping up in 2009 from his music video productions that began in 2005, he produced his first Nollywood-inspired films *Valentine: Satanic Day* (2010) and *Tebaatusasula* (2010). Nabwana's work then established the Wakaliwood style and developed the production company in partnership with costume designer and make-up artist, Harriet Nakasujja his wife, and scriptwriter Isaac Ssempijja. Also, in 2010, the trailer of *Who Killed Captain Alex?* uploaded to YouTube attracted attention beyond Uganda, and gained Nabwana another partner, Alan Hofmanis, a former New York film festival director, who moved to Uganda to be part of the Wakaliwood operation.

In the progression of events, the screening of *Who Killed Captain Alex?* at the 2015 Fantasia International Film Festival in Montreal, Canada, was indeed important in garnering international interest around the film. Among the reviews, it was acclaimed as 'The Best Worst Film of 2010' (Judell 2015). Other reviews more or less applauded the film's 'homemade, no budget hallmarks' and other characteristics such as its humour and veejay narrator/commentary. Whatever the original intentions of the director may have been, Nabra Nelson (2018) for example, places *Who Killed Captain Alex?* as a 'cult film'. In presenting a case for such, Nelson offers the following proposition:

> *Who Killed Captain Alex?*, despite being a film, carries the target audience characteristic (and, in a certain sense, the seeming impermanence) of theatre. Nabwana created this film for and

with his village, with no desire or intention for widespread distribution. This, in fact, is a wonderful example of community engagement through art, and urges a reviewer to critique this film through a unique lens (Nelson, 2018).

What seems to be at work here is a quest for an equitable means by which to engage with the film and its meaning in terms of how it might be informed by, and what it says about both Uganda (Africa?) and contemporary cinema. If these considerations are valid, then *Who Killed Captain Alex?* is much more than a 'one film phenomenon'. The global and transnational context within which the film now circulates raises even more pertinent questions, especially when Nabwana is being referred to as an 'auteur', and an analogy is made with Quinten Tarantino. In this regard, it is instructive to note that Tarantino does not make films for $200.00. Neither, in spite of some popular mythologies, is he 'self-taught'. His knowledge of American culture and society is extensive. This includes a distinct immersion in Hollywood cinema and its genres. His particular adoration for 1970s 'Blaxploitation' films is legendary. Across his films, these influences are distilled through a lens of nostalgia and celebration, to produce a number of poignant *postmodern* statements about *his* America and his filmmaking. If Nabwana as an 'auteur' and his films (and such works similarly defined as a 'genre' or by their characteristic 'authorship'') are to be comparably appraised, then much more work is needed to historicize films within critical and epistemological frameworks that validate these texts as cultural expressions emanating from a diverse and complex African film culture.

In 2015, the year that *Who Killed Captain Alex?* arrived at the Fantasia International Film Festival, the reported perception among Ugandan filmmakers was that Ugandan films were struggling to penetrate the 'local market' (Kaggwa 2015a). In effect, their films were being shut out of the cinemas. Filmmakers like Donald Mugisha and Matt Bish, who had also been part of the resurgence that had begun around 2005, were having a very different experience to the Wakaliwood filmmakers. What unites these seemingly divergent experiences however, is the shared reality of African filmmakers operating in an indifferent environment where regulation is often punitive, and institutional support is non-existent, even where moderate levels of technology is accessible. It is however, instructive to consider that even when a film is produced under these challenging circumstances, its success could also rest on its failure to meet audience expectations. This was the reported response to another Ugandan production, *Wako* (Aaron Zziwa, 2015), 'one of the most anticipated films for 2015' (Kaggwa 2015b). The account of the response to the release of *Wako* is a reminder that contingent to the various experiences of success and failure that may be accredited to any across the spectrum of 'voices', is the factor of 'audience(s) expectations'. What it illustrates, and as is already evident in instances of 'new' Nollywood; is that the more the expectations of audiences are raised, the less they

will compromise and compensate for what may be perceived as aesthetic or narrative flaws – in a word, a shortfall in 'quality'.

Reading through Esan's (2008) 'ethnographic study of audience response to the Nigerian movies industry', an instructive factor is revealed about the underlying process of spectatorship. In determining or choosing what is to be watched, audiences seem to be responding to an initial common-sense 'need to relax or pass the time'. This can possibly, in a situation that offers an option in a London venue for example, be superseded by added considerations of 'value' and privilege that 'the mainstream', or proximity to it, would perhaps signify. Hence, in 'choosing to watch *Lucky Joe* at the Odeon instead of *Casino Royale*' a certain performance of 'defiance' and 'resistance' could be deemed to be embedded in the pleasure of the moment. Fulfilling this pleasure is always part of the logic of the economy of cinema. While genre films must be easily recognizable and accessible, there must also be enough novelty and innovation to maintain engagement and gratification. As Esan states, in relation to the volume of Nollywood films generally on offer, and the relatively limited replication and repetition of conventions that defines the main body of films, there is evidence to suggest that the 'audience preferred to be in a position where they could work at the construction of meaning'.

Ultimately, just as it is desirable that different audiences should exist for different films, the study of differentiated audiences and viewing contexts is invaluable to enhanced knowledge and of engaging with the potential for a dynamic film culture. Importantly, this work could be regarded as an opportunity to make a contribution to an epistemology that would serve theorization and the development of critical perspectives that would more usefully, for example, locate Nollywood as only one of the Pan-Africanisms we have. Thus, even within 'Nollywood' there is the inescapable fact that there is much to be gained by opening up spaces for filmmaking practices that respond to the diversity of Africa and its diasporic possibilities. In the contemporary situation of Uganda in 2018, filmmakers now speak of 'Kinna-Uganda', of which 'Wakaliwood' is only one characteristic of the national output. The Uganda realities that underlie what is noted here, can be seen to have regional as well continental commonalities. Across the various national contexts is the reality of filmmakers employing a range of practices and ideas to pursue their 'passion' for cinema.

There are a number of specific needs to be addressed urgently, towards achieving a more enabling 'economy' within which African filmmakers can exists. Here, primacy could be given to the importance of an approach that privileges the reconciling of the critical ideas developed over the decades around African films and the aspirations of filmmakers for Pan-African cinema. Equally, the challenge for a more rigorous and widespread film (media) education has to be addressed in a way that values both technical skills training and critical knowledge. This is a provisional proposition.

Wakanda in the bush of digital dreams

The overall intention of these 'notes' is to revisit the course that led to the present juncture in the twenty-first century where film culture in Africa can be found. The considered approach must be obliged to provide a historical periodization of the African experience of cinema as noted in the introduction. This is an essential part of the process of determining concepts and ideas that may be utilized whilst in the service of meeting the challenges presented by the persistence in the digital age of 'film', the proliferation of media products and experiences, and the enduring need for 'film studies'.

As a strategic reference point for the future, we should seek to understand Sembene's idea 'that his films should fulfill the function of a night school for their viewers' (Pfaff 1993.16). The 'night school' concept is explored by Opondo (2015) as an element that brings out the political significance in Sembene's work. This is very much aligned to a propagated intention to provoke critical thought 'about truth claims and power formations in Africa' (46). This stance deserves some interrogation in working through the possibility of mobilizing the concept as a critical tool. In this sense, there is the realization that the 'truths' to be contested are evident as their impacts are manifested within Africa, through the power formations by which they may be codified and are propagated. These axes of power are indeed pervasive and global; and can be read through audience positions.

As Dovey (2015) suggests, responses of popular audiences in the Ugandan context may confirm that acceptable readings of depictions of 'a ridiculous display of government power' is a 'clue to people's feeling about the political atmosphere' (103). However, in the Swedish-Uganda encounter at the core of Dovey's discussion, there is a tendency to normalize the European view ('gaze'), and to evade the fact that normalized European truth claims are also in the frame for contestation. In presenting Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) as a Ugandan cinema event, the efficacy of the veejay's reading of a depiction of suicide as being 'dumb' seems to be inappropriately oppositional. In this particular instance the 'crisis of truth' (Opondo 2015. 46) that is precipitated by the two contending discourses is made evident. The prerogative of 'authorship' and 'meaning', of the 'European artist' (Dovey 2015. 106) pitched against the 'Ugandan veejays' (107), is an issue of contention. In effect, the veejay calls into question the authority of the postcolonial state, as well as types of European mores (ideologies) that seek a privileged placed among the contesting forces that may be operating within such a state.

The 'night school' in Sembene's practice is perceived in terms of the view that an African cinema 'must teach' (Barlet 1998). There is however a recognition that his voice is only one among many. Thus, he makes clear, '…I'm not asking African cinema to be a reflection of my own cinema. There are lots of comedies that I also like. I

would like for everyone to have the right to express themselves as they wish…' (Barlet). The stance here is by no means utopian, prescriptive or dogmatic. In this regard the concept may be usefully utilized in an articulation of the idea of a Pan-African cinema that as suggested by Cham (2004),

> '…functions as a mode of entertainment. At the same time, it assigns itself a pivotal role in definitions, enactment, and performance of African notions of individual as well as community and humanity' (48).

As a meaningful term, the 'night school' being articulated, could be understood in terms of a cinema that offers possibilities for new types of 'time, space and authorship' (elaborating on Dovey 2015. 99) to be realized. This aspiration encompasses the quest for a more interactive (democratic?) and liberating social experience. It was a quest in which African filmmakers of the 1960s invested much hope; as they laid the foundations, however tenuous, for developments in African filmmaking practices. It asks for nothing less than an equitable environment within which film production can thrive - a foundation nurtured by investment that is financial, cultural and intellectual. What seems clear is that those who may today be referred to as new, emerging or up-and-coming filmmakers should have access to film education that would facilitate a more enabling institutional Pan-African cinema environment.

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