Digital Zoom on the Video Boom: Close Readings of Nigerian Films

Michael J. Laramee

University of Miami, mikelaramee@hotmail.com

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DIGITAL ZOOM ON THE VIDEO BOOM: CLOSE READINGS OF NIGERIAN FILMS

By

Michael J. Laramee

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DIGITAL ZOOM ON THE VIDEO BOOM:
CLOSE READINGS OF NIGERIAN FILMS

Michael J. Laramee
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Focusing on a selection of Nigerian video films—Living in Bondage (1992), Osuofia in London (2003), Saworoide (1999), Arugba (2010), Sitanda (2006), and Slave Warrior (2006)—and informed by in-depth interviews with four producer-directors, this dissertation establishes a model for combining industry contextualization with close shot by shot critical textual analysis in order to study products of Nollywood as individual films or works of art rather than solely as part of a phenomenon. After identifying an “arm’s length approach” in scholarship about Nollywood, a trend which identifies the video film revolution’s importance but does not incorporate close analysis of the films themselves, an “excess-exhortation” model is theorized, combining Larkin’s aesthetics of outrage with Adesokan’s aesthetics of exhortation, a union demonstrating the developing pattern of the creation of excess being mitigated with an exhortatory or didactic sequence which serves to then re-emphasize cultural or religious beliefs. In addition to conceptualizing this excess-exhortation model as a prototypical pattern exemplified by the landmark Living in Bondage, the employment of reflexive techniques, narrative structure, cinematography, editing, and sound in Osuofia in London, Saworoide, Arugba, and Sitanda will be focused on as an instrument of meaning creation in a manner seldom associated with Nigerian video films. Furthermore, Saworoide and Arugba are contextualized as important and sophisticated films by Tunde Kelani which demonstrate
the producer-director’s artistry as an extension of his Yoruba culture. Finally, *Slave Warrior* is analyzed and situated as a Nigerian Diaspora film which combines realist and anti-realist aesthetics and challenges spatio-temporal conventions.
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Chapter 1  
Introduction: New Paradigms of Nigerian Film Criticism  

Statement of Purpose  

Throughout the twenty-first century, calls for new paradigms and reassessments of the state of African film criticism have been made by scholars and critics including Nwachuckwu Ukadike, Martin Mhando, Jonathan Haynes, Foluke Ogunleye, and Kenneth Harrow to name a few. During the same period, the burgeoning Nigerian film and video industry, often referred to as Nollywood, has been recognized in academic spheres for its substantial output of low budget, narrative-driven, serialized, popular videos that balance elements of film and television. While the initial paradigms of thought concerning African film concentrated on works made on celluloid that have been indoctrinated into the metanarratives of postcolonial film history, in areas like Nigeria, where compounding economic, social and infrastructural factors all but eliminated the hopes for expensive film production, a revolution of video filmmaking had established new trends of inexpensive production which has now developed into a twenty year old industry (1992-2013). Precipitate trends in criticism about Nollywood acknowledged the potential of digital media in Africa, often noting the staggering number of Nigerian productions released weekly or annually as familiar critical talking points. However, further research into the specific content and context of the films themselves has been comparatively less frequent, consequently presenting a void in the world of film study.

What are the reasons behind these foresights in the research of Nigerian films, and in turn of African film? The answer usually boils down to a lack of production value that discourages one from watching a sizeable amount of videos. While it is incontrovertibly
true that many videos suffer from a myriad of technical issues amidst an uncertain and competitive market dominated by distributors, this dissertation intends to explore a selection of films that more than exceed these low expectations by innovatively carving their space as individual works of art within a commercial industry. As affirmed by Ogunleye, “Serious academic effort must be expended on [the Nigerian film industry] to elevate it from the current position of a mere craft and change the pariah status it occupies” (“Preface” xi).

In the twelve years since the first book entirely focused on the Nigerian film industry, Haynes’ revised edition of Nigerian Video Films, there have been few in-depth analyses of many Nigerian films even as the industry has continued to reap more critical attention. While scholarly research and criticism related to Nigerian film has increased with works like Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria and Viewing African Films in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution, deep critical readings of individual films remain comparatively scarce. When the films themselves are explored, thematic and solely content-based approaches have typically dominated over discussions about form and cinematography. For example, Manthia Diawara’s African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics examines Nigerian video films in a section entitled, “Nollywood: Popular Cinema and the New Social Imaginary,” where the author discusses the films and spectator reactions as a whole. Even in the section “Toward a Narratological Approach to Nollywood Videos,” the only film with even a paragraph devoted solely to it is Living in Bondage; there is even an equivalent amount of space discussing Frederic Jameson’s essay on Sidney Lumet’s Dog Day Afternoon (1975). Also, the edited collection Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in
Nigeria includes fourteen brief one or two page “film profiles” that are informative but remain content-based, barely scratching the surface of the films before discrediting some aspect of their production.

But these brief analyses, while opening seemingly promising doors, typically remain concise and discussions about cinematography or the synthesis of several filmic elements are intermittent at best. Other than a couple exemplary critical pieces—Haynes’ work on Nnebue and Akin Adesokan’s study of Kelani—to be discussed at greater length in this dissertation, representative in-depth film analyses of Nigerian films are surprisingly absent from most literature on the subject. In this dissertation, I am labeling this trend in Nigerian film criticism as the “arm’s length” approach which acknowledges the video film’s interesting and important role in the world of global and local film but does not incorporate close analysis of the films themselves into their work. Nonetheless, these recent works have demonstrated and suggested that rather than simply mentioning that a booming industry exists “over there,” or surveying and summarizing recurring narrative themes across a large sample size of video-films, a methodological shift to close readings of individual films or small group of films from video boom countries like Nigeria and Ghana can open critical avenues that have been largely ignored by scholars in the United States.

Method: The Importance of Close Readings

After conducting my research on Nollywood, and following the recent work of Nigerian film scholars like Adesokan, Haynes, Onookome Okome, and Brian Larkin, this dissertation argues in theory and practice that one successful new paradigm desired and
partially delivered by critics and researchers of African cinema could emerge paradigm desired and partially delivered by critics and researchers of African cinema could emerge serious attention to the video film in Nigeria and Ghana as a source capable of establishing and fostering exciting new insights into the world of African film and video. As I will argue and demonstrate throughout the following pages, deep, shot by shot, contextual analyses which treat video films as films, with significant attention to the manner by which not just the industry as a whole but each individual product creates meaning in cinematic terms and as works of art, can provide a new methodological and epistemological foundation for the role and location of the individual Nigerian video film(s), which lacks close attention, within film studies. Therefore, after reviewing the relevant literature pertaining to Nigerian films and African film study, following Haynes’ plea for “deeper readings of the films, approaching them as works of art with adequate interpretative sophistication” (“Preface” xvii, original emphasis), this dissertation will closely analyze a series of films—Osuofia in London (2003), Saworoide (1999), Arugba (2010), Sitanda (2006), and Slave Warrior (2006), as well as a brief analysis of Living in Bondage (1992) as the prototype Nollywood film—as case studies which place each work both within their proper historical and socio-cultural contexts and within the framework of film history. Overall, my argument is dependent on the identification and emphasis of unique and innovative aesthetic and didactic qualities, as well as reflexive cinematic characteristics within each film chosen for analysis.

In doing so, I will draw from postcolonial theory, including the work of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam on multiculturalism and media, but in conjunction with popular African arts theory and along with the conceptualizations of a handful of Nigerian film
scholars who have addressed the theoretical and aesthetic contexts of the video films in similar terms. However, while identifying and reaping the knowledge and theoretical concepts laid down by these important scholars and critics is important, it is the manner in which the texts themselves are considered and analyzed which I believe enables the types of insights, connections and contextualization developed in this dissertation. The “arm’s length” critical approach inherently establishes boundaries between what academics are willing to seriously watch and what popular audiences consume. Rather than creating barriers by constructing or reinforcing walls between academic viewing and popular viewing, the Nigerian film industry provides the groundwork for the space in and through which such walls can be deconstructed when close critical readings are the method of engagement. As I will argue, not only are Nigerian video films worthy of serious study in the manner which film classics have historically been treated, this methodological shift would enable for a host of new studies and interest in Nollywood productions as films capable of artistic expression, as a result possibly moving Nigerian film criticism in a new exciting, potentially productive direction.

Challenges/Obstacles

As Barrot mentions, “it would be unrealistic to attempt an exhaustive study” of Nollywood considering the thousands of films that would need to be viewed, many of which are debatably “disposable,” as he puts it (Barrot, xi). However, when watching closely even a film originally considered “disposable” can provide or reveal significant insights upon viewing or reviewing. After watching dozens of Nollywood video films, trends undoubtedly begin to develop among films and production companies, but more importantly certain works stand out from the sea of titles, and the aforementioned films...
are a sample of those exceptional works. The reasons for choosing the aforementioned films and directors for this dissertation are multifaceted and their respective value will be elaborated upon in the coming chapters, but the decision was made after watching hundreds of Nigerian video films produced from 1992-2007, as well as purchasing Tunde Kelani’s entire film catalogue vis-à-vis bank wire to Nigeria. This fact speaks to one of the inherent problems when studying the industry: the difficulty and unreliability when trying to find and purchase films. While it was comparatively easy to purchase Kelani’s films while abroad, the plethora of different websites and even distribution outlets in areas like New York and Atlanta typically only carry a selection of recent films; obtaining older films takes a significant amount of legwork, even if contacting a filmmaker directly. However, while a particular film being sought may be challenging to obtain, hundreds of other films are always at the consumers’ fingertips, requiring hundreds of hours of viewing to familiarize one with even recent productions. While these difficulties inevitably arise, and limitations are typically ingrained into the study of Nollywood, there are several books (regardless of depth of film reading) which provide information on the types of films yet, as the trend has been established, marginalize Nollywood video films on account of their collective low production value and ultimately discourage the scholar or researcher to extend themselves in order to seriously engage with the films and the industry.

This initial disheartening research obstacle can be overcome to a certain degree, however, if traveling to Nigeria for fieldwork. Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of Nollywood and its filmmaking environments, I visited Nigeria to conduct in-depth interviews with prominent producers and directors—for example Tunde
Kelani, Izu Ojukwu, and Teco Benson—about the industry in general, their careers, and with specific focus on the films to be discussed in this dissertation. Furthermore, I conducted an interview with New York-based Nigerian filmmaker Oliver Mbamara to discuss his *Slave Warrior* in the context of the Nigerian film industry. Overall, the interviews were very structured and focused on individual films. In addition to the interviews, I visited film markets, personal studios, and locations while experiencing the general conditions and daily lives of filmmakers in Lagos, Enugu, Abuja, and Yola. All of these experiences help inform my experiences of the films themselves, and they are a major aspect of many works by scholars like Haynes and Barrot, but ultimately the incorporation of directors or producer statements interwoven into my analysis of the films is an important tactical approach which strategically combats the “arm’s length” approach. By including statements by directors and producers, rather than marketers or spectators, the analyses focus on particular films and thus intrinsically consider a Nollywood video film as an individual work which deserves extended interest over time, not just the few weeks it is permitted on shelves before the next selection of recent film are presented. These filmmakers’ statements, then, are used not as a point of reliance, but one of recognition, of acknowledgment, which grants their statements value in relation to treating their films as works of art and in turn classifying them as artists, even as auteurs. Furthermore, largely stemming from my interviews with Tunde Kelani, Izu Ojukwu, and Teco Benson, a discussion of quantity versus production quality, and the idea of the individual director championing a secession of ‘quality’ filmmakers from the corruption and highly “piracized” markets and normal distribution channels, became
pertinent in this dissertation, exemplifying the fruitful nature of such deep exchanges while pointing toward possible new directions in the industry’s future.

New Paradigms

In the preface to his recent book *Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism*, Kenneth Harrow articulates what he believes to be the current state of African film criticism among Western scholars. Harrow writes: “It is time for a revolution in African film criticism. A revolution against the old, tired formulas deployed in justification of filmmaking practices that have not substantially changed in forty years. Time for new voices, a new paradigm, a new view” (Harrow xi). With his book, Harrow begins with this “space-clearing gesture” (xiii) in which he questions the history of African film criticism and suggests epistemological and methodological alternatives. However, the “new scaffolding for a future approach” (xiii) which he lays out in the pages following still concentrates on canonized African directors like Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambéty, and Souleymane Cissé, whose work respectively merit several academic studies but do not exactly constitute the base for new paradigms.

Harrow is admittedly invested in “reversing the patterns of dominant thinking that have controlled and limited approaches to African cinema” (xiii), but he does not break free from another pattern of focusing on directors who have been indoctrinated into some narratives of film history. On the other hand, Harrow does acknowledge the importance of African video production by specifying this revolution in African film criticism should include, “Something trashy, to begin, straight out of the Nigerian video handbook” (xi),
and he seems to suggest their inclusion is essential under a new direction for African film criticism. However, contending that Nigerian video films are synonymous with trashiness is not necessarily a productive move, and he later comments that he does not include video films in his study despite their contemporary significance. This gesture of recognition yet avoidance is common in African film studies, one which inadvertently marginalizes such films while implying their popularity does not qualify an academic study, or that their value is solely popular.

Even Harrow’s suggestion to resituate notions of postmodernism into African contexts seems to suggest video films would make ideal postmodern African texts ripe for analysis. Harrow writes:

> The African postmodern is being generated in our times as a function of African cultural responses to globalization, to the late capitalism that has seen both the disintegration of the possibilities to create a widely-viewed, serious, politicized African cinema, and the explosion of a popular and accessible African video-cinema that eschews the earlier values of engagement. (Harrow xv)

By including the above quote yet excluding analyses of video films from his new critical framework for “Postmodern African Cinema,” Harrow effectively intimates that he leaves nearly as much space as he clears, a move that must not only leave room for reinterpretations and a newly developed focus on the same films but also a complete reframing to a different set of films that persistently get mentioned in the narrative of world cinema yet lack significant close-ups.

**Theoretical and Contextual Models: The Prisms of Popular Arts and African Cinema**

But why is this tendency of recognition yet avoidance, this “arm’s length” approach, common to the study of Nigerian film? A survey of the literature related specifically to
Nigerian films helps better expose the ambivalent responses to this complex industry over the last decade or so. In 2002, Nwachukwu Ukadike, a giant of African film criticism tackled the “inadequacy of contemporary critical methodologies for dealing with African cinema” (xix) in his *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with African Filmmakers* by publishing a selection of interviews that allow filmmakers to speak about their practice in their own words, rather than being saturated by theory and filtered through dense academic language. Ukadike focuses on classic directors of African cinema, including two Nigerian celluloid directors but no Nigerian video-film directors\(^1\) (*Questioning African Cinema*). This is understandable considering the scope of that project, but a year later Ukadike addresses the development of video film industries in a rather denigrating yet complicated manner when he notes how the video boom has produced vibrant commercially-driven film industries, or *First cinema*, within Nigeria and Ghana, African environments where films have historically been instruments of art and politics (“Video Booms” 126). However, at this stage Ukadike, like many critics, was reluctant to classify such video films as anything but First cinema, writing that “these videos are grounded in an unapologetic commercial culture and seem quite indifferent to the social responsibility agenda of contemporary African cinema” (“Video Booms” 140).

In these instances, Ukadike generalizes thousands of films as socially irresponsible, which is true of some, but in doing so sets a tone for African enthusiasts that neglects films and filmmakers which I argue succeed in making quality films that demonstrate an intersection of commercialism, artistry, and a social or political consciousness.

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\(^1\) Ukadike does include an interesting interview with Kwah Ansah, Ghanaian director who used video technology in the production of his *Love Brewed in an African Pot* (1980).
However, despite Ukadike’s ostensibly strict classification, his article still demonstrates how the study of these video phenomena is one particular area where productive examinations of such intersections can be made by probing the space between first and third cinema (as terms defined by Solanas and Getino\textsuperscript{2}), in turn demonstrating the malleability of such categories at the outset. In the same article as his criticisms, then, Ukadike does give credit to the films for several other reasons such as their ability to facilitate social mobility by employing many women in the industry and demonstrating “commendable experimental breakthroughs” (“Video Booms” 129-133). Perhaps his strongest endorsement of the positive effects of the video boom is their accomplishment of “transcending the inability of the celluloid film [in Africa] to cultivate its own audience/film culture” (“Video Booms” 131), even if the films draw from universal themes in his opinion, framing the industry as “a maneuver against the representational authority of celluloid filmmaking” (“Video Booms” 140). He goes as far as stating “it marks the proliferation of \textit{artistic expressions} no longer bound by extant distribution/exhibition systems,” giving the films the label of “artistic expressions” (140).

A few years later Ukadike was a member of the academic circle attending the Nollywood Rising Conference, a joint meeting between Hollywood and Nollywood figures, in which it was agreed upon that “the conceptual frame that constituted African cinema has to be dramatically rethought” (Larkin, “Nollywood Rising” 109), emphasizing the need for a new paradigm that specifically included a space for video films. However, despite these notes of encouragement, Ukadike’s weighty words and emphasis of commerciality over

\textsuperscript{2} Solanas and Getino discuss “\textit{first cinema}” as bourgeois consumer cinema, “synonymous with spectacle or entertainment,” “\textit{second cinema}” as “author’s cinema” in which non-conventional language and somewhat liberated filmmakers present an alternative to \textit{first cinema}, and “the \textit{third cinema}” as a “cinema outside and against the System,” of revolution and of the masses (33-43).
artistry initially contributed to the thinking that the video films as a whole are interesting through the scope of sociology but less worthy of individual examination in the world of film study.

This is not an uncommon initial response to the early onslaught of videos made in Nigeria, and scholars like Haynes have expressed from where this sentiment may have evolved:

The theoretical context that supports their [Nigerian video-films] study is quite different from the themes and paradigms that have governed the criticism of African cinema. The emergence of the video films has an entirely different social, political and historical character from that of African cinema. A local, popular, and commercially based phenomenon, it has been unheralded on the international level, with no ringing manifestos. (“Introduction” 5)

Haynes roots these tendencies in historical practices: “Whereas French colonialism and neocolonialism vigorously pursued a policy that has kept francophone Africa in close contact with official French cultural bodies, British colonialism tended to leave culture to the private sector, and so Ghana and Kenya as well as Nigeria have favored commercial popular cultural forms” (“Introduction” 5). The resulting criticism would often be “more sociological than political or purely aesthetic” (Haynes, “Introduction” 10). Austen and Saul address the consequential reasons Nigerian film criticism largely became the arena of fields other than film studies, and considered as wholly separate entities from celluloid art films in educational settings:

Students of Francophone African art films have largely been humanists, concerned with cinema aesthetics but also very attentive to ideological issues that many of these works address very explicitly. Videos, on the other hand, have been perceived as an apolitical emanation of popular culture, subject to the scrutiny of social scientists (mainly anthropologists)
or, in humanities faculties, of ‘media studies’ and ‘cultural studies’ specialists. (2).

Austen and Saul do mention the “common denominator in all these research efforts has been an attention to the economics of film production” but even that intersection served as a means of underscoring how dissimilar the resulting products and industries have become (2). That this seemingly strict categorization segregated the two “schools” of filmmaking into distinct educational roles in universities is not surprising considering the early perspectives and fruitless comparisons with celluloid filmmaking; however, this dissertation argues these classifications require serious amendment, especially since the adoption of digital technology, vis-à-vis in depth readings of Nigerian video films which accentuate aesthetic qualities, didactic techniques, and reflexive characteristics seldom mentioned by film studies scholars in association with Nollywood, and rarely a focal point of social science.

Nonetheless, providing film scholars with a different early perspective on Nigerian cinema than Ukadike, Haynes’ aforementioned decade-old yet groundbreaking book, *Nigerian Video Films*, addresses critical difficulties when studying the Nigerian industry initially with the use of the term *video film*, and by suggesting “they [Nigerian films] are something between television and cinema, and they do not fit comfortably within the North American structures of either” (“Introduction” 1). His work consistently offers validations of the importance of the Nigerian video film as a distinct form of African audio-visual expression and as an academic subject, ultimately reiterating that the video films are “the strongest, most accessible expression of contemporary Nigerian popular culture, which is to say the imagination of Africa’s largest nation” (“Introduction” 2). Furthermore, Haynes argues, “they are a prime instance of the
interpenetration of the global and the local through the international commerce in cultural forms…and they are a prime instance of African modernity” (“Introduction” 2). Haynes even suggests that other fields have begun restructuring the manner in which they view African social and economic issues: “Political theory about Africa has been suggesting alternatives to the monolithic, bipolar model of the imperialist world system created by dependency theory” (7).

Recently, though, Haynes has addressed the typical academic study of Nigerian films as inconsistent and homogenized in approach from a couple different disciplinary backgrounds, while being not fully integrated into Film Studies as compared to other international film industries (“What is to Be Done?”). He notes how anthropologists have produced a large amount of scholarly articles with both a “humanities-oriented disciplinary character” in which a study “discusses a few films or the general Nollywood phenomenon in light of theoretical concepts or thematic concerns emanating principally from postcolonial or gender studies,” as well as culturally-based approach in which a video’s relationship to society is analyzed textually and in terms of media effects (“What is to Be Done?” 12). He elaborates on the “lack of context” displayed in a standard case:

…there is little reference to the body of work that has been done in this field of study…and such an article deals with only a couple of films, plucked as if at random from a flood. There is no attempt to situate the films, explaining and justifying their selection and their representative character. (“What is to Be Done?” 12)

While Haynes believes this body of work “ranges from brilliantly illuminating to perfectly useless” (“What is to Be Done?” 12), he interestingly mentions how these types of analyses do not require direct contact with the culture or fieldwork, often repeating
homogenized or distanced readings which clearly demonstrate what I referred to as an arm’s length approach.

Haynes then particularly takes the field of Film Studies to task claiming the discipline is reluctant to “bear with full force on the videos” (“What is to Be Done?” 12). One particular symptomatic review from an established African film scholar exists in Diawara’s *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics*, in which the author refers to the main character Andy Okeke as Ichie Million, a character whose party he attends early in the film (Diawara 181). While Diawara’s work does make a number of important points about both celluloid and video industries in contemporary African settings, only an arm’s length approach would not only produce this dissociative review but also facilitate its publication without correction. Haynes attributes this lack to the dissociation of film studies with Nigerian and Ghanaian universities and a poor historical sense of archiving Nigerian films in the United States as well as around the world, but most importantly to the differences in quality that have thus excluded the video films from “institutions of (celluloid) ‘international cinema,’ as constituted by the international festival circuit, international art cinema houses, and international film distributors, and even shut out of the ‘African cinema’ subset of those institutions, as constituted by FESPACO, ArtMattan, California Newsreel, and so on” (“What is to Be Done?” 12). Haynes maintains, “we have hardly begun doing the work of describing them in the normal ways applied to other film cultures (“What is to Be Done?” 13), suggesting paying attention to the works’ formal properties as a base, one which is employed consistently throughout the chapters of this dissertation. For example, the shoddy but common characteristic between Nigerian film articles is the tendency to refer to films by
title only, disrespecting the films’ context of production by not granting the director or producer creative agency and conflicting with the notion of auteurism, in turn dis-servicing interested scholars wishing to further research the topic (“What is to Be Done?” 14).

However, recently one work, 2011’s *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics* by the author and critic Adesokan, diverts from these critical trends by devoting a chapter to Kelani in which *Thunderbolt: Magun* (2000) was analyzed in depth in a manner that grants the film status as an artistic work made by an important director while still accounting for the dire contexts of production. Adesokan, a well-accomplished and versatile scholar, situates Nigerian video-films and celluloid African films within the same study, making important connections between the two styles rather than simply pointing out differences. Adesokan continuously *Thunderbolt: Magun*’s complexity, pointing out that “Kelani’s deliberative, thoughtful, lush, and culturally sophisticated streams of images are something of a rarity” throughout Nollywood yet are present throughout the director-producer’s 20 year career in video film production (*Postcolonial Artists* 81). Adesokan undergoes an in depth analysis, which will be explored in greater depth in chapters three and four, positioning Kelani’s film “as an aggregation of the dominant trends in [Nollywood]” and labeling it an “aesthetics of exhortation” (*Postcolonial Artists* 82), a model which leaves space for the intersection of artistic, popular and didactic functions of West African popular art. He also claims this filmic category can be considered “neotraditional cinema, in which the apparatus of an expressive culture is put on display for didactic and educational purposes” (*Postcolonial Artists* 86), in this case Yoruba cultural teachings.
In addition to an in-depth reading of Thunderbolt: Magun, Adesokan situates the film within the director’s milieu, maintaining that Kelani’s work features the noteworthy characteristics including “a complex address to Nigerian political society from the standpoint of Yoruba expressive culture,” experimentation with “allegorical and “popular” forms,” and “overt didacticism.” (Postcolonial Artists 83) Ultimately, Adesokan makes a strong case for how many of Kelani’s films do create an aesthetic of exhortation, positing how audiences are addressed with a sort of moral injunction resulting from the belief that “a dramatic or narrative text is thought to be fundamentally about notions of good and bad conduct and, in exhortatory and didactic registers, subsumes every aspect of human relations to this basic theme” (Postcolonial Artists 82). Moreover, Adesokan’s analysis takes shape vis-à-vis an auteurist framework informed by the history of African popular art, rendering his review the prototypical examination of a Nigerian video-film with an international impact. Similarly, another chapter-length study on Kelani’s work, which particularly focuses on Abeni 1 & 2 (2006), The Narrow Path (2006), and most useful for my arguments and scope, Arugba (2010), is Gbemisola Adeoti’s “Border-Neutering Devices in Nigerian Home Video Tradition: A Study of Mainframe Films,” which highlights themes of cultural nationalism while recognizing pedagogical patterns and a focus on exposing and reflecting upon corruption within a medium with massive transnational capabilities (Adeoti 27-28). Furthermore, Adeoti’s emphasis on Arugba’s incorporation of the common Kelani theme of conservatism versus progressiveness, or how “forces of change” conflict with traditional values (Adeoti 33), familiar subject matter across Nigerian video films as well as African cinema.
But while the international recognition and festival appearance for Nigerian films have increased in the time since the publication of Haynes’ book, the challenges they still pose to African film criticism have continued to be highly debated. Far from being explicitly involved in movements of decolonization typical of post-independence African cinema, the Nigerian film industry, with Yoruba, Hausa, English and Igbo language films among others, is decentralized and reflects several cultural manifestations that point as much or more toward regional and ethnic ties than toward nationalism. As Haynes again suggests, “the radically different basis of Nigerian video films thus makes them not just an interesting comparison to the rest of African cinema but a singularly convenient subject for theoretical orientations that want to look past or around the African state” (“Introduction” 8). Overall, the monumental presence of the Nigerian film industry as a contemporary form of dominant local and global media has, if nothing else, called to attention “how much the African cinema that reaches European or American shores is mediated in ways that make it comprehensible to foreign audiences” (“Introduction” 5).

Productive Theoretical Contexts

One area relevant to the video films that is familiar to African film studies and postcolonial theory are the tropes of multiculturalism. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, in their collection *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, make important distinctions about the term multiculturalism that must be taken into account in order to frame the Nigerian film industry as both comprised of many cultural influences while operating as a multicultural product. Shohat and Stam “distinguish between the multicultural fact and the multicultural project” with the former reflecting “the obvious cultural heterogeneity of most of the world, to the multiple ethnicities, languages, and
religions of countries like India or Nigeria” (“Introduction” 7). Nigeria’s three major ethnic groups, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, are one indication of the multicultural make-up of the Nigerian film industry, but the country’s colonial history and contemporary postcolonial reality are responsible for the many cultural influences that have helped shape the form and style of the films themselves. For example, the bulk of Nollywood productions famously demonstrate a mixture of Hollywood genres and serialized television programming, melodrama resembling Latin American telenovelas and the Anglo-American soap opera, West African oral traditions, the Yoruba Traveling Popular Theater, and the strong association of Hausa films and Bollywood musicals, indisputably creating a palimpsestic bricolage of formal influences that will be unpacked in more depth in the following chapters.

But another aspect of how Nigerian films function returns to Shohat and Stam’s conception of the “multicultural project,” which “entails a profound restructuring of the ways knowledge is produced through the distribution of cultural resources and power” (“Introduction” 7). Such a notion is extremely crucial in a post-colonial environment like Nigeria, where regaining agency and authority over representation is an initial step in unforgetting the past and reappropriating power, similar to the projects undergone by Third-Worldist filmmakers in the wake of independence in the 1960’s and 1970’s. In Unthinking Eurocentrism, Shohat and Stam claim, “Multiculturalism decolonizes representation not only in terms of cultural artifacts—literary canons, museum exhibits, film series—but also in terms of power relations between communities” (5). By including film as one of the mechanisms by which power is negotiated, it is reasonable to
claim that the same medium is best equipped to combat past misrepresentations with the power to once again self-represent (Givanni).

One characteristic of Nigerian films that is familiar to African film criticism and post-Third Worldist theory is the syncreticism or creolization clearly evident in the content of the films. Haynes lays out a simple definition of creolization as “an active historical process whereby new cultural forms are created out of the interaction of two or more cultures, with a center-periphery power context, with an asymmetry in power and prestige but with the periphery playing an active role” (“Introduction” 20), a concept familiar in many postcolonial environments marked by the influence of several cultures, especially in the modern globalized world. Drawing from the work of Hannerz, Haynes discusses two varying types of creolization, saturation and maturation, with the former being marked by a domination of foreign influences and the latter indicative of a society with more agency in their adoption of foreign culture (“Introduction” 20). Some of the elements borrowed from abroad by Nigerian filmmakers are rooted in the frequent use of melodrama, influenced by the American soap opera, the Latin American telenovela, and Bollywood films. However, these forms work in combination with indigenous art forms like the aforementioned Yoruba Traveling Theatre and original Igbo Onitsha Market literature to create a creolized, syncretic form of Nigerian melodrama with local and global roots (Haynes, “Introduction” 22-23).

Rather than using classics of African cinema history and the associated criticism and Third-Worldist theory as a barometer for the value of Nigerian video production, however, Haynes maintains that a more useful critical prism through which to view the industry and individual films is the paradigm of African Popular Arts and Culture.
Haynes and Okome cite Karin Barber’s “Popular Arts in Africa,” for her definition of such arts: “Popular art can be taken to mean the large class of new unofficial art forms which are syncretic, concerned with social change, and associated with the masses” (Barber 23), so the notion that popular art works through competing cultural influences to produce a syncretic or creolized whole is integrated into how these works should be framed. Barber credits this syncretic characteristic as one of the fundamental defining features of popular arts, as “its most central and positive stylistic imperative,” and explains that such arts negotiate meaning through an in-between space, borrowing from both indigenous and European forms, “to operate in a kind of no-man’s-land between the two, selecting and combining elements from each for their own purposes” (12). Furthermore, the syncretic nature of these forms, and in the case of this dissertation on Nigerian video films, consequently indicates that “cultural brokerage” is an element of their ontology and a foundation for theorizing about the popular arts (12).

But Barber additionally explains their value beyond a syncretic nature: “Popular arts are also much more than constellations of social, political, and economic relationships—they are expressive acts. Their most important attribute is their power to communicate. This power is eloquently testified to by the frequency with which they are repressed” (2). Barber refers to their enormous communicative capacity and, partially due to their wide appeal and “power,” the probability that such a mass message could be challenged by authority. Throughout her work, though, she continuously emphasizes the significance of examining and understanding such “expressive acts” as texts worthy of in-depth study:
Interpreting what popular art forms say is not straightforward. They require as careful and scrupulous a decoding as any other complex text. Whatever the difficulties, however, this task is of vital importance: because for the majority of African people, the arts are the only channel of public communication at their disposal. (2)

Barber further clarifies that the value of understanding such popular arts does not simply stem from their widespread reception but also what and how the individual works communicate. She writes, “To know what, and how, they communicate requires above all that we respect their specificity as works of art” (Barber 5). She points out how the intersection of the popular and artistic is clearly evident because “the expression popular arts itself indicates that this field has built into it two closely allied dimensions: the sociological popular and the aesthetic arts” (5). Well aware of the complexity and multiple definitions of each term, Barber makes it clear that the two should not be considered as mutually exclusive categories when examining African popular arts, or nearly any cultural product associated with either class. She makes the case for how this integration of sociological/popular and aesthetic/arts approaches would take shape by maintaining, “The arts cannot be "read" without both comprehending their nature as aesthetic constructs with their own principles and conventions, and locating them in the specific social universe which is the grounds of their existence” (5), therefore attesting for the need of both close readings of the films as works of art and with attention to the various contexts—historical, cultural or ethnic, economic, political, industry-based, or social—in which they were produced.

Ultimately, framing such cultural productions as aesthetic acts or performances that communicate important ideas to a mass audience is a predecessor to developing the argument that the intersection of the popular and the artistic is by extension inherent to
Nigerian video films. In the end, the theoretical framework of African Popular Arts allows one to effectively place the massively popular Nigerian film industry within a lineage of works, stemming directly from the Yoruba Travelling Popular Theater, which are worthy of study due to having been marked by an intersection of artistry, socio-political consciousness and mass appeal. In doing so, these ideas directly conflict with the notion that Nigerian films lack such consciousness while defying the classification of First and Third cinema as completely separate ideological categories.

Textual Models of Aesthetics

Shohat and Stam devote a sizeable portion of *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, including a chapter titled “Esthetics of Resistance,” to films that demonstrate this power shift by attempting to “synthesize radical politics with alternative esthetics, in a double and complementary movement embracing form and content” (10). Describing this category of film, Shohat and Stam also explain “that they transcend an exclusive concern with nation” (*Unthinking Eurocentrism* 10), differing from mostly all post-independence African classics from Nigeria, Senegal, Zimbabwe, or Guinea-Bissau to name a few, but not from the ethnically-based Nigerian industry with Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo or English language films establishing particular conventions and aesthetics. This category includes a number of films that constitute “a varied constellation of oppositional strategies,” some of which apply to the Nigerian video film as I argue throughout this dissertation. For example, they write, “This spectrum includes films and videos that bypass the formal conventions of dramatic realism in favor of such modes and strategies as the carnivalesque, the anthropophagic, the magical realist, the reflexive modernist, and the resistant postmodernist” (292). Specifically, this dissertation will analyze moments of
magic realism and the carnivalesque in describing the anti-realist aesthetics of resistance demonstrated by the prototypical Nigerian films such as *Living in Bondage* and *Osuofia in London*, as well as reflexive elements to frame scenes from *Saworoide, Osuofia in London*, and *Slave Warrior*, making the case for the sophisticated synthesis of form and content in each film. Furthermore, the concepts of magic realism and the carnivalesque will be synthesized with Brian Larkin’s notion of the video films’ “aesthetics of outrage,” as well as the notions of creolization and media jujitsu, each theoretical model providing a prism of thinking which aids the argument that the films are complex works of art. For example, I will argue that the complex narrative layering in the creolized film *Osuofia in London* demonstrates a form of media jujitsu in that it “steals elements of the dominant culture and redeploy them in the interests of oppositional practice” (Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* 328), mainly the narrative framing as an ethnographic film as a means to *unthink* the influence of colonial discourse of African primitivism.

Situating the Film and the Audience

It is evident from one film to the next that the “videos reflect the ambient poverty” (Haynes, “Preface” xv) present across the country, but the same could be said for the scarcity of celluloid production in all but a few African countries like Senegal, South Africa, Egypt and Burkina Faso. In the case of Nigeria, general poverty, corruption, structural readjustment programs, overpopulation, and lack of resources are frequently cited as the primary contributors to the contemporary condition of the country as a whole, including the decline of celluloid filmmaking. Larkin explains, “Contemporary Africa is

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3 See Afolabi Adesanya’s “From Film to Video” as one exemplary source discussing the downfall of celluloid production in Nigeria leading to the adoption of video technology.
marked by the erosion of accepted paths of progress and the recognition of a constant fight against the insecurity of everyday life” (*Signal and Noise* 169). But he maintains that “Africans do not merely exist in a state of permanent crisis, the crises themselves generate modes of cultural production and forms of self-fashioning that address widespread feelings of vulnerability” (Larkin, *Signal and Noise* 170), and makes it clear that the rise of the video phenomenon is indeed one of these productive responses.

Haynes appropriately draws from Fabian, who discusses the nature of popular performance in an African setting like Nigeria by affirming “the kind of performances we find in popular culture have become for the people involved more than ever ways to preserve some self-respect in the face of constant humiliation, and to set the wealth of artistic creativity against an environment of utter poverty” (Fabian, 19). Such performances, first in the Yoruba Travelling Theater and later in the video films, are among the most noteworthy cultural products that exist both within and in response to general poverty and stark surrounding conditions.

One area Larkin pays particular attention to is the “collapse of state economies and the rise of informal markets” which in turn foster the pirating of Nollywood products, writing, “The roots of all Nigerian film in piracy means that the physical quality and look of Nigerian video film has been determined by the formal properties of pirate infrastructure” (*Signal and Noise* 230). But when examining this deep-rooted informal structure, which has certainly contributed to the poor quality images and sound of many films as well as becoming the bane of the existence of many filmmakers who battle the illegal sale of their work daily, Larkin views the effects of the activity as not completely negative, framing piracy “not simply in legal terms but as a mode of infrastructure that
facilitates the movement of cultural goods” (*Signal and Noise* 14). It is also the cause of the trend to serialize films, according to producer/director/distributor Teco Benson, who claimed in order to combat pirates filmmakers have had to make multiple parts to films to reap multiple profits (Author Interview). Ultimately, Larkin sees this movement as essential in the wake of the failure of formal infrastructures, while simultaneously marking the need for the development of new infrastructure.

However, despite the focus on poverty surrounding the context of Nollywood productions, the narratives are still argued to often cultivate a form of desire of wealth despite the less than lavish production conditions. It is referred to how the stories commonly attract spectators, suturing them in with “the décor of the living rooms, the nice cars, great clothes, R&B and other popular music, and the special effects” (Diawara, 170). Diawara intimates how desire for the aforementioned materiality is cultivated and how Nollywood films “now represent an unconscious collective desire” for Nigerians, other Africans and members of the Diaspora (172). However, Diawara also explains the inherent contradiction with such desires as many viewers also view these marks of upward mobility as “sources of evil and corruption” throughout society (180). This relationship, according to Diawara, develops out of a spectator-filmmaker contract:

> The spectator of a Nollywood film knows that what happens to some of the characters may seem unbelievable to some people…The spectator knows that the world is complex and that anything is possible. If in Nollywood unbelievable things happen, it’s because we know they can actually happen to people. That is the basic contract Nollywood—and every popular cinema in the world—agrees on with its spectators. (Diawara 172)

But while the events of a given film may all feasibly occur in the world outside the film, and the films may forge identifications with characters and lifestyles on the screen, is the
popularity of the films not also based on the spectators’ knowledge that they are in fact films and not subject to the rules and laws of reality? In fact, a study conducted in 2006 among University of Lagos students suggested “many youths also wanted more realistic themes for Nigerian home videos” (M’Bayo and Alao 295), thus insinuating something different from Diawara’s assertion concerning the relationship of the films to reality.

Nevertheless, Diawara is right in stressing that “these fantasies, narrative desires and allegories” are a major factor in the appeal of Nollywood films, and that some events that may seem unbelievable could happen (African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics 172). But more importantly, as Okome details in his overview of Nollywood criticisms, Diawara represents the stance of “first generation African filmmakers” towards Nollywood which ultimately “locates the politics of critical engagement outside the realm of popular culture while also recognizing Nollywood as a kind of artistic expression that caters to another Africa” (“Nollywood and its Critics” 31). This sort of wavering between acknowledging the importance of Nollywood and marginalizing its arena of operation through the creation of a hierarchy, or at the very least a border, by which African celluloid films are granted superiority and video films inherently devalued. Furthermore, Okome notes that Diawara “attributes the success of Nollywood to ‘money’” (“Nollywood and its Critics” 31), a critical stance which completely dismisses the notion that images, sound and cinematographic angles could contribute to the films’ popularity, consequently painting the industry with a broad brush. The elements that he does not discuss—sound, camera angles, and image quality—are precisely the elements that if appreciated would force audience members to acknowledge one is in fact viewing a film and not reality, a story told through a specific medium. Overall, Diawara’s
argument consequently diminishes respect for and attention to formal characteristics and becomes something of a sociological study rather than a film study. Barrot, as well, similarly believes “watching a video-film from Southern Nigeria⁴, there is not a trace of aestheticism or poetry” (Barrot 25), as if the role of these fundamentals of filmmaking needs no attention, never mind discussion. Conversely, it is these elements that I wish to emphasize in my film analyses in this dissertation, arguing that their sophisticated use of cinematography, sound, and form are worthy of deep readings.

Brian Larkin’s thought-provoking interdisciplinary study *Signal and Noise* offers a different view of the spectator-film relationship for Nigerian viewers of Nollywood films. He first argues that the films “draw on ideas of emotional, financial and spiritual corruption that index the vulnerability and insecurity of contemporary Nigerian life” (Larkin, *Signal and Noise* 13). While Diawara notes the films are “full of elements that facilitate the projection of the spectator’s fantasies and fears on screen” (170), Larkin’s argument focuses more intently on the fear than the creation of a “collective desire.” Larkin writes:

>[The films] rely on an aesthetics of outrage, a mode of cinematic address that rests on the outrageous abrogation of deep cultural norms to generate shock and anger the viewer. Resting on norms of melodrama, these films provide fantastic narratives about Nigerian life in order not just to reflect that life but, by evoking bodily reactions, to constitute a living experience of this as well. (*Signal and Noise* 13)

As Larkin points out, his argument overlaps with Linda Williams’ “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” in their concentration on bodily reactions and emotions experienced by spectators, in Larkin’s case the relationship between viewers and a Nollywood

⁴ This comment thus excludes Hausa videos from northern Nigeria.
production. Larkin focuses on the artifice, the fantasy, stating the films are “rooted in the extravagant, inflated world of melodrama” (*Signal and Noise* 169), but not the potential realism as a driving force of their popularity like Diawara. In effect, Larkin’s notion of the “aesthetics of outrage” contends that films do create a melodramatically-induced style by which they operate as films and not simply as a repository of narrative-based desires to be transferred to the real world. He later appropriately summarizes the typical Nollywood films’ relationship to realism by suggesting they “ground hyperbolized events in very real, everyday situations of poverty” (*Signal and Noise* 189), poverty usually juxtaposed alongside excessive wealth focused on by Diawara. As a result of this melodramatic style and conjecture concerning how spectators relate to the films, Larkin believes that “outrage works through a mechanism of distancing: characters are involved in actions so horrible that one cannot identify with them” (*Signal and Noise* 189).

Therefore, his analysis posits that the majority of films, no matter the quality, foster a relationship with spectators which is not bread from desire but rather “revulsion” (*Signal and Noise* 190), thus differentiating his and Diawara’s viewpoints. Overall, I believe Larkin’s argument is crucial in advancing the idea that many Nollywood films do capitalize on a particular style of excess by articulating and theorizing a stylistic model, even if he does not emphasize cinematic characteristics other than narrative structure and themes.

By and large Larkin seemingly grants the films a more complex role than Diawara but mainly discusses them as a larger whole, dealing extensively with Northern Nigerian Hausa films which will not be included in this dissertation, rather than as individual works of art, commerce, entertainment, education, social reflection or at the intersection
of each. Still, he does not devote any significant amount of the book to specific films and again tackles them all together outside of brief analyses. Nevertheless, in both arguments strong connections can be made with characters and even a “living experience” is forged by spectators of a typical Nigerian film, largely as a result of gripping, emotional, melodramatic narratives, with little or no attention to other cinematic elements.

Attempting to summarize the nature of the industry and its products, Wole Ogundele writes:

[The Nigerian film industry] is full of contradictions that ordinarily should not hold together but somehow do: crass opportunism and commercialism mixing with and inseparable from some flashes of true art…the dullest and most plodding productions contesting for the same space and attention with, and (by sheer force of numbers) overwhelming, the few that are good and original.” (Ogundele 90)

This is not the most glowing review of the films as a whole but Ogundele does acknowledge the presence of original, artistic works amidst the onslaught of piecemeal productions and contradictions. But while his remarks acknowledge the existence of such works, they also emphasize how films with lower production value and least creativity both outnumber and essentially engulf the creativity and quality that does help create the Nollywood landscape, not exactly an optimistic perspective for these works’ perseverance.

Even Haynes clearly states that videos lack the “visual poetry of true cinema” but “contain a staggering amount of narrative energy” (“Preface” xv). It is hard to deny that such statements are not true of the bulk of films made annually, suggesting that their there is much more to be learned about this developing story. In an article addressing the state of African film criticism, Niels Buch-Jepsen writes, “The critic needs not just to ask
questions, but to ask new kinds of questions, independently of any ideological veneration of the established filmmakers” (Buch-Jepsen, 2004). In this spirit, and despite this inconsistency of quality, a step back from production-value based arguments must be made in order to ask one of these new kinds of questions: Is the “visual poetry of true cinema” the meaning and solitary goal of filmmaking? And more specifically should Nigerian films be striving for such accolades in absence of the technology and finances used to achieve technical mastery? Perhaps by striving for something that may be uniquely different, and by telling stories at any cost, Nigerian video films have laid the foundation for a scaffolding of new critical methodologies to handle films of a different kind.
CHAPTER 2

Industry Aesthetics: *Living in Bondage* and Excess-Exhortation as Prototype for Subversion

In *Nigerian Video Films* (2000), the first book-length study of Nollywood, Haynes identifies and explains a number of narrative patterns and stylistic trends common throughout the industry’s first handful of years, many of which exist in the industry’s landmark Igbo film, Kenneth Nnebue’s *Living in Bondage* (1992). While it is has been repeatedly noted that “Yoruba traveling theater artists began making video films in 1988,” Igbo films were not far behind as Haynes and Okome document the crucial role of “Igbo businessmen” in the institutionalization of a market based on video cassette sales, even noting that “Kenneth Nnebue, then an electronics dealer and film promoter, led the way” (55). Nnebue began working when he left school before seventh grade, becoming an apprentice and trader of handbags in Onitsha Market before moving to Idumota Market, the predominant focal point for Nigerian marketers (Haynes, “Nnebue”).

While Igbo in heritage, Nnebue’s early career involved strong “inter-ethnic” and “international” “social ties” with an “urban outlook and desire for profit” (Shaka 45), the latter of which becomes a fulcrum around which his early films thematically revolved. Femi Shaka notes how Nnebue’s “production outfit, NEK Video Links, started out by experimenting in the production of Yoruba language based video films such as *Aje Ni Iya Mi* (1989) and *Ina Ote* (1990),” but that they were not as profitable selling mainly to Yoruba populations. Haynes also mentions Nnebue’s multi-varied involvement in the Yoruba films, noting how he “hung around the [Yoruba] productions, participating in
various ways and learning about movie-making” (Haynes, “Nnebue”). *Living in Bondage*, however, tried to capitalize on both the Igbo-speaking market, as it was shot with Igbo dialogue, but also the entire English-speaking population of Nigeria with the cosmopolitan addition of English subtitles. Shaka notes how “the anachronistic peculiarity of an Igbo video film bearing an English title is all part of the process of experimentation” (Shaka 45), a novel philosophy which the industry would carry forward. Shaka still aligns these strands of inventiveness with marketing strategy when pointing out that copies with English subtitles sold better than the Igbo only copies, an indicator of why Igbo filmmakers typically made and continue to make films in English (45). Overall, because of the context of production and despite Nnebue’s previous multi-ethnic associations, *Living in Bondage* is widely accepted as the first Igbo film, released in 1992, consequently impacting the shape and direction of the Nigerian film industry in an historic manner by sparking an even greater level of interest in the new video medium which would lead to the global phenomenon that today is Nollywood.

However, it is surprising to note that Nnebue actually lost money producing *Living in Bondage* as a result of piracy, “but he quickly made a sequel with a larger budget and released it through a better-organized distribution system” (Haynes, “Nnebue”). Shortly after the release of *Living in Bondage Part 2*, then, Nnebue’s NEK Video Links would become the “most powerful player in the business” with “more machines to dub copies of films than anyone else” and “the largest network of distribution points” (Haynes, “Nnebue”). But still, the question of what brand of aesthetics is created by early video films requires further exploration, in this case a closer analysis of *Living in Bondage*, in order to both articulate their style and subsequently
evaluate their influence over the future of the now prolific industry. Haynes emphasizes the influence of early “classics,” claiming, based on thematic repetition and historical and contemporary trends, “that whatever the future of film in Nigeria turns out to be, it will be recognizable as an extension of what has already been created” (“What is to be Done?” 15). In particular he has noted the impact of Nnebue’s work on the content of future films, stating that “to an extraordinary degree, Living in Bondage, the film that started the Nigerian video boom, contains the seeds of almost everything that followed” (“What is to be Done?” 15). Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will analyze Living in Bondage in order to formulate its prototypical narrative structure and general style as one of syncretic, carnivalesque excess, a style which is counterbalanced in the second portion of the film in an exhortatory manner, thus establishing what I am positing as the excess-exhortation model. In doing so, thematic, aesthetic, and cinematographic analyses will intersect as I re-emphasize the significance of Living in Bondage as a film worthy of textual and contextual study as a breakthrough production in a landmark industry.

Common Themes and Excess-Exhortation

But regardless of the cultural context, Living in Bondage possesses many narrative and stylistic traits which characterize a typical Nollywood video film. Referring to the director’s milieu, Haynes defines Nnebue’s Lagos as one “utterly dominated by the amoral pursuit of money” (“Nnebue”), a trait which is enormously evident in the first few moments of Living in Bondage, a film which will serve as a model for not only the remainder of his career but also the Nigerian video film narrative prototype. As Haynes and Okome explain, the film highlights the prospects of social mobility set against a characteristic urban backdrop in which the protagonist, Andy, becomes involved with “a
group of upwardly mobile, dubious Igbo businessmen” (79). As the narrative rapidly progresses, Andy is compelled to ritually sacrifice his wife in order to overindulge in the money and luxuries of his friends. At this point, the plot does focus on Andy’s newfound lifestyle as the audience views him “philandering in bars, frequenting posh hotels, and generally conspicuously consuming in the most crude and flagrant manner” (Haynes and Okome 80). Haynes and Okome roots Andy’s penchant for this lavish lifestyle within a real world “disposition in traditional Igbo culture to favor individual dynamism and ambition” which has in turn shaped “popular consciousness” to be “fascinated with the art and strategy of getting ahead in this world” and to appreciate the “spectacle of luxury” (82). This period in the narrative is marked by excess, overload, overindulgence, surplus, or, as Larkin explains, outrage.

These scenes and manifestations of excess occur repeatedly in the first half of the film, making an initial appearance when chief Omego’s three wives fight over his affection and as a result of their inherent polygamous structure (Image 2.1). The scene begins as a recognizable family dispute but gradually erupts into a shouting and wrestling
match as the two women struggle atop the bed and the chief attempts to separate them before the scene fades to black, narratively calming the excess emotions of the scene by shifting to another storyline. Meanwhile, Andy’s desires for extreme wealth are being further ignited by his friend Paul’s luxurious lifestyle, a change of fortune and lifestyle the narrative foreshadows with an extended close-up image of Andy’s carnivorous consumption as he greedily devours chicken while talking with Paul (Image 2.2). Furthermore, Ichie Million’s party, where Paul further introduces Andy to a life of excess, further confirms the protagonist’s money-driven motivations while feeding him various meats, liquors, and foreign wine. As the camera tracks, pans, or cuts to each guest member, each character is holding either one or two large pieces of meat and/or a glass of wine, visually demonstrating their “flagrant” consumption (Image 2.3).

Soon after, excess becomes punctuated by the inclusion of occult themes and practices as the means by which Andy will realize his greedy desires. After following Paul’s advice, Andy joins the secret cult to which Paul, Chief Omego, Mike, and several other male characters are members. Andy’s initiation into this cult is first revealed with slow reverse zoom in a barren room, the mise-en-scene highlighted with black and red cloth and robes (Image 2.4). As the camera zooms completely out to a wide shot of the
room, the audience notices several black containers on the wooden floor, until several shirtless men, including Paul, Omego, and of course Andy, enter the room (Image 2.5). Andy’s oath to the cult makes it clear that he must honor and worship “Lord Lucifer” and above all abide by the rules of the group, which must remain secret (Image 2.6). Andy, wearing white as the newcomer who is yet to discover the cult’s rituals, is shocked to
discover that in order to attain such extreme wealth he will have to sacrifice his wife, Merit, consequently launching the narrative along another path or immoral excess in which each member admits they have killed loved ones, including wives, mothers, and children, in order to achieve their “blood money.” While Andy is initially skeptical and attempts to sacrifice another woman, once Merit returns from her trip he does adhere to the group’s orders and brings his wife to their sacrificial space (Image 2.7). While she seems oddly conscious, two large syringes full of her blood are extracted and redeposited into separate bowls which are then passed around to all members of the group as they communally drink Merit’s blood (Image 2.8). Ultimately these rituals reemphasize the abhorrent nature of such acts and function as narrative devices which outrage the viewer with immoral excess which consumes *Living in Bondage*.

The question regarding scenes pertaining to occult activities in *Living in Bondage*, and many Nollywood films, should not be completely considered as fantastic though, as realistic beliefs of occult do permeate the nation, together with stories in the press that feature content dealing with the supernatural. In many films since *Living in Bondage*, especially English-language productions, “magic mixes with the world economy, and
capitalist accumulation is only possible through occult means” (Larkin, “Itineraries of Indian Cinema” 179). Such suspicions do often exist in the actual world surrounding unfathomable leaps in social mobility and discrepancy of wealth among the elites, as Larkin explains in more depth:

The perceived rise in the presence of witchcraft in everyday life, the widespread beliefs that new elites are part of secret cults and the urban fear of occult violence demonstrate the intensity of these fears. Religion, whether through the guise of witchcraft or Pentecostal prosperity gospel, has emerged to become the idiom explaining why vast sections of society live in poverty while a tiny elite accumulate fantastic sums of money. The fear is that behind the operation of this unstable new economy, powerful occult forces are at work. (Signal and Noise 180)

In this case, Diawara’s notion that the fantastic events of a Nollywood film can be equated with actual experiences is supported, as are his and Larkin’s assertions that the films operate within and utilize the province of contemporary Nigerian insecurities.

An important source to consult when debating the relationship of the occult themes in a Nigerian video film to reality is McCall’s conversation with a native Igbo doctor, Chief Ink, which touched upon Nollywood representations of occult groups, money, and madness. McCall notes, “Ink’s talents include training in the practice of dibîa, a profession that locals translate as “native doctor” and covers specializations in divination, herbal pharmacology, and knowledge of a broad spectrum of indigenous ritual and philosophy” (“Madness, Money and Movies” 82). He elaborates on Chief Ink’s explanation of how money and greed do in fact drive citizens to use occult means for the ends of wealth:

You will see him talking out of topic. So the brain is changing. That is caused by anya ukwu, and that may lead him to go and look for [money] medicine—ogwu ego, looking for medicine that may make him become greater than everybody, richer than everybody...So whatever—even if it
entails giving up my mother for sacrifice. (Some people go to use parents and relatives to sacrifice.) Blood money, they want blood money…Some of them try societies. (McCall, “Money, Madness and Movies” 84)

This explanation by Igbo Chief Ink is a theme directly related to Andy’s role in *Living in Bondage* and the secret cults or societies related to the suspicious and sudden upshot of wealth. As McCall explains, it is an example of where the video films, in this case Igbo videos, act as a site for “cultural exegesis” and a “forum for public discourse” about competing forces in a complex, palimpsestic society (“Madness, Money and Movies). *Living in Bondage* ultimately provides an example of how a morality lesson can be used to combat secret occult mobility, one in which religious politics becomes a major factor and Christianity in turn a savior.

Another critic whose viewpoint on the use of supernatural themes becomes useful here is Akin Adesokan. Like Larkin, Adesokan makes connections to the suspicions that extreme wealth is related to sorcery, but he uses slightly different terminology when writing, “Enchantment is the explicit figuration in the videofilms of the occult imaginary” (*Postcolonial Artists* 91). Adesokan then deciphers between “two basic strands of the occult imaginary” in such films, “Pentecostalsim and sorcery,” with the former related to “faith healing by charismatic pastors” with capitalistic, greedy schemes, and the latter involved with the “Ifa divination system” (*Postcolonial Artists* 91). While Adesokan does not refer to traditional Igbo religion, or *Odinani*, I would extend sorcery to apply to traditional *Odinani* practices and thus including both polytheistic systems of belief. In any case, Adesokan mentions Andy’s wife, an apparition whom torments him and possesses “the power to hand down punishment and deliverance” (*Postcolonial Artists* 92), as a character dealing with sorcery as opposed to Pentecostal occultism. But it is the
“pervasive presence of Pentecostal fervor” that wins the battle between the two supernatural themes as Andy is offered salvation via a Pentecostal church (Adesokan, “Issues in New Nigerian Cinema” 7). Furthermore, as Adesokan points out, it is the province of the Pentecostal churches to employ exhortation “to promote their chiliastic doctrines,” establishing an important connection between “enchantment and exhortation” which has spawned a series of films following what he calls a “Jesus Christ, Executive Producer” syndrome” (*Postcolonial Artists* 92).

Whether one believes that the occult elements are inherently fictional and fantastical or housed within non-fiction, the notion that they are reproduced as fiction for a video film does suggest that the spectator-film relationship is just as important as the relationship of the film, and its occult themes, to reality. Discussing common approaches to Nollywood narratives, Adesokan claims one’s acceptance of the “diegetic world” of Nigerian videofilms is dependent on “the recognition of an order that is, strictly speaking, otherworldly and fantastic,” inhabited by a “symbolic order that is resistant to actions and explanations that strive to maximize reality” (*Postcolonial Artists* 91). Ultimately, Adesokan argues that a typical spectator of a Nigerian video film must consider that diegetic causality within Nollywood is dependent on challenging the accepted rational or scientific rules of logic that arguably govern the world outside of film.

A different viewpoint not consumed with whether fantastical elements do or do not occur in the actual world relates to the theme of magical realism, “characterized by a conglomeration or collage of the real and surreal” (Ogunleye, “Video Film in Ghana” 6-7). It is mentioned that magical realist elements could function “as a means for projection of a belief system” (Ogunleye, “Video Film in Ghana” 7), and that “the
interplay between the magical and the real is a part of the African consciousness and a part of the popular culture of postcolonial Africa” (Eghagha 71). But while this connection to actual Nigerian everyday experience is introduced, Ogunleye is more invested in summarizing the narrative function of magical realism as “an incorporation of elements of folklore and folk history specific to the local culture/mythology of the story, as ‘real,’” and how “[magical realism] uses fantastic elements to stand in for unknowable possibilities of ordinary experience” (“Video Film in Ghana” 7). Eghagha adopts the following definition of magical realism as it applies to the Nigerian video films:

A mode of narration that naturalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of rigorous equivalence—neither has a great claim to truth or referentiality. (73)

These perspectives presuppose the spectator does not outright believe that the occult or supernatural elements within the film exist in reality, but rather that no clear distinction is made between the two realms, and that the idea of magical realism is less invested in deciphering between the two than exploring the possibilities of their interplay in a text. What the manifestation of magical realism in Nigerian video films is ostensibly more invested in is that the space of the narrative is where the categories of real and fantastic intermingle to produce meaning.

Ogunleye further explains how magical realism can act as a “social critique” granting supernatural elements the power to “render examination of a depressing social state less painful” (“Video Film in Ghana” 7), intimating that the themes act as a means of escape as well. In fact, one study on supernatural elements in Nigerian films “discovered that as a result of the poverty level in the country viewers find this theme a
source of comfort, as it enables them to come to terms with their poverty since they would rather be poor than go into rituals and sacrifices of fellow humans to obtain riches” (Amobi 201). Ultimately, Ogunleye discusses how the idea of magical realism and the reactions of Nigerian audiences to the supernatural and fantastic are equally complex.

Regardless of the nature of the occult or supernatural in the film, Andy and his friends are clearly painted as immoral, dissolute, and ultimately wicked characters, and the audience is encouraged to judge them as such despite the glamorization of luxury in a hyperbolic fashion and even if he remains unpunished during the course of Living in Bondage Part 1. While it is clear the narrative frames his money-driven, ritual activity as detestable, shortly after his wife’s death, and as he begins preparing to marry a new woman, Andy is haunted by a supernatural form of Merit. Even though his behavior has been characterized as excessive or outrageous to this point, the supernatural presence of Merit’s image seems to appear suddenly, initially as a haunting and almost subliminal
superimposed figure marking alternating sides of the frame (Images 2.9-2.10). At first it seems Andy does not fully process these images, but after Merit speaks his name he screams and faints onto the ground, creating a panic amongst his friends (Image 2.11). Andy’s encounters with Merit persist, comprising much of the plot of *Living in Bondage* 2, eventually driving the anti-hero mad, most dramatically symbolized by his resemblance to a street beggar who picks and eats food from a trash pile (Image 2.12).

As Haynes and Okome again note, the remaining segment of the film is centered around rehabilitation, and the protagonist is offered assistance through “spiritual exorcism” and the generosity and practice of a Pentecostal church (80). Christianity is extremely popular among Igbo, and in fact Nnebue is commonly known as Brother Kenneth Nnebue, a born-again Christian (Diawara 190), and the film /DVD is even marketed as “Film Evangelism,” clearly establishing Nnebue’s pro-Christian standpoint and motivation for the film’s exhortatory style.

The aforementioned scenes provide a few examples of how *Living in Bondage* is a film lying at the intersection of a few different genres of Nigerian film, including “the occult genre,” and “the Christian conversion story” which serves as the basis of the Pentecostal fervor in the second part of the film (Diawara 180). But within these genres,
there are a few themes which are always recognizable and function as an impetus for many of the major events in the plot. As most criticism notes, two themes that are nearly indispensible to films throughout the last two decades are corruption and love/romance (Larkin, Signal and Noise 173), and at the heart of these themes are typically the tensions within a character’s family. The conventional plot points and scenarios accompanying these themes lead viewers to conclude that in typical Nollywood stories the following statement often rings true: “As much as family offers security, it threatens destruction” (Signal and Noise 171).

But family is not the only or even the main contributing factor to the corrupt milieu in many films like Living in Bondage, in which everyone from friends, priests, government and political officials, traditional healers, elders and children can be morally corrupted by the environment. Essentially, these environments are manufactured film universes which often both reflect and are literally set and filmed within a space where real-world corruption contributes to the content of the story while seriously impacting the quality, and as a result the aesthetics, of the production. Such corruption manifests itself from the opening moments in the film when Andy laments over his “miserable existence” as a result of the fact that the last four companies and bank he worked for did not pay enough wages. Even when Merit consoles him by reminding him of the unemployment ravaging the nation, the only goal which drives him is social mobility; essentially the entire film, from the first moment, chronicles Andy’s question for extreme wealth, repeatedly demonstrating the shocking extremes of his gluttonous consumption. Uttering phrases like, “My body needs money” (Image 2.13), and not only leaving but sacrificing his wife while pursuing a woman named Ego, the Igbo word for money, are among the
most excessive, or corrupt behaviors exhibited by Andy and his friends in the film.

Furthermore, *Living in Bondage* includes some of the more comparatively excessive kissing and groping between Ego and Andy when compared to the industry conventions of minimal displays of screen affection (Image 2.14), compounding the objectionable display of behavior by inaugurating the Igbo video film industry with sexually charged images which would further influence spectator judgment.

Much of the corruption involved in *Living in Bondage* can be attributed to another thematic intersection of urban life, confusion, identity, and immorality. In *Living in Bondage*, Andy is “a representative of the urban ‘intermediate class’ trying to reconcile his ambition to the dangerous and unscrupulous city,” an example of how characters in urban setting are often attempting to make sense of the modernized urban environment (Okome, “Onome” 148-149). Okome claims the film is “not primarily about an Igbo society” because, largely due to the city, “the characters negotiate a new set of social values that are very different from those of their original tradition, yet they sometimes look back to that tradition when it suits their purposes” (“Onome” 149). One example of the transformation of Igbo culture is the erosion of classical Igbo for “an urban variation that accommodates a lot of linguistic flexibility, allowing for the introduction of English
and pidgin words, the most common forms of communication in the city” (Okome, “Onome” 149). Overall these characteristics are indicative of the dominance of such associations of urban and the attrition of the values of times past, a very familiar theme running across the African continent and one very familiar to African film enthusiasts positioned abroad.

With the pervasiveness of these themes of corruption and narrative excess, Nollywood pundits, among others, fear that the abundance of negative portrayals will shape national and international perceptions of Nigeria. Conversely, Larkin notes how the international prominence of the industry as a global export paradoxically functions as a cultural artifact with perhaps the ultimate potential to combat the already existent negative images of Nigeria and Africa as a ferment of corruption and violence (Larkin, *Signal and Noise* 176), if not an exotic, primitive amalgamation of “othered” cultures. This is partially due to the melodramatic styles of the film, enabling the narrative excess, particularly considering the argument that “melodrama is not only multinational (produced in many countries), it is also transnational (designed for exportation): it is an extremely impressive example of the export of cultural forms” (24). Still, the violence within the country remains a source of ideas to draw from which both influences the content of the films and ensure greater sales (Barrot 19-20), complicating its role and effects on both a film’s diegesis and its context of production, particularly in the pre-democratic era of militaristic rule like *Living in Bondage*.

Resulting from these rampant themes of immorality, outrage, excess and corruption within and outside the family, *Living in Bondage* dictates that Andy must be punished and the narrative provide a moral or message. In effect, even though the desire
for luxury and extravagance is arguably cultivated as tempting vis-à-vis narrative excess or outrage, the conclusion of Living in Bondage has a pedagogical function, and the film as a whole employs a narrative structure, which insists on condemnation of those same excesses. Therefore, Living in Bondage 2 functions by way of exhortation, or emphatic didacticism, by which those engaged in the excesses of Living in Bondage must be punished. While I will explain Adesokan’s notion of exhortation in chapter four on Tunde Kelani, it is pertinent to note such a technique is often present in films which are “fundamentally about notions of good and bad conduct,” and thus employ “exhortatory and didactic registers” in order to communicate messages based on character conduct and social issues (Postcolonial Artists 82). Exhortation is also a popular practice among Pentecostal churches (Adesokan, Postcolonial Artists 92), who subsequently both affect the content of the film when part of a production company and also influence the overall stylistic and narrative structure of hundreds of films with their didactic methods. The manner in which these exhortations are realized in video films, however, ranges from explicit words on screen to messages or morals within the story, often being delivered at the end of a two or three part film after narrative tensions have built up in earlier segments, as in Osuofia in London 1 & 2 to be illustrated in the following chapter.

Altogether, this narrative pattern featured in the landmark Living in Bondage 1 & 2 comprises what I am formulating in this chapter as an excess-exhortation model, a foundational and multi-varied stylistic and narrative synthesis present in multiple generic forms and as pervasive within the industry as the three act structure and Classical Hollywood style in the United States. That is not to say a three act structure is absent from Nollywood, but the presence of scenes of excess or outrage, eventually followed by
an exhortatory sequence(s) or message(s) establishes not only a narrative pattern but a
tone, or mood which inevitably impacts and shapes the style of many English-language
video films. Other than Living in Bondage 1 & 2 and Osuofia in London 1 & 2, the
excess-exhortation model is evident in countless films including: Battle of Love (2001)
and Across the Niger (2003), a two part series featuring the final exhortation, “One
Nigeria, One Africa;” Fire on the Mountain 1 & 2 (2003) which preach “The Soul that
Sinneth Shall Die;” films such as Mr. Ibu (2003) and Mr. Ibu 2 (2004) with the common
message, “To God Be the Glory;” and similarly Osuofia and the Wise Men 1 & 2 (2008)
concluding with the phrase, “God Take all the Glory;” corruption of royal families of the
past condemned in works like Heart of a Slave 1 & 2 (2007) and Evil Queen 1 & 2
(2008); general immoral character behavior presented and punished in Igbo Made (2003),
Across the River 1 & 2 (2003-2004), and Cease Fire 1 & 2 (2006); and albeit with a
reflexive conclusion making contact with the camera, in God is a “Joker” (2000) as the
protagonist Nkem Owoh comes to a post-dream realization to reform his life by
dissociating with his troublesome friends.

In terms of theoretical origins, the excess-exhortation model combines ideas by
Shohat and Stam, in the lineage of Mikhail Bakhtin, concerning the notion of carnival,
and Latin American celluloid films in the traditions of Imperfect Cinema, the aesthetics
of hunger, and Third cinema, with Larkin’s “aesthetics of outrage” and Akin Adesokan’s
“aesthetics of exhortation.” Essentially, the industry which challenges film conventions
and traditions with palimpsestic, creolized, syncretic products also requires a syncretic
theoretical model in order to firmly locate the video film phenomenon within film
history, even if its location is inherently marginalized, interstitial, and ironically irresolute.

**Articulating a Syncretic model**

While *Living in Bondage* employs an influential and historically significant narrative structure, it also embodies the stylistic and technical archetype which, by most comparative accounts, is associated with a low budget and negligible production value. Still, *Living in Bondage* both exhibits the limited technical capabilities of a burgeoning industry while realizing the marketing and sales possibilities of a popular video industry, one initially dependent on narratives including an excess-exhortation model that proved to be successful. Nevertheless, academic and critical scholarship concerning the film inevitably concludes, like Adesokan, that *Living in Bondage* is “technically flawed” even if a “breakthrough work” (Adesokan, “Issues in New Nigerian Cinema” 7). Haynes further meditates on the impact of quality in the work of Nnebue, whom he nonetheless labels a “creative artist”:

> His art suffers from the faults and limitations of Nollywood as a whole: his dialogue can be dull and mechanical, the realization of his vision rather lifeless. His great strength, which is also Nollywood’s, stems from his proximity to the popular imagination. He works from what he reads in the papers, hears on the radio, and picks up from the conversations around him. (“Nnebue”)

So, in Haynes’s view, the technical shortcomings of his films are certainly symptomatic of the entire industry, but they do not supersede the worth in telling those stories despite the contextual confines. Still, such analytical conformity leads the critic to ponder the question, ‘What does it mean to initiate a filmmaking movement not only without technical mastery, but with limited resources?’
Despite the probable deficiencies inherent with most industry products, especially in the early to mid-1990s during the height of Nnebue’s popularity, Haynes justifiably, albeit daringly, attempts to “bring sustained attention to the work of a single Nigerian video filmmaker” with a study of his oeuvre in “Nnebue: Anatomy of Power” (“Nnebue”). According to Haynes, Nnebue “claims all writing credits” for his work and he is known for having a “steady set of collaborators,” allowing for a degree of “uniformity of look and feel of his films” (“Nnebue”). Haynes traces what he calls “the anatomy of power,” a structure through which complex character and social relations are exposed and critiqued in Nnebue’s work, revealing how an auteur approach could be a fruitful type of criticism (“Nnebue”). More importantly for this chapter, though, Haynes identifies a power structure and typical narrative pattern of social structures which do evolve as a result of power, desire, luxury, poverty, and potential mobility. Ultimately, Haynes formalizes an important model existent in Nnebue’s films which is relevant to theorizing early Nollywood narrative and stylistic structure.

As mentioned in the introduction, Larkin also makes a vital contribution to the articulation of the video film aesthetic. To reiterate, Larkin asserts that the prototypical work relies on “aesthetics of outrage, a mode of cinematic address that rests on the outrageous abrogation of deep cultural norms to generate shock and anger the viewer” (Signal and Noise 13). He further elaborates that “grotesque” elements are used to create this “aesthetics of outrage, a narrative based on continual shocks that transgress religious and social norms and are designed to provoke and affront the audience” (Larkin, Signal and Noise 184). Larkin also explains how these aesthetics are “often heightened by exaggeration and excess” (Signal and Noise 186) and posits that “outrage works through
a mechanism of distancing: characters are involved in actions so horrible that one cannot identify with them” (*Signal and Noise* 189). Larkin also importantly summarizes how “outrage” impacts and creates the typical spectator-film relationship:

The aesthetics of outrage, aimed at bodily stimulation, represents an experience of film integral to the film itself. It is a temporal and corporeal sense of living in and with the film, and it represents the singularity of film over and above political and economic contexts. While films draw their charge from these wider contexts, they cannot simply be reduced to them as if they were neutral referents of a situation outside of the film. The aesthetics of outrage force people to live the film so that external realities are intensified, vivified, and made sensate through the mediation of film narrative itself. (*Signal and Noise* 187)

In this manner, Larkin’s “aesthetics of outrage” essentially makes the argument that the typical video film creates a melodramatically-induced style by which it functions as a film, and potentially as a work of art, which truly capitalizes on the special and unique capabilities of the medium of film, celluloid, digital, and even video.

While not speaking directly about Nollywood and the video film aesthetic, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s critical and theoretical work again proves helpful when analyzing the individual Nigerian film with their discussion of carnival, which they define with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, a figure of great interest to Larkin as well:

Carnival embraces an anticlassical esthetic that rejects formal harmony and unity in favor of the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, the oxymoronic, the miscegenated. Carnival’s “grotesque realism” turns conventional esthetics on its head in order to locate a new kind of popular, convulsive, rebellious beauty. (*Unthinking Eurocentrism* 302)

This statement is seemingly applicable to most Nigerian films, especially considering the widespread use of melodramatic extremes that emphasize otherworldly or anti-realist occurrences, because the video films do operate within an aesthetic realm which does challenge convention, and furthermore constitute a popular industry which does embody
a form of “rebellious beauty” despite technical flaws. Additionally, I would argue that the excess-exhortation model, which I am formulating in this chapter as a model for many Nollywood narratives, is rooted in a frenetic, wild exhibition of overindulgence, or outrage, which by nature operates vis-à-vis the corruption of harmony. Even if the pattern leads to a pedagogical or exhortatory sequence which attempts to return the chaos to order, wild swings of fortune ultimately create a design which rejects formal harmony for the effects of disharmony. Moreover, because the video films are produced and marketed within the heterogeneous, syncretic context that is post-colonial Nigeria (1990s-2010s), the films originate from and thus employ a number of diverse techniques which mark them as creolized or “miscegenated” productions.

Shohat and Stam further explain how “carnival favors an esthetics of mistakes,” a form of “laughing grammar in which artistic language is liberated from the stifling norms of correctness and decorum” in order to combat the notion of a hierarchical scale where there exists an ideal type of beauty (Unthinking Eurocentrism 302-303). In the case of film, Hollywood, for example, could traditionally represent an ideal type while Nollywood would be considered liberation from such conventions. However, this type of dichotomous thinking is what should be avoided in order to accept “an esthetics of mistakes” as a form of beauty. If one views a Nigerian work like Living in Bondage as a more raw, less refined and organized, subversive, and ultimately carnivalesque work that exemplifies a different form of beauty than the ideal type, one that embraces imperfection like the model in Espinosa’s “Imperfect Cinema,” then a different starting point is

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5 Espinosa’a “For an Imperfect Cinema” is pertinent to this discussion because it posits the idea that for an art to transcend the traditional senses of beauty it must be a popular art and one spawning from people who have struggled immensely, even if the commercial nature of the industry and its star system would
generated that not only values the aesthetic but also leaves space for the video film to be acknowledged as a medium capable of popular artistic creation. While the films typically associated with Imperfect Cinema, Glauber Rocha’s “Aesthetics of Hunger,” and the idea of Third Cinema introduced by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino are primarily Latin American, the concepts of oppressed cinemas born out of harsh conditions can be extended to African contexts and applied to early Nigerian films like *Living in Bondage* in particular. However, while the manifestoes accompanying these movements define their cinemas in opposition to Hollywood, as belonging to a different brand of ideological film, Nollywood films, in name and some narrative conventions, are at the same time aligned with the Hollywood industry while demonstrating characteristics by which it is radically divergent.

With *Living in Bondage*, “mistakes” are evident in the opening scenes but they are also accompanied by stylistic techniques, in addition to the excess-exhortation model, which exhibit reflexive tendencies and creative screen direction. The very opening of the film features a bare room with white walls creating a washed-out background in which Andy is framed alone with a double cassette radio by his side on the couch (Image 2.15). Additionally, the soundtrack is layered with both wanted—a low jazzy score on saxophone albeit with a wavering volume—and seemingly undesired sounds—ambient

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certainly not apply to Espinosa’s definition of “Imperfect Cinema.” Espinosa writes, “We have more faith in the sick man than in the healthy one because his truth is purged by suffering,” and the “Imperfect Cinema finds a new audience in those who struggle, and it finds its themes in their problems” (80).

6 The Cinema Novo movement Rocha discusses in his manifesto “An Esthetic of Hunger” is one defined by starvation as the “essence of society,” and that behavior related to this condition of starvation is revolutionary violence as a natural and necessary response. While the response within the Nigerian films is not one encouraging violence, the notion that the film’s aesthetic is born out of an impoverished state of failed infrastructure and takes on a didactic role is where the concepts are interrelated.
noise and hissing which at times overpower the music and following that Andy’s opening
address. However, despite the sound complications inherent in one of the first films
within the industry, *Living in Bondage* does utilize reflexive techniques including the use
of direct address and voiceover, superimpositions, and long takes during the party

sequence. In addition, Nnebue juxtaposes the bizarre and almost implausible ritual
scenes with footage resembling a verite-style documentary sequence, as a result
combining realist and anti-realist aesthetics in an experimental manner.

In the film’s opening image, the sterile room, in conjunction with the low tonal
music, helps establish a mood which does seemingly capture Andy’s psychological state
of emptiness as the camera slowly zooms into a close-up of his face as he longs for
money, status and the Mercedes Benz owned by his colleagues and friends. As Andy is
framed in close–up, he seemingly delivers the first several lines directly to the viewers in
a manner which combines the zooming capabilities of film with the theatrical technique
of communicating major elements of the plot openly with an audience characters can
acknowledge. However, the conventional direct address is then challenged as the camera
zooms back out, framing Andy in a medium long shot in the background of the room
until Merit enters and ostensibly joins the spectators in his address (Image 2.17). Therefore, what begins as a reflexive direct address is then transformed into a conventional two shot as Andy further explains his greedy desires which his wife assuages.

![Image 2.17](Image 2.17)

Direct address is also employed later in the film, as Andy contemplates sacrificing Merit, nearly gazing directly at the lens when the camera more rapidly zooms into his face until there is a dissolve to his memories together with Merit (Image 2.18). However, once the flashback concludes and the narrative returns to the present, Andy is framed in a contemplative pose while he no longer addresses any characters in the room but instead
communicates to the audience via voiceover, explaining he did not understand Merit would have to be the price of his extreme wealth. The voiceover continues in this scene explaining how he wishes to borrow Paul’s car, seemingly overriding his contemplation about sacrifice with luxury vehicles, but the visual image becomes static as Andy’s reluctance, and subsequently humanity and morality, is evident while he must choose between sacrificing his wife or himself and ultimately favors life, wealth, and guilt, over death.

Overall, even within the first few minutes of the film and continuously throughout the narrative, *Living in Bondage* contains a number of creative and reflexive narrative and stylistic techniques which demonstrate the promise and possibilities of an artistic popular video medium which has since evolved into Nollywood. This chapter synthesizes theories and ideas including Larkin’s “aesthetics of outrage” and Adesokan’s “aesthetics of exhortation” in order to formulate an excess-exhortation model as the narrative and stylistic structure of *Living in Bondage*, a prototypical early Nollywood production. In particular, *Living in Bondage* is a multifaceted film, marked by developing creolization and an aesthetic borrowing from carnivalesque subversion, which stands as early Nollywood prototype and sets a complex standard composed of a myriad of factors including technical shortcomings.
Chapter 3

Unthinking Industry Conventions: Reflexivity and Media Jujitsu in Osuofia in London

While Nigerian video films, like Living in Bondage, do challenge a number traditional beliefs about film aesthetics and spectatorship, the pitfalls of their comparison to other African and non-African films almost always ultimately leads to a losing battle and a label of inferiority of style, content, and narrative structure. Consider the following criticism by influential African film scholar Manthia Diawara as symptomatic of this trend: “Nollywood is bad because it is based on a zero degree of narrative. It is filmed and edited in a raw manner, with no reflexivity and no effort to distance the spectator from the reality of the world of the film. In summary, Nollywood is not modern in its approach to narratives” (183). Although some Nollywood films do lack these qualities upon first glance, I believe it is much more productive to take a functional approach to Nigerian video films in order to demonstrate how and why this statement is far too strict in its stance. Therefore, partially in response to such patronizing assertions, the following chapter will identify and theoretically contextualize a number of elements in one particular landmark film, Osuofia in London (2003), which challenge dismissive claims

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of this sort. Beginning with the film’s intriguing narrative layering device, and mindful of the prototypical elements of the film as a product of Nollywood, I explore how Osuofia in London employs a series of techniques that demonstrate reflexivity and establish an aesthetics of resistance and also as artistic media jujitsu.

As one of the most internationally recognized, nationally heralded, and economically impactful Nigerian video films, Osuofia in London holds a crucial place in both contemporary Nigerian culture—as there was seldom a taxi driver, hotel or restaurant worker, businessman or woman, director, producer or stranger who did not encouragingly smile and positively react to the mere mention of the name Osuofia—and the history of Nollywood, and subsequently the history of film as a medium. Starring the renowned, hard-working and innovative Igbo comedian, Nkem Owoh, the film was so popular that in many cases the actor is still referred to as Osuofia. But it was not only Owoh’s presence in the satirical comedy which contributed to the film’s reputation. Director and producer Kingsley Ogoro creatively crafted a number of narrative and stylistic devices which arguably propel the film above the standard Nollywood production.

Satirizing the (Neo)Colonial Gaze

In order to properly discuss the narrative layering of Osuofia in London, it is necessary to first analyze the film’s crucial opening including a voiceover which does not return until the end of the film. The film begins with an image of what appears to be the earth travelling through the frame, accompanied by the opening credit reading Kingsley Ogoro Productions, until the audience’s view zooms into the planet’s atmosphere and the
image becomes washed out and completely white (Images 3.1-3.2). The white screen cuts to become an animated long shot of what appear to be villagers and livestock traversing a path on the horizon as the sun sets, casting a red-orange glow over the land (Image 3.3), and wooden percussion sounds become audible on the soundtrack. While Pierre Barrot refers to these images as “amateurish” (23), I believe, however, that rather than solely viewed as images behind a credit sequence they need to be contextualized within the opening voiceover which suggests the film’s narrative is filtered on one level through the prism of an outside source reminiscent of an ethnographic perspective.

Initially the opening images and animated pictures may be considered as simply a credit sequence establishing a typical rural African setting, both with images and sounds.
However, after fading to black, an iris opens in the frame revealing a misty long shot of a lone tree in a lush green meadow (Image 3.4) as the critical voiceover begins: “The planet Earth, a solid mass of land and water mysteriously afloat in a vast and unknowable universe.” As the words are heard, an opening montage of images unfolds beginning with the tree and followed by a mountain, a flowing stream (Image 3.5), and a bird in flight—images found somewhere on earth as the voiceover indicates. Next, the voiceover briefly pauses as the images indicate a more specific geographical location in Africa; first viewers see two men canoeing in a river, a tapper climbing a palm tree for wine (Image 3.6), elephants crossing the screen (Image 3.7), and a quick image of baboons before framing a village atop a hill in long shot. By including baboons and certainly elephants,
an animal naturally associated with the African wilderness, as well as the familiar scene in southeastern Nigeria of a palm tree being tapped for its sweet milky wine, the montage visually locates a portion of the narrative in an African setting. The voiceover then resumes over the baboons and village with the words, “In fact some days became quite complex and confusing, like today,” and then proceeds to focus on the framed village, which will become the location of the first scene, to represent life’s complexity. The first segment of the voiceover continues: “A day when a man might be called anything but a hunter,” as the camera suddenly cuts from the village to a close-up of the butt of a rifle and then pans down the shaft of the weapon until revealing the protagonist, Osuofia, arguing with offscreen voices and unsteadily holding the weapon while aiming at an antelope (Image 3.8). However, the comedic twist to the scene is exposed to the audience with another cut to four young women holding Osuofia up in the air as he aims the rifle at the antelope (Image 3.9), the frenzied commotion now more audible with a lengthier pause in the voiceover. Finally, the voiceover temporarily concludes, “A wish Osuofia would have preferred,” as the ostensible anti-hero tumbles to the ground atop his daughters and sets the farcical nature of the narrative into motion. Osuofia then proceeds to berate his daughters, cruelly insulting one’s weight and essentially labeling them as bad luck for the hunt.
Overall, the voice sounds British and the sequence initially suggests tone and imagery stylistically evocative of traditional documentaries about nature or people, including, but not limited to, ethnographic films about African culture. This voice, while admitting to a degree that some things are unknowable, maintains authority over the narrative, one which begins with a sequence featuring a stereotypical inept, uncivilized African hunter being framed by the perspective of presumably a European outsider. In the process, this authoritative prism emphasizes confusion almost simultaneously as shifting the narrative to Africa, as if understanding this environment from the narrator’s perspective was particularly challenging. Such a move could be considered an extension of imperialist practice, through which cinema was employed as a means to “represent alien topographies and cultures as aberrant in relation to Europe” (Shohat and Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism 106). With this initial hunt, Osuofia and his daughters play the role, at least partially, of the “non-European ‘they’ [whom] are irrational and subhuman” when culturally measured (Shohat and Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism 120). While the European standard and lifestyle will be critiqued throughout the film, the villagers are initially represented as inferior “others” due to the folly of the hunt.
Directly following the spoiled hunt, however, *Osuofia in London* effectively reverses this perspective by employing the same voiceover and a brief montage to introduce life in London and allude to the vital relationship between the two cultural settings. The voiceover again begins over images of the London Bridge (Image 3.10), Big Ben and Buckingham Palace, clearly highlighting the world famous glamour and prestige of the United Kingdom: “But true enough, elsewhere on this planet other people build large jungles of concrete and steel, where life was tense and often very sad.” In this brief transition, the voiceover turns its lens on London and rethinks the imperialist notion of the European lifestyle as a paradise, marked by the image of a woman (later learned to
be the wife of Osuofia’s deceased brother) stepping out of a limousine and representative of the melancholy populace (Image 3.11). These images and foreign city life is then juxtaposed again with an African village setting as the voiceover and images return to Osuofia and his daughters on the pathway home (Image 3.12) accompanied by the conclusion to the voiceover: “However, in our small and peaceful village, big cities and fast lifestyles never entered their wildest dreams. Politics and confusion remained unknown.” With these final words, the opening voiceover ultimately makes a statement about the villagers’ ignorance and inability to imagine European lifestyles as if oblivious to the cultural imperialism and pedestalization of colonial powers. By ending the voiceover on this tone, though, the lens of the narrative shifts back toward exotic images of Africa in order to further satirically explore the extremes of foreign misconceptions and cross-cultural understandings, first of Africa and then of London by Africans as a consequence of colonialism and its residual effects.

Taking into account the opening of this voiceover, then, the initial images zooming into the earth from space, and the subsequent images precisely focusing on an African setting, represent a visual manner of suggesting an outside-in view of the world and, as it will become more apparent throughout the film, of culture in general. The Osuofia character actually originated in the Owoh written film *Ikuku/Hurricane*, in which the “town drunk” in a traditional setting is named Osuofia and the entire film is a satire of city life from the perspective of villagers (Haynes and Okome 83-84). With the restructured version of *Osuofia in London*, the film includes the misguided perspectives

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7 *Ikuku* (part one) was also directed by Nkem Owoh
of London held by villagers, but it begins with, and is ultimately framed as, a satire of outsiders’ patronizing views of Osuofia’s bungling African village.

Considering this argument about the opening scene, and acknowledging the film’s origins, I wish to reiterate my claim posited in this dissertation’s introduction about how Osuofia in London can be argued to “steal elements of the dominant culture and redeploy them in the interests of oppositional practice” (Unthinking Eurocentrism 328). In the case of Osuofia in London, the media jujitsu occurs vis-à-vis the narrative framing as an ethnographic film as a means to unthink the influence of colonial discourse of African primitivism (Shohat and Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism 328). Shohat and Stam also mention that “contemporary video and computer technologies facilitate media jujitsu” and in turn “all the conventional decorum of dominant narrative cinema—eyeline matches, position matches, the 30 degree rule, cutaway shots—is superseded by proliferating polysemy,” indirectly suggesting that the complex and anti-classical video film would fit that mold (329). Shohat and Stam discuss media jujitsu in relation to Brazilian art and the idea of anthropophagy, a form of cultural cannibalism. They write, “By appropriating an existing discourse for its own ends, anthropophagy assumes the force of the dominant discourse only to deploy that force, through a kind of artistic jujitsu, against domination” (328). With Osuofia in London, the discourse that is borrowed is that of the primitive, rural Africa as an inferior life to the glamour of a Westernized land like London. By initially framing the film through the eyes of a foreigner, this view is endorsed in a farcical manner that utilizes a foreign stereotypical (mis)conception of Africa as means to acknowledge, reflect upon, and essentially challenge such characterizations. In a similar manner, the animated titles are thus
representative of both rural African realities but also of the type of foreign representations of Africa which often focus on the exotic, rural, village life which starkly contrasts with Western standards of living. As I will discuss below, Osuofia’s trip to the United Kingdom reveals that popular conceptions of Europe as a paradise, pervasive across many parts of Nigeria, are mainly misconceptions resulting from the imperial imaginary and consequential constructions of the West. Ultimately, a product of colonial stereotyping becomes a vessel through which their alleged superiority is unveiled and, with Osuofia’s return to Nigeria marked by monetary gain but still consistent hardship in Osuofia in London 2 (2004), the moral of wealth and European lifestyles as a savior is deemphasized. In this resistant and interstitial sense, I strongly believe Osuofia in London is one video film which critiques the imperial imaginary, as discussed by Shohat and Stam in Unthinking Eurocentrism, and contributes to the unthinking of its effects by:

a) being from a foreign perspective as a narrative device; b) featuring characters consumed by the idea of Europe as paradise; and c) revealing Osuofia’s actual experience as a stark contrast to the projected images of London and England.

Building off the analysis of the initial voiceover and discussions concerning power-based colonial and neocolonial relationships and cultural products, consideration of the interrelated concepts of creolization, imperialism, and ultimately cultural exchange is important. One common family of themes which are recognizable across African film criticism, both on celluloid and video, focuses on colonialism, imperialism and creolization or hybridity. In the case of Nollywood, the issues of cultural imposition and interaction are realized not in content challenging European domination, but through an ever present negotiation of cultural identity in a country which has gone through many
trials and tribulations including, but not nearly limited to, colonialism. As Haynes has identified while referencing Bayart, “‘extraversion’—the active pursuit of external resources—has shaped the internal structure of African societies, including their popular culture” (“Introduction” 19), a reality which has, of course, not escaped Nigeria. Furthermore, Haynes explores how extraversion is one component of the state of creolization, previously defined as “an active historical process whereby new cultural forms are created out of the interaction of two or more cultures, with a center-periphery power context, with an asymmetry in power and prestige but with the periphery playing an active role” (“Introduction” 20).

Considering this model of creolization, Nollywood, even by name alone, is unquestionably an interesting exemplar of this cultural development. As much criticism debates, with and without attention to the actual films, the name Nollywood designates an original cultural development which works in conjunction with the influence of foreign media sources such as Hollywood, Bollywood, and Latin-American telenovelas. However, the question often revolves around whether the films produced in these palimpsestic environments are saturated by these outside influences, or have they undergone a maturation process through which they actively incorporate foreign elements. Also, as Haynes has highlighted, when considering whether Nigerian video films are simply saturated with outside influences, it is important to “recognize that the consumption of foreign melodramas, as well as the production of local ones, express Nigerian desires and intentions” (“Introduction” 28). Thus it could be argued that even

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8 For a sophisticated discussion of the objections and adoption of the term Nollywood, see Haynes’ 2007 “Nollywood: What’s in a Name?”.
the typical Nigerian video film signifies a breaking down of the indigenous and imported binary (Haynes, “Introduction” 31-32), a third wordlist notion in which the two occupy separate ideological poles. Elaborating on this issue, Shohat and Stam write:

It might be objected that jujitsu tactics place one in a perpetually reactive or parasitic posture of merely deconstructing or reversing the dominant [but] these films are not merely defensive. Rather, they express an alternative sensibility and shape an innovative esthetic. By defamiliarizing and reaccentuating preexisting materials, they rechannel energies in new directions, generating a space of negotiation outside of the binaries of domination and subordination, in ways that convey specific cultural and even autobiographical inflections. (Unthinking Eurocentrism 330-331)

*Osuofia in London* occupies a unique and innovative position in this arena of activity because the film parodies characters whose intentions are completely saturated with foreign desires and ideals and the relationship between cultures is explored through misconceptions created on both ends of the power spectrum. As a result, the “space of negotiation” in which it operates as media jujitsu proposes a model which forgoes simple relationships of domination and subordination, ultimately demonstrating a mode to reappropriate agency by framing a world of foreign misconceptions. In this sense, then, Nigerian films as models of media jujitsu serve as examples that do help break down the “binary of domination and subordination” (Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* 331) and serve to defend against criticism along these lines.

**An Imperial Parody: The Function of Cross-cultural Misconceptions**

It is not only the film’s opening which evidences *Osuofia in London*’s innovative narrative, stylistic and reflexive elements which qualify its attention, but as the voiceover ends (only to be returned to in the film’s final moments) and the audience is introduced to Osuofia’s village life and his characterization as a buffoon who is apparently consistently
disappointing and disappointed by his family. Aside from his inabilities with the hunt, he is consistently positioned on the opposite side of the frame as a group of men or women with whom he is having a confrontation (Images 3.13-3.15), and the mere fact that his weight was literally being supported by his daughters during the failed hunt suggests his role as the male provider in a male-dominated society is being threatened. Despite all his challenges, however, Osuofia does retain some agency over his situation even if it requires that he chases away the men with his rifle and upset the community.

As the plot begins to unfold and spectators witness his life in the village, many standard Nollywood characteristics undoubtedly do exist including an early scene in
which tax collectors from the community visit Osuofia for outstanding fees. While the meeting occurs in Osuofia’s compound, it erupts into a skirmish with multiple pairs of men and women wildly flailing and yelling in a manner similar to the model of excess (Image 3.16) illustrated in the previous chapter with Living in Bondage. In terms of style, while there is coverage in medium and close-up shots, much of the action occurs with the camera in the position of a long establishing shot, with the characters mainly located visually within the confines of the compound, house, and in a community meeting with elders. Even though these scenes are typically filmed as exteriors the characters still seem restricted by their environment, even during the hunt, contrasting directly with the comparatively glorious wide angle images of London in the opening sequence, and generating an aesthetic which will be challenged by Osuofia’s cross-cultural misadventures in London.

Quickly following this establishment of Osuofia’s character and life in the village, the anti-hero is visited by a businessman from Lagos with news that his brother, who moved overseas without contacting or contributing to his family in Nigeria, has died (Image 3.17). While Osuofia is initially perturbed at the mention of his sibling, skeptical he will incur the debt of his sibling (Image 3.18), he nearly faints upon discovering he is the sole benefactor to his brother’s fortune in London, a turn of events which will require him to travel to England. After regaining consciousness Osuofia performs a dramatic show of wailing and tears in another scene marked by excess (Image 3.19-3.20); but the audience recognizes this performance as a parody of these actual emotions because they
not only witnessed his true emotions before this act but also view him coach his daughters on how to excessively grieve between his own howls, in order to make their performance convincing. Therefore, Osuofía as a character reflexively employs this device of excess to utilize conventional emotional reactions—both to a sibling’s death and in dramatic Nollywood scenes—as a means to move the narrative forward and ensure his trip to London to claim his unforeseen fortune. Furthermore, the satirical act in this scene can be seen as a parody of the excessive and demonstrative emotion by Nollywood characters—in essence the industry product playfully turning the lens on itself—but while utilizing those same conventions to move the plot forward into a foreign setting and saturate the narrative with cross-cultural examinations.
Upon discovering that Osuofia will be visiting London, regardless of the money involved, everyone in the community is overjoyed and hopeful for the future of the village simply because one of their residents will be overseas, in the nation from which they gained independence. For example, even in school one of his daughters is singled out to approach the front of the classroom as the offspring of someone who will visit London (Image 3.21) as her teacher claims Osuofia’s trip will be “one of the best things that happened to the village this year” and that “he will bring a lot of development in the community.” This announcement in turn delights students who beam in envy, pride and desire (Image 3.22) undoubtedly as an effect of the projection of British culture across Nigeria. In the next scene his daughters discuss the various consumer products they wish to gain from his trip, including clothes, shoes and makeup, and then the day he is departing the village for the city a crowd of neighbors gather at Osuofia’s compound to wish him well and glorify British culture (Image 3.23). While doing so, Osuofia emerges from his home “dressed for trip” and jokes that he already has the “London breeze entering his nose” in utter excitement for his journey based on the projection of Western luxury, technology, and fashion. However, Osuofia is abnormally
dressed in layers of clothing, including a gray sport coat, colorful tie, and an Igbo walking stick and wool hat, a modern-traditional version of the okpu agu warrior’s cap, altogether resembling a fashion palimpsest with Western and native influences intermingling in a manner akin to Nigerian history (Image 3.24). Furthermore, because this mélange resembles Osuofia’s misconceptions of how to dress in London, his figure at this time of departure visually carries with him the projections and miscommunications, even if excessive with his clothing, between Nigeria and Britain as a result of colonial and neocolonial cultural exchange. Nevertheless, his friends and neighbors finally proceed to lift up Osuofia as if he was royalty and place him in the bed of a pick-up truck
before an animated sendoff (Image 3.25). While promising them he will return with riches to serve the community, Osuofia is then framed at a low angle which ultimately symbolizes his revered position as a result of his expected fortune and association with London (Image 3.26).

Marking the narrative shift to London, the aesthetic beauty of the city skyline is emphasized with a long shot of the illuminated Parliament buildings beneath a picturesque blue evening night (Image 3.27) which locates the story in London. However, there is a quick cut to an image of a black man in business attire in a dimly lit office, initially on the phone and then framed over the shoulder of a women whom he is speaking (Image 3.28). He is informed that Osuofia, who is called “the African man” in a gesture toward the neo-colonial view of Africans as nameless, exploitable people, is on his way to London, in turn insisting “progress “has being made. The scene clearly reeks of suspicion and insinuates there is some sort of plan to swindle Osuofia, establishing an adverse relationship between Osuofia, the African, and the British man before the pair meet. This shift to London is then emphasized with a montage of images similar to the

(Image 3.27) (Image 3.28)
few during the opening voiceover narration, identifying major landmarks and city streets including a peculiar image of Buckingham Palace which first appears tilted to the left, resembling a canted angle of the royal palace (Image 3.29). This image then rotates, caused by an editing effect rather than a camera movement, and zooms out to reveal a long shot of a more balanced landmark (Image 3.30), visually suggesting this world does not have a stable foundation. However, by distorting the image of Buckingham Palace, the supreme indicator and foundation of British prestige, the sequence obliquely challenges the high regard of the foundation of British cultural expansion.

As the montage continues, massive and impressive forms of technology are emphasized by focusing on spinning jet engines, airport radars, and large buses and aircraft, all as examples of sights and sounds amazing Osuofia as he enters London. Osuofia’s initial experiences of the country and culture which has been glorified do seemingly meet his high expectations, accentuated by low angle tracking shots following the protagonist’s head swivel to observe the environment in eye-popping wonder (Image 3.31). As he climbs a staircase in Heathrow, Osuofia beams in pleasure, delightfully extends his arms, and loudly exclaims “wonderful, wonderful,” in an apparent expression
of love and desire for this revered land. However, as he passes through the airport, Osuofia stands out from the crowd not only with his aforementioned palimpsestic fashion sense but also culturally uncharacteristic enthusiasm and body behavior. Moreover, the sounds accompanying the scene further establish this cultural comparison as lyrics repeatedly emphasize the words “I come from the ghetto,” marking Osuofia as a resident of a less privileged area as he astonishingly strolls through the comparatively glamorous airport terminal.

Overall, the above analyses are indications of the forms of productive criticism which can be generated from even the initial sequence of Osuofia in London’s transference of plot and setting from Nigeria to London. However, nearly a decade into the industry’s development at the turn of the century, this landmark film is hardly exempt from common Nollywood criticisms related to production value. For example Pierre Barrot’s brief profile of Osuofia in London in Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria, while one of the lengthiest analysis of the film (even if under 2 pages) which does give the film credit in some areas, still seems to fall back upon the standard Nollywood technical shortcomings as the infertile barometer by which the film should be
judged. While commenting on the seemingly unrehearsed and rushed nature of some London scenes (Barrot 23), Barrot is quick to dismiss this rapid narrative progression simply without critical reflection. In my view, the brisk editing is reminiscent of and a commentary upon the fast-paced environment into which Osuofia has been thrown and being swindled, a solid contrast from Barrot’s critique. For example, the scene in which Osuofia is greeted at the airport by a chauffeur and driven by limousine to his brother’s estate contains a battery of rapidly edited images, both inside and outside the car, which seemingly do not follow and traditional shooting pattern yet reflect on the visual culture shock and succession of views being observed by Osuofia. Essentially, the editing in these sequences can be considered as on-screen manifestations of the shifts in culture, and in the overall pace of everyday life, experienced by Osuofia and by extension spectators.

In addition to the editing style, the content of both the frame and the narrative itself proceeds to reflect on Osuofia’s cultural adjustment immediately upon his entering the limousine, consorting with the driver, and soaking in the London atmosphere. One of initial images of Osuofia in the limousine resembles the effect of a telephoto lens with a long, flattened depth of field as Osuofia sits near the window and enjoys the world within and outside the automobile. In addition, a mirrored ceiling creates an upside down image of Osuofia in the upper right portion of the frame, as a result revealing two images of Osuofia within the composition (Image 3.33). Considering the cultural transplantation of the narrative form Nigeria to London, this double image, like the canted angle of
Buckingham Palace, not only foreshadows Osuofia’s cultural confusion due to this cultural narrative shift. Additionally, this double image marks his abrupt turn of fortune in the current space where a poor African villager rides a London limousine and gazes out the window in wonderment, waving at passers-by while bemused due to his relocation (Image 3.34). Despite the bewilderment, Osuofia repeatedly beams at his newfound location in the limousine, which functions similar to the Mercedes Benz in many videos set entirely in Africa. As Haynes points out, “a single image to express the culture of the videos…would undoubtedly be a Mercedes Benz, which appears ubiquitously as the symbol of the desired good life, the reward of both good and evil, the sign of social status and individual mobility” (“Introduction” 2). In this initial scene outside the airport, the limousine is a similar status symbol which causes Osuofia to claim, “I come I saw I conquer,” in regards to his ostensible social mobility and prominence as a result of being in a limousine in London.

As Osuofia adjusts to British culture upon arrival, Owoh’s comedic abilities shine particularly while attempting to communicate with his chauffeur, leading to reflexive, almost theatrical moments. As Osuofia is playing with champagne and admiring his
newfound location, a brief cut to a low angle image of the chauffeur (Image 3.35) precedes his mispronunciation of “Oh-so-FI-ah” and the slightly muffled question, “did you have a nice flight?” At first reacting in surprise, as if he had done something wrong, Osuofia then cannot decipher the chauffeur’s words and, as the camera zooms into his confused expression, Osuofia looks in the direction of the camera and says, “I can’t understand what this man is saying” (Image 3.36). This comment, resembling a direct address to the audience, appears somewhat as a theatrical aside and functions as a playful joke referring to the potential communication issues stemming from such an intercultural encounter. However, it also acts as a manner of foreshadowing the comedic sequences, most involving cultural misunderstandings, which consume and follow this scene. After making this reflexive comment, Osuofia, still looking toward the camera, then addresses the chauffeur, corrects his name, and aggressively asserts, “if you want to talk to me open your mouth and talk,” feeling he did not enunciate enough due to difference in accent. This problem then reappears with the chauffeur’s next comment indicating he must stop for “fuel, gas, petrol for the car.” Osuofia initially repeats the pronunciation, “Fuel, fuel,
fuel,” sounding odd based on his cultural conventions, but petrol is the term which he identifies with as the limousine enters the gas station.

While waiting for the chauffeur to pay for the fuel, a seemingly strange narrative device occurs to shift Osuofia’s attention away from the space of the limousine and towards a man, who he seemingly perceives to be another African, boarding a bus. This moment is marked both visually and audibly in very traditional, stereotypical manners.

While surveying the nearby hustle and bustle yet shielded by the limousine windows, Osuofia unexpectedly looks shocked after observing this image, exhibited by a close-up of his bewildered expression (Image 3.38). Additionally, the music which had been accompanying Osuofia’s drive, an elegant, smooth, soft jazzy piano, is suddenly interrupted by an easily recognizable musical cue signaling some form of danger, or at least something threatening the status quo. Apparently convinced he knows this man, Osuofia proceeds to exit the limousine and, more importantly for the advancement of the plot, leaves the control of the chauffeur and the characters from the initial London montage who are seeking to steal his inheritance. However, upon boarding the open-top double decker bus and following this strange man, Osuofia insists they are friends while
the man maintains they are strangers, leading to the man to pressure, “You best move from me” (Image 3.39). Osuofia attempts to be friendly but his presence becomes an invasion of space, with the scene initially presenting a seemingly harmless case of mistaken identity by the protagonist but ultimately threatening violence at his expense. In the end the bus introduces a space which does pose a threat to Osuofia’s perception of London, in effect challenging and potentially shattering imperial projections ostensibly affirmed by his experience in the limousine.

Another interesting stylistic component of this scene is the music, which nearly deafens the interaction between Osuofia and this stranger with a loud, thrashing mix of reggae and hip-hop. Critics have derided the use of music in many Nollywood productions with valid statements such as “music in American pop styles is thrown down like cheap carpeting” (Haynes, “Introduction” 3). It is quite often that sound issues capturing dialogue lead to the inclusion of heavy soundtracks populated by American music, but songs are also often used to cast obviously recognizable tones and moods over the spectator in a manner which resembles both melodramas of the 1950’s as well as low production value 1980’s Television drama. Furthermore, American music is also used as
a reflective narrative device marking characters’ desires of foreign lifestyles; it is both a symbol and product of the nature of extraversion in Nollywood. However, in this case the powerful song originates from a diegetic source in the man’s headphones but the music interestingly seems to be amplified as if they were at a bus-top concert. Therefore, although Osuofia’s transition to luxury and British culture had been the subject of the London portion of the film, the audience’s experience of this bus-top scene seems to be filtered through this newfound character. This technique essentially projects his psychological sound and shifts character identification in a non-traditional carnivalesque fashion as I discussed in the previous chapter. With these sudden narrative jumps and the use of sound, the conventions of film language are broken and the spectator distanced from the story in the manner of modernist films of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Following the case of mistaken identity, Osuofia leaves the same bench seat as the man and plops down in front of him in an awkward and guarded manner, clutching his belongings while peering back at his dancing mannerisms (Image 3.40) and indicating he judges this behavior as odd. This image marks the continuation of a sequence of Osuofia’s cultural misunderstandings as the protagonist becomes somewhat jaded as he explores the city beginning with the inhabitants of the bus. While looking around, Osuofia is horrified when he witnesses a middle-aged couple kissing atop the bus (Image 3.41); this scenario is initiated by an image of Osuofia with his hand over his mouth
(Image 3.42), but after cutting to the couple again a closer image of Osuofia harshly reacting with a scowl and hostile gesturing (Image 3.43).

Osuofia subsequently explores some popular tourist sites, such as the Tower of London, the London Bridge, and Buckingham Palace, in wonderment of the mythic cultural landmarks which have symbolized the power and prestige of the British Empire for centuries (Images 3.44-3.45). His role as an outsider, though, is emphasized in the same sequence as he misinterprets a loud noise for a firing cannon and is framed running down the street, appearing out of place with his layers of clothing beside two men in proper exercise attire. Soon after, Osuofia encounters a female sitting on some outside
steps wearing a skirt, and suggesting that she is dressed improperly for a female he first forcibly closes her legs and then attempts to cover her with his suit jacket. However, the female is understandably hostile, slapping his face and directing obscenities at him (Images 3.46-3.48). This scene is humorous to the spectator but it is also becoming
evident that Osuofia is not fitting into this new environment, encountering difficulty when judging British cultural behavior by his own standards. Overall, this portion of the narrative on the bus, and then as Osuofia wanders the streets does share similarities with Damoure’s cultural exploration in Jean Rouch’s *Petit a Petit* (1969). Like Damoure, Osuofia makes culturally-based value judgments in the land of his colonizing nation (France for Damoure) as a clever and contextually innovative narrative technique within a film, like *Petit a Petit*, which seeks to critique the influence of the colonizing culture in a satirical manner which can be classified as media jujitsu—*Osuofia in London* because of its narrative layering and playful command of the colonizing gaze and *Petit a Petit* due to its direct usurping and derisive utilization of colonial practices.

It is clear the film intends to poke fun at Osuofia’s inability to comprehend this world despite its consistent projection and imposition upon Nigerian culture; he is portrayed as inept and primitive and unable to survive in London on his own. His series of misadventures in this sequence culminates when he attempts to catch a pigeon for food after he is refused a meal when trying to pay with Naira instead of English currency. After becoming a spectacle to onlookers when diving into flocks of pigeon at a local park, a series of images of police cars and the sound of sirens indicate Osuofia’s behavior is certainly deemed odd and dangerous by British cultural conventions. While the audience understands Osuofia may be detained for his actions, when he is revealed to be actually holding a pigeon while being interrogated by police at the station (Image 3.49), the fantastic, unbelievable narrative elements seem to be climaxing amidst his confusing travels. This implausible narrative turn, and absurd image of a Nigerian man holding a pigeon in a London police station, then develop suddenly into a scene with supernatural
elements. While being interrogated about his identity, the conflict erupts into another characteristic Nollywood scene of excess emotion and conflict when Osuofia claims he must consult an oracle and pulls out an amulet which produces a bright light, injuring one policeman’s shoulder while struggling with the police woman over the strange artifact (Image 3.50). However, this scene is then abruptly interrupted by a phone call confirming Osuofia’s identity, essentially saving him from this tumultuous location and thus settling down the narrative devices which momentarily surfaced; as suddenly as he unpredictably converts the interrogation room into a site for otherworldly battles with London authority figures, Osuofia is released, the narrative tensions decrease, and the supernatural elements of the narrative dissolve.

From this point on, the story content becomes more predictable but innovative techniques continue to highlight the film’s cinematographic and narrative style. Osuofia is then escorted to his brother’s luxurious home, where introduced to servants and his former fiancée, Samantha, whom the viewer recognizes from the initial montage of London. Believing she is part of his inheritance, again highlighting aspects of Osuofia’s character which differ most with European ideals such as polygamy, the pair initiates a
combative relationship among a backdrop of luxury in which the protagonist again immerses himself (Image 3.51). However, desiring a big meal which Samantha refuses to prepare, Osuofia, nearly dwarfed by the image of the mansion in the background of the frame, then imagines aiming his rifle at a nearby bird in a similar hunting pose to his introductory image. At that moment the scene begins to dissolve into an illuminated nighttime mansion; but before the dissolve is complete there is a moment both images of the mansion are present in the frame, visually consuming Osuofia as a manner of foreshadowing the influence such an environment will have on his character and traditional hunting lifestyle (Image 3.52).

While Osuofia encounters more difficulties adjust to British culture, finding everything from the bathrooms to the breakfasts a bit perplexing and unsatisfactory, it is not until Samantha begins to spend more time with Osuofia that he establishes some comfort in his newfound setting. This sentiment is unmistakably displayed first when the space of the protagonist’s prior confusion (albeit following excitement), the limousine, is occupied by Osuofia and Samantha while he beams in elation as the couple drinks champagne before kissing (Image 3.53), and then as he enjoys a feast at an African
restaurant. However, as the audience is privileged to discover, Samantha is working together with Ben Okafor, revealed to be the black man in the initial montage of London, in a subplot to seduce Osuofia’s as a strategy to later steal his inheritance. When the audience is truly introduced to Ben, whom Osuofia meets with as an executor of his inheritance, he is aggravated by Osuofia’s unwillingness to sign and steps into the bathroom where he directly addresses the camera, and the audience, through the mirror. As the camera zooms into Ben’s face he clearly comments to the audience while looking directly at the lens and complains, “What kind of stubborn goat is this? Why is he so difficult? I hate these semi-literate foreign clients” (Image 3.54). With these words, Ben openly communicates his feelings to the audience, and the narrative grants him the reflexive duty of cementing his role as evildoer. Furthermore, Ben remarks that simply speaking with Africans threatens his “cultivated English natural accents,” an oxymoronic phrase itself, and mentions how he does not want to “sound like his father.” By explicitly stating his intentions to ignore his cultural heritage, Ben is literally and figuratively turning his back on Nigeria and Africa in exchange for his role as a proprietor of exploitation.
After Samantha finally persuades Osuofia to sign the document with his thumbprint, she takes the papers to Ben’s office. However, he immediately double-crosses her, asserting he wants nearly all the money, but she quickly regains possession of the documents, rushes home and informs Osuofia that Ben was scamming them and that the money can be obtained without him. She also suspiciously maintains Osuofia’s money can be transferred to a credit card and she will sign for him for “security reasons.” Osuofia is willing to abide by her sudden plan, despite being unsure about the business aspect of the inheritance, because Samantha claims she will marry him and the pair can leave for Africa. While one seemingly misguided interpretation states, “Osuofia uncovers the banker’s plot and somehow achieves a complete turnaround in the young widow” (Barrot 22), it is evident that she exposes Ben’s plot and only orchestrates this plan due to interest in her potential fortune, the true motivation for all three main characters in England. Nevertheless, Samantha’s actions ultimately prompt a car pursuit on the way to the airport which proves unsuccessful when Ben is arrested and the couple is re-situated drinking champagne in the back of the limousine (Image 3.55).
As it seems the pair will safely make it to the airport, but with many other story elements unanswered, a high angle view of the limousine driving down the freeway accompanied by the familiar voiceover from earlier signals the conclusion of the film. The voiceover, which seems to appear suddenly and amidst the story’s climax, comments: “Some might say that all’s well that ends well. That’s probably the subject of another movie. At any rate, perhaps for now we best remember no matter where you may roam, there’s just no place like home.” With this voiceover, the film playfully attempts to wrap-up the story with flip, almost dismissive comments which reemphasize notions of cultural belonging and differences. These words, somewhat unsatisfying to a viewer seeking narrative closure, ultimately affirm the notion that this story is not “ending well” but in a very sudden, climactic moment more customary of a serialized soap opera or television program. As Haynes, among other critics, has pointed out, one of the most recognizable characteristics of Nollywood narratives is the “familiar serial technique of suspending the action at a climax,” an influence from melodramatic television soap operas (“Introduction” 22). As a result, audiences must then purchase Osuofia in London 2 (2004) to observe the misadventures occurring when Samantha returns to Africa, marries Osuofia (Image 3.56), and attempts to fit in while scheming to retain her piece of the fortune.
Because the subject of *Osuofia in London* is wealth, luxury, inheritance, and
greed, Nollywood tradition had established a common form in which “the spectacle of
luxury is normally accompanied by a moralizing commentary, which appeals to more
traditional values” (Haynes and Okome 79). But for *Osuofia in London*, due to
serialization, Ogoro’s comparatively modern narrative style, and the voiceover being
from the ethnographer’s perspective, the moralizing is officially absent; nevertheless the
punishment of Ben’s character suggests that the film disparages blind, greedy quests for
riches at all costs. On the other hand, Samantha’s story is unresolved and remains so
until the conclusion of *Osuofia in London* 2, which again does not deliver a moral
through its voiceover but instead simply concludes that the film has been a “little tale in a
small village on the continent of Africa.” However, Samantha’s subplot does conclude
with a final apologetic sermon, which functions as an exhortation condemning her greed,
before she returns to London with a newfound respect for African customs and traditions
supplemented by an understanding of the consequences of greed, ultimately securing
narrative closure, as Osuofia, his family, and his village all seem healthy, wealthy and
happy, amidst a backdrop of cross-cultural understanding.

*Osuofia in London* is its heralded reception and extreme popularity both in
Nigeria and abroad. Barrot claims 300,000 to 400,000 copies of the VCD were in
circulation after the film was released (Barrot 23), and following that the legend of
Osuofia was created. The film also faired extremely well in other areas of Africa like
Nairobi where, according to Barrot, it “brought in more money than *The Lord of the
Rings* on the day of its simultaneous release” (Barrot 23). But in addition to the
innovative narrative techniques and location shooting in London, there is no doubt the
success of the film resulted from Nkem Owoh’s comedic talents and performance style. For almost the entire industry history there has been the development of a star system for actors and actresses. As Haynes and Okome note, “There is a concerted effort to build a star system of actors with name recognition whose presence (as in Hollywood) will guarantee investment in the project” (64). This trend is quite evident with the case of the subsequent Osuofia films, such as Osuofia and the Wise Men Parts 1 & 2 (2008), and Bonjour Osuofia 1 & 2 (2004), in which the producers assume that the star’s name recognition, along with the character, will certainly increase investment and sales opportunities. However, the subsequent Osuofia films were not as popular or stylistically innovative, partially due to the absence of Kingsley Ogoro, and have not made a similar mark on the industry as Osuofia in London Part 1 and to a lesser extent its sequel.

But it is of course not just the presence of Owoh that would lead to a propagation of films with similar themes that did not contain the Igbo star. For example, Mr. Ibu in London starring another well-known comedian, John Okafor, attempted to capitalize on the same wake of interest. This copycat mentality certainly fills in the void left by the lack of original stories, but the view of even this simple characteristic of Nollywood should perhaps be reconsidered while acknowledging Thackway’s comment about oral culture, that “tales are judged for their perspicacity and delivery, rather than for their originality” (53). In an industry born out of an oral culture, first manifested with orature and then with “secondary oralities” like the soap opera and video films, repetition is often rewarded if combined with tale-telling ingenuity.
Why films from Nollywood were rejected in academic circles is no surprise, considering the harsh criticism they received for not being as politically-minded as West African film pioneers, and because, as Haynes laid out, “they are something between television and cinema, and they do not fit comfortably within the North American structure of either.” (“Introduction” 1) But as early as 1993 with *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile* (God owns the land), Kelani was politically-minded albeit shooting on cheaper video technology and a lower budget. Nevertheless, concerning the pitfalls of comparing Nigerian video-films to other African film classics, Adesokan warns:

This kind of assumption requires questioning because it masks a different issue: how willing are the elites in Africa and of other places (including the academics) to make sense of the conundrums that give rise to the fantastical and extra-materialist spectacles suffusing a popular form like the video-film? This, it seems to me, is a challenge to scholars who wish to deal productively

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9 See Adesokan, 2006 for one reference to how criticism that Nollywood is “apolitical” is an unproductive move in terms of influencing future criticism and study in the field.
with the complexity of the world at the present time. ("Revolution from Below” 67)

While that statement does recognize the frequency of false comparisons in academia, it also leaves space for films by figures like Kelani to not be judged in opposition to other pioneers like Sembene or Gerima, nor simply classified as an extra-materialist spectacle. Instead, Adesokan imagines a place, perhaps occupied in part by academics, where cultural products such as Kelani’s films can be considered products of a political and social milieu marked by a particular complexity which shares cinematographic and narrative traits with both African cinema classics and Nollywood’s video films. In fact, Tunde Kelani’s Thunderbolt: Magun has to date been the only film associated with Nollywood which is offered via the California Newsreel’s Library of African cinema, other than Franco Sacchi and Robert Caputo’s documentary This is Nollywood (2007). Such a fact calls to question the biases in their selection processes while also helping to establish a distribution barrier between the library’s university or academic-based purchases and films associated with Nollywood and commercialism. At the same time, at least for Kelani who regularly attends FESPACO and watches the celluloid classics of African cinema (Author Interview), it has created a sort of measuring stick and an attainable aspiration. Kelani admitted it was a “privilege” for Thunderbolt/Magun to be distributed via California Newsreel, and that he reads the list of institutions which have purchased the film with pride (Author Interview), but his other films have not been adopted and remain somewhat elusive in academia

Partially as a result of his alternative distribution network, Kelani’s films are comparatively lesser known in academic circles. While Thunderbolt’s selection by California Newsreel does suggest Kelani’s privileged position compared to the virtually
ignored Nollywood filmmaker, in the eyes of western distributors and scholars the bulk of Kelani’s work has ultimately been subsumed by the phenomenon that is Nollywood and thus associated with a different aesthetic, one represented in part by the model of excess-exhortation posited in chapter two. Although I can pinpoint a few reasons for such a scholarly dearth surrounding Kelani—various biases against Nollywood aesthetics such as marginalization of Nollywood directors as auteurs, and less prominent distribution methods than celluloid African films—among them is not lack of ingenuity, creativity, style, cultural relevance, or conviction that Kelani is an indispensible director whose career deserves more critical attention as an artist whose films are worthy of deep, even shot by shot, analyses. Therefore, as this chapter argues, I believe Kelani’s unique and prolific work is perhaps the most deserving in all of Nigeria of an in-depth director study in which his position as a director whose style consistently bridges techniques popularized in Yoruba theater, Nollywood video film, and celluloid works from Africa and abroad is established vis-à-vis close readings of his *Saworoide* (1999) and *Arugba* (2010). Ultimately, I make the case that these two films, representative of his entire milieu, classify Kelani as a Yoruba film griot who should not only be recognized among Yoruba filmmakers, or Nigerian filmmakers, but alongside and not in opposition with all African filmmakers.

**Cultural Relevance**

Tunde Kelani, born in Lagos but raised from five years old in Abeokuta, a city synonymous with Yoruba culture and birthplace of cultural figures such as playwright Wole Soyinka and musician Fela Kuti, is truly a director whose work stands apart from the standard Nollywood fare while clearly situated within it. Yoruba films are
undoubtedly a subset of the Nigerian video phenomenon as they follow many of the same narrative patterns, production techniques, and distribution networks, but overall they do still differ from the prototypical Nollywood films, often English-language productions, mainly with their use of Yoruba language and because the setting and narratives refer to and incorporate Yoruba culture. While Larkin notes that “the presence of African languages in the films is as much driven by the market advantage of vernacular as by any cultural nationalist tradition,” he then continues to mention how filmmakers like Kenneth Nnebue have shifted to English-language productions “when they realized the market potential, and since that time [English-language films] have been the largest and most successful of the genres” (Signal and Noise 177). While such a quote leaves little space for a culturally-based, native language filmmaker to function seriously, it does acknowledge the force against which directors like Kelani, whose films are deeply invested in Yoruba cultural practices and almost exclusively made in Yoruba, must operate within Nollywood.

Being a socially conscious Yoruba filmmaker, Kelani’s films evolve from cultural art and entertainment like the aforementioned Yoruba Traveling Popular Theater. The Yoruba Theater had its “immediate beginnings in the Victorian Lagos of the 1930’s and 1940’s, in church end-of-year and harvest concerts and plays, [and] soon outgrew these to discover its own roots in the Yoruba alaarinjo (or apidan) masquerade performance practices that predate colonialism by centuries” (Ogundele 92). So, in the face of the imposition of British culture, a form of liberation and creativity was revealed through

10 Kelani’s two English-language films, Thunderbolt and Campus Queen, are made in English as a means to both accurately portray the common language of a Yoruba-Igbo couple in the former film, while being a shared language in a university setting and a means to target youth audiences in the latter.
Yoruba traditions. Similarly, as I will illustrate, Kelani uses the backdrop of Yoruba traditions and masquerade as a means for the characters of *Arugba* to honor their past with creativity and ultimately free themselves from private and public battles endured throughout the film. However, there are a number of Yoruba cultural elements that are evident in many of Kelani’s films including the “five components” of “major Yoruba beliefs:” the Supreme Being (Olodumare), the divinities, the spirits, the ancestors, and medicine and magic; the “other-worldly domain (orun) [which] co-exist with the phenomenal world (aiye) of people, animals, plants and things” and “communication with the spirit realm [and] what Ifa is all about” (Onabajo & Binutu 153); and the notion that “culture is used as a vehicle for conveying the existence of ancestors and their activities in the affairs of men” (Onabajo & Binutu 154).

The proliferation of Nollywood and the video industry in general, as I mention in the introduction, owes much to the popularity and practices of the Yoruba Popular Theater. It is commonly noted that the “pool of exceptional actors” from the theaters are one of the resource areas drawn from in order to initially fuel the industry (Barrot 19). Furthermore, Kelani’s own origins with filmmaking began when he manned the camera for Bankole Bello and Akinwumi Isola’s *Efunsetan Aniwura* (1981), an early “historical drama” with roots in the Yoruba Traveling Theater (Diawara 169). As the Yoruba Theater was “at once elite and popular, entertainment oriented and educative” (Ogundele 94), a major element borrowed by early video films was the utilization of a work of entertainment or art as a didactic function based on educating the masses. This association with Yoruba Theater was something Kelani consistently embraced, manifesting itself in Yoruba films which combine entertainment and education functions.
As a director schooled in Yoruba traditions including the Traveling Popular Theater, Kelani feels education is perhaps the most important aspect of his filmmaking mission, and he is principally concerned with transmitting Yoruba culture. Kelani elaborates upon the magnitude of such a duty:

> In a globalizing world, we are losing our identity. We should do everything possible to document most of our heritage. It is sad that there is almost an imposition of mono-culture. In Nigeria today, it is almost like American culture because we are being bombarded by electronic information through cable and internet about dominant cultures. (“Interview by Jumoke Giwa”)

Kelani is clear that, partially as a response to the ongoing process of globalization, Yoruba culture faces many threats to its preservation and thus needs proper documentation. As a result, he is deeply invested in promoting and preserving everything Yoruba by using his films as didactic tools which convey and reflect upon Yoruba past, wisdom, tradition and contemporary culture, despite the fact that the language will undoubtedly shrink the market. However, the distribution of his films, despite being made in Yoruba, stretch beyond Yoruba audiences due to his popularity and ability to stand out from the crowd over his two decades of persistent work (Diawara 169).

**Industry Innovations**

In terms of criticism, even as far back as 2000, Haynes and Okome identify Kelani as a video film director, with training in celluloid production, who makes quality films that honor the Yoruba theater actors and traditions:

> Tunde Kelani, who was a cameraman for a great many of the celluloid films of the 1970’s and 1980’s, now runs a large professional operation, Mainframe Productions, making sophisticated films, exclusively in Yoruba, that mix
‘traditional’ and ‘acada’ actors, and draw on the scriptwriting talents of prominent Yoruba literary dramatists. (58)

Even Pierre Barrot, who disparages the artistic and cinematographic execution of Nollywood films throughout his work, acknowledges that each of Kelani’s films is a “truly cinematographic production” (Barrot 71). One reason for his technical detail within a film culture which praises speed over precision is his extensive knowledge and memory when discussing cameras, and he remembers nearly every one he has not only used but touched (Author Interview).

While it is not typical of the director to stand out in an industry dominated by marketers and distributors, Kelani created such consistency in production value through establishing his company, Mainframe Productions, to ensure quality and autonomy over his own work. The company title, Mainframe, refers both the frame as the basic element of filmmaking, and also to a mainframe as a foundational support structure (Author Interview). With most productions, “It is the distributor that is headlined,” (Barrot 15) but with Kelani’s work Mainframe Productions is headlined, being synonymous with the director who by all accounts is the “real creative talent behind his films” (Barrot 54, author’s emphasis). Kelani avers, “I am responsible for every frame” during the filmmaking process (Author Interview), and to maintain creative control Kelani notes how he has “never taken any money from any marketer,” a strategy that has propelled him to the head of Nigerian filmmaking yet has also prevented a windfall of profits (Trenton 118). Kelani does certainly make significant returns on each production, but he maintains that Mainframe has not created an abundance of profits or become a viable corporation in the business sense (Author Interview).
Mainframe has, however, established a brand which is in many cases more recognizable than the name Kelani amongst the general population.¹¹ In his study of a handful of Mainframe films, Adeoti notes how the “rhetoric of politics” employed by Mainframe productions features the “adoption of a monarchical framework which is rooted in the Yoruba traditional political system,” but also that the same films “make the institution of kings and chiefs occupied by anti-heroes, misfits, and tyrants to justify their subversion and outright expulsion by youths and others that seek democratic change” (Adeoti 33). Ultimately, Adeoti identifies a pattern in which the traditional Yoruba power structure functions as both the foundation of the films, a means by which to emphasize the incompatibility of corruption with Yoruba values, and a tool which can envision a compromise between tradition and modern democracy.

It has been considered that problems of an auteur approach do exist in such a diverse industry, especially considering ethnic differences that shape each film by region. As Adesokan notes, “There is a limit to holding up an individual filmmaker as the paradigmatic figure” (“Issues in New Nigerian Cinema” 6) because of the significant differences amongst Yoruba, Igbo or English-language films, and Hausa productions. Nonetheless, scholars like Haynes believe more work should be done which concentrates on a single director:

Some directors…have become celebrities and established brand names, but few academic studies have been organized as the interpretations of the work of a particular artist. While I certainly do not mean to argue that auteurist film criticism should be the only or even the main kind of criticism brought

¹¹ There were several instances during my brief travels in Nigeria in September 2009 where restaurant/bar employees and taxi drivers did not recognize Kelani by name but immediately perked up when hearing Mainframe Productions.
to bear on Nigerian videos, I would like to demonstrate its usefulness. (“Nnebue”)

Haynes proceeds to draw a number of interesting comparisons in his study of Kenneth Nnebue’s work, focusing on several of the pioneer’s films as discussed in the previous chapter.

Furthermore, in *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics*, Adesokan, while conscious of the potential pitfalls of such criticism, includes an auteurist analysis of his *Thunderbolt: Magun* (2000) in which he “conceptualizes an aesthetics of exhortation” as part of the director’s didactic technique (*Postcolonial Artists* 82). An idea he had mentioned five years earlier in a *Black Camera* article titled “Issues in Nigerian Cinema,” Adesokan further elaborates upon the nature of this brand of aesthetics in his more recent 2011 work:

> By this term I refer to the West African tradition of aesthetic populism which understands politics as a subcategory of morality, and gauges the impact of a work of art according to how the audience responds to it, either by making it a commercial success or by drawing a useful example from it. (*Postcolonial Artists* 82)

Furthermore, in this same tradition, “a dramatic or narrative text is thought to be fundamentally about notions of good and bad conduct and, in exhortatory and didactic registers, subsumes every aspect of human relations to this basic theme” (Adesokan, *Postcolonial Artists* 82) The operative area in these statements, as it pertains to my analysis of Kelani’s work, is the consequent popularity and utility drawn from the film’s attempt to interact with the audience, and potentially affect behavior based on the morality espoused by the aesthetics of exhortation. Since the notions of the popular and artistic can clearly overlap in this aesthetic, this paradigm of thinking does not uphold
strict boundaries between the two while additionally acknowledging the addition of a
didactic function does coexist with this model.

In Thunderbolt: Magun the viewer is exhorted or encouraged to reconsider some
deep rooted elements of Nigerian society, initially with the interethnic marriage between
an Ibo woman and a Yoruba man, an environment which authentically dictates the
primary language of the film being English since it is the common language between the
cultures (“Interview by Jumoke Giwa”). With this issue, the moral urges viewers to
question ethnic stereotypes that have led to unfathomable amounts of strife throughout
Nigerian history, but the additional didactic element of the film relates to “the myth of the
reality of magun,” which translates to “don’t mount,” as a disease/supernatural affliction
which would result in death to anyone attempting to have intercourse with an “infected”
woman. While Kelani states that eighty percent of Nigerians believe in Magun, the
film’s focus is on the tension of treatment practices as a result of the contemporary
creolization. Kelani states, “The overriding message in Thunderbolt is to look at
orthodox medical practices and suggest that they should not look down on traditional
herbalists as inferior but should rather take them along and see what they can learn from
each other” (“Interview by Jumoke Giwa”). Ultimately, the film suggests an open mind
and a belief that the creolized nature of Nigerian culture need not lead to conflict but
rather convergence.

Adesokan also includes a healthy amount of information from Kelani’s earlier
films, especially Ti Oluwa Nile in order to help frame his argument, demonstrating the
fruitful avenues opened up by such director studies. While not restricting his analysis to
Thunderbolt: Magun, Adesokan asserts Kelani’s work has regularly featured the following cinematic characteristics:

A complex address to Nigerian political society from the standpoint of Yoruba expressive culture; a predilection for allegorical and “popular” forms; subtle or (often) overt didacticism; the use of actors from both the English-language and Yoruba subgenres, the skillful use of light and exteriors in cinematography, and an astute sense of a transnational context. (*Postcolonial Artists* 83)

In fact, *Ti Oluwa Nile* (1993) is noted as “the first film to consciously and extensively mix diegetic and nondiegetic music, crosscutting, and dream sequences, using a slower pace than was common in English-language films and television dramas, and in this way, it aspired to be cinematic” (Adesokan 86). In doing so, Adesokan points out, Kelani made spectators “aware of the cinematic apparatus, especially the camera” (*Postcolonial Artists* 86). Furthermore, with Kelani’s *Koseegbe* (1995), Mainframe is also credited with introducing the “idea of scripting a video film production, with dialogue and detailed description of the situations, scenes, and sequences,” a basic celluloid filming element which engendered a more sophisticated filmmaking style in the first few years of the industry (Oyewo 146). Perhaps most notable in terms of production value, Kelani also differs from a typical Nollywood director in terms of shooting schedule and overall length of the production process. While some Nollywood directors make a living shooting a film in less than a week, such as Chico Ejiro who is accused in Jamie Meltzer’s acclaimed documentary *Welcome to Nollywood* (2007) of churning out his hundred or so films as if he were a baker, Kelani was unhappy with the still modest “20 days of filming for *The Campus Queen*” (Barrot 54). But Barrot notes how this unusually long shooting schedule, while still within the ultimate control of marketers, was a freedom granted due to his respected position within the industry: “Even though Kelani
considered 20 days not enough time, this period reflects the privileged position of an independent producer, able to set his own demands as a meticulous director who makes only one full-length film a year” (Barrot 54).

In the next two sections/following pages I intend to identify a number of instances in which many of these characteristics appear in the process of critically analyze two of Kelani’s most important works, *Saworoide* (1999) and *Arugba* (2008), by situating them in their cultural contexts and making a case for their respective positions in both the landscape of Nollywood and within the master narratives of film history and aesthetics. Furthermore, in doing so I will draw from Adesokan’s conceptualization of Kelani’s aesthetics of exhortation, Larkin’s notion of the aesthetics of outrage, and aforementioned models of creolization and magical realism as a means to theorize the multi-varied aesthetic exhibited by Kelani’s complex Yoruba productions. Ultimately, this chapter utilizes in-depth analyses of several shots, sequences and techniques in order to demonstrate how, even with limited agency amongst an industry of marketing tyrants, Kelani has been able to steadily establish a succession of increasingly high quality films, with a political and cultural consciousness, which have propelled the director to a comparatively venerated status among Nigerian filmmakers.

**Saworoide (1999)**

*Saworoide*, filmed in Abeokuta with an approximate $70,000 budget for roughly a twenty day shooting schedule (Author Interview), is accurately referred to by Adesokan as a “political thriller that allegorizes corruption” (*Postcolonial Artists* 87), referring to how the narrative resembles a recognizable film genre (“political thriller”) which channels the
past through allegory to comment on contemporary deceitfulness. The opening of *Saworoide*, like all Kelani films, first displays his production company, Mainframe Productions and Opomulero—the pillar of the community, in his case the Yoruba community—before cutting to an image of a bata drum being beat with the caption, “This is the parable of the drum as the voice of the people” (Images 4.1-4.2). Although it is conventional for words on screen to introduce a story in Nollywood, the fact that the drum is being beaten suggests that the drum could also be communicating this same phrase. In any case, the film is immediately marked by the audiovisual presence of the drum, a crucial element of Yoruba culture.

Onabajo and Binutu, among many others, have noted how language in a Yoruba film can include “speech, talking drums, gongs, folklore, proverbs, body movements, songs, incantations and so on” (152). Kelani elaborated on the importance of the talking drum in Yoruba society, discussing the notion of the “educated Yoruba” who understands “Yoruba drum vocabulary” and has the ability to decipher different drum tones among the bata drum family (Author Interview). He described the Iyá, the mother drum, the
Itólele or father drum, and their baby or Okónkolo, each which produces a variety of distinctive polyrhythmic tones. Essentially, Kelani referred to the Yoruba talking drums as “absolutely important, as the culture itself” (Author Interview). In fact, Kelani and scriptwriter Akinwumi Asola initially conceived of the film as a documentary about Lasisi Ayanyemi, a master bata drummer dwelling in the Yoruba village of Labode near Ibadan; however, due to Ayanyemi’s death, before Kelani was even able to meet the drummer, eventually led the film to become a fiction, albeit one which draws from contemporary society (Author Interview).

Following the image of the drum, a second shot of the front of a village home is accompanied by the caption, “This is the story of the pact between an ancient community and the kings that ruled over it” (Image 4.3). The ancient community which the viewer will be introduced to the viewer throughout the film is Jogbo, defined by Kelani as a “fictitious entity,” although he continued, “Nigeria is thinly disguised as Jogbo” (Author Interview). Regardless of the exact location at this point, the first images importantly highlight the interplay of many elements of the story: authentic imagery, sound as a
crucial communicative channel, a foundation of oral storytelling, social awareness and the necessity of community interaction, and the overall importance of drumming throughout the narrative.

The sequence that follows is rapidly edited and explains to the audience the guidance provided by an ailing king to his sons and community, ultimately revealing the ontology of a fictitious native ritual. First, an image of the elder king is revealed as two young men, presumably his sons, stand over him and fear the loss of the elder’s wisdom will create disorder in their community (Image 4.4). As the ailing father explains, “There’ll be a pact between the people of Jogbo and their kings,” essentially to maintain order and continuity within their culture. This initial interior shot’s frame is quite dark, and the sequence that follows has the effect of a brass tint over the mise-en-scène, seemingly marking the film and the future of Jogbo with the importance of this prologue, a common feature in Yoruba theater productions, providing backstory to the events of contemporary Jogbo.

As the elder further explains the ritual, a sophisticatedly edited montage develops as a means to illustrate that first a brass crown, jingle bells, drum, and small container
must be created as part of this process and the production of each is very briefly introduced. The brass bells are fastened to the top of the drum, the materials are brought to an Ifá priest, and he provides a set of instructions which the audience witnesses during the montage: one half of the ‘agbaarin seed’ will placed in the king’s crown and the other in the drum; prescribed leaves will be burnt in the pot and that powdered ash transferred to the small container; an incision made on Ayangalu, as well all Jogbo kings in the future; the powder is rubbed into Ayangalu’s wound; and the pot previously containing the leaves and ash is smashed on
The myth about the drum, actually, it was as if the whole sequence was like the preparation of a constitution. It’s a pact between the people, the royalty, and the line of drummers, just like in modern democracy you have the executive, the judiciary, and the legislative.” (Author Interview)

Altogether the ceremonial procedure acts as an oath binding the people, the king, and the drummers of Jogbo. He further expounds how the film’s main action is initially comprised of a scenario in which this pact is challenged and the narrative demonstrates how “life is normal until somebody tries not to go through the constitution” (Author Interview).

Following the establishment of this custom, the camera frames the old man in a close-up as he lay on the same bed as the opening and speaks the word Saworoide before expectedly passing as the camera zooms out of his face and smoothly dissolves into the king’s memorial service in the next scene. While the narrative is initially marked with this sad event, the following scene is a vibrant and enthusiastic tribute to the elder, instantly apparent with the first shot of the ceremony highlighted by trademark Yoruba
dancing, chanting, singing, and use of the proverb, “To find the elephant go to the forest,
to find the buffalo go to the grassland” (Image 4.11- 4.12). While this scene is outwardly
buoyant, it is clear by the translated verses, “To find a just king like you except by God’s
grace, Our father is gone, He was just and precise, Our benefactor is gone,” that the event
is laden with sadness at the loss of so much wisdom and experience. In addition, other
than the tint indicating its setting in the past, the ceremony almost seems to be captured
documentary style with a series of various images from points of view which seem as if they
could be members of the crowd. Overall, the rapid pace of the editing imparts a
significant amount of information very effectively in less than four minutes.
After a fade to black, the camera reopens with an establishing view which overlooks the community of Jogbo, from the actual hills of Abeokuta, at a later time period (Image 4.13). The first characters introduced are one chief, Balogun, and an old elder, Opalaba, resting his eyes on the stairs outside the palace kingdom. Being sought for advice, Opalaba warns the chief, “He that loves the good life must not aspire to be king” and instead must serve the people, unlike rich modern kings, or he may be punished by the mysteries of Jogbo, acknowledging the unknowable in Yoruba culture. Opalaba is clearly a source of wisdom for the elder, advising him that if his friend, Lapite, wishes to become a rich king that he must not take the oath and incisions. The dramatic narrative then proceeds to introduce Lapite (Image 4.14) arguing with his wife.
Asabi (Image 4.15), who aspires to be queen, about living arrangements should he be enthroned, but the prospective yet unsuspecting king is actually scheming to invite Tinuola (Image 4.16), who has become pregnant with another man, to accompany him in the palace. When Balogun discovers Tinuola’s secret, he is shocked but conspires to cover it up and prevent it from foiling his own greedy intentions (Image 4.17), immediately setting into motion an impactful web of lies in the form of a handful of compelling subplots which foreshadow imminent tragedy for the people of Jogbo.

Shortly after, the audience views Lapite’s refusal to receive the incisions and take the oath, effectively disregarding all things traditional by barking phrases like, “Don’t bind me to any backward tradition,” and claiming “rituals are concluded” (Image 4.18). Expectedly, such a taboo decision creates a harsh reaction by everyone, including Ayangalu, thus presenting a major obstacle for Jogbo’s future. But Lapite does not waver and instead becomes increasingly tyrannical following their collective reaction and even threatens everyone with a gun if they resist his orders in any way (Image 4.19), prompting Ayangalu’s response, “He is his own private king.” However, once Lapite’s
refusal is final, Balogun again visits the wise Opalaba in order to inquire about the potential dangers of his actions. He discovers that Lapite both faces the possibility of sharing the crown and is vulnerable to the fact that if wearing the crown when Ayangalu plays the Saworoide, or talking drum, he will incur a fatal headache, establishing another set of dramatic subplots which ultimately disparage avarice and greed.

Upon discovering Lapite’s actions, Opalaba displays a shocked expression at the king’s overconfidence, displayed by a lengthy close-up while propped against a glowing yellow-orange wall (Images 4.20-4.21). While the bright colors within the frame further highlight the gravity of Lapite’s actions, they also encourage the spectator to identify with Opalaba whose reaction is something of an official moral gauge for the events in Saworoide. Furthermore, after chief Balogun hurriedly leaves, Opalaba repeats the proverb or coded speech from earlier in the scene, “The bird perched on the roof is gathering information” (Image 4.22), referring to himself as a knowledgeable figure within the narrative, but it also alludes to the role of the spectator, or audience, who has
been gathering information vis-à-vis Opalaba’s character. In effect Opalaba provides a social commentary, reflexively informing the audience of the happenings of the story from within the text itself, like a Greek chorus.

Furthermore, Adesokan contextualizes the role of Opalaba, the “palace wit,” in Yoruba culture by elucidating how he stands for the “moral order” according to the “Ifa verse (“Okanran-Owonrin”),” a theme initiated into Kelani’s early films and still clearly evident with the presence of moral injunctions throughout Saworoide (Postcolonial Artists 106). Therefore, he is responsible for “exhorting the viewer to the kind of morality which the figure of the actor is the conduit for expressing” (Adesokan, Postcolonial Artists 96). Adesokan emphasizes the important nature of such a role by noting the didacticism requires a “philosophical ring” and that the impact of the actor’s personality is both crucial for “the success of the moral injunction” (Postcolonial Artists 96).

Adesokan additionally connects the aesthetics of exhortation to common self-conceptions in African popular arts resulting from pedagogical practices. He writes,
“The aesthetics of exhortation in the videofilms create a particular notion of the self in a social setting, and embody a strategic, open attitude toward life which can be related to populism as a flexible political ideology” (*Postcolonial Artists* 98). The ontology of this relationship of the spectator to popular art is then associated with a practice of self-conception generated from African poetic genres, such as *oriki,* which are “oral poems [which are] addressed to an individual to invoke the individual’s state of being” (99-100). Adesokan repeatedly emphasizes that “the *oriki* functions as modes of social address and self-conception” (*Postcolonial Artists* 100), at least partially rooting Kelani’s didactic style in indigenous, rather than imported or creolized, narrative techniques. Overall, the mix of such practices with elements from the typical Nollywood film would classify *Saworoide* as a creolized product with indigenous origins, one which is both a commentary on and product of a progressively globalizing world in which Kelani consistently reaffirms to audiences that Yoruba culture is an active member. Adesokan even suggests where the “aesthetic manifestations of the *oriki*” (*Postcolonial Artists* 102) occur in Kelani’s films are typically when elders help resolve disputes, and in the case of *Saworoide* characters like Ayangalu and old Amawomaro evoke the poetic form when teaching and praising young Adebola (later named Arese) who will become a focal point in the remainder of the film.
After a joyous celebration inaugurating Lapite as the king of Jogbo, his reign of terror in the pursuit of personal wealth begins without hesitation. Upon hearing of the threats to his throne, Lapite and Balogun decide to target Ayangalu and Adebomi, the latter murdered in the next scene along with his wife and Ayangalu’s daughter Adedigba. However, the couples’ son is spared and the young boy then appears on Ayangalu’s doorstep with a blood-soaked face (Image 4.24), and the pair escape into the bush; the initial threats to Lapite’s brutal authoritarianism are temporarily subdued, but due to their escape Lapite is aware danger still persists, becoming the crux of the remainder of the narrative. Nevertheless, without direct opposition and not bound by tradition, Lapite continues to wield his power. Following this iron-fisted stance, chief Balogun advises, when beaming “the forest is our gold mine,” that their fast path to “big money” in Jobo is dependent on exploiting the land’s natural resources at the expense of the welfare of the community. This suggestion is quickly realized within the narrative, as the very next image contains a bulldozer clearing the land in a visual manifestation of modernization at the sacrifice of tradition (Image 4.25), much like the final images of Djibril Diop Mambety’s *Hyenas* (1992) when, after Dramaan Drameh is devoured by towns people like wild hyenas, the plot concludes with the excavation of the land, and with that the
past, in the service of modernization. Kelani, however, uses the image as the beginning of a brief almost documentary-style montage as a reflection of Nigerian realities, rather than as a metaphorical closing idea as in *Hyenas*.

This montage continues with images of chainsaws slicing through tree trunks and men measuring and cutting logs (Image 4.26), all which seem to be presented in a matter of fact manner, with distanced objectivity, heightening the sense of realism in the sequence. Logging is an industry which has severely impacted Nigeria, and Kelani did highlight a similar theme in *Ti Oluwa Nile* (1993) ten years earlier. However, Kelani absolutely disregards any effects his films may have had on forest preservation, quickly replying “not at all” when asked if his warnings have been heeded, and adding the comment, “The forests are gone.” Nevertheless, Kelani’s inclusion of such themes evidences his social consciousness while implicating ill-advised, greedy leadership for the abuse of natural resources. It soon becomes more evident in the narrative to what extent the community is being affected by the loggers when a group comprised of the head of farmers, hunters, and elders visit Lapite and the chiefs complaining that loggers are destroying crops and the honey business with their machines, refusing to plant new
trees, moving into sacred forests, and even threatening any protesters with guns. However, Lapite sides with the loggers over the people, basing executive decisions on potential personal profit and even sidestepping his own chiefs to deepen his pockets in the form of foreign bank accounts.

At this point, Kelani skillfully crosscuts between the storyline with the loggers, the conflict between Asabi, Lapite’s first wife, and Tinuola, who lives with him in the palace, and finally Ayangalu and Arese, who progressively grows older each time the narrative returns to them in the forest. The discord between the women is volatile, demonstrated by a few encounters which develop into harsh name calling and even erupt into physical altercations in a manner characteristic of prototypical Nollywood excess (Images 4.27-4.28) discussed in chapter two. This conflict temporarily subsides, though, with Asabi’s threat to expose the true father of Tinuola’s baby, all common Nollywood themes of jealousy, paternity, and deceit. While these narrative tensions are always looming and occasionally resurface, they cease to explode and overrun or consume the plot like in most video films, as Kelani will quickly resolve or move on from the issue to Ayangalu and Arese, teaching the young boy proverbs pertaining to a bow and arrow and

(Image 4.27) (Image 4.28)
playing the drum as an older Arese dances (Image 4.29-4.31). Furthermore, because the subplot with Asabi and Tinuola is intercut with scenes highlighting drum playing and dancing, the creolized nature of *Saworoide* as both invested in Yoruba culture and as a product within the landscape of Nollywood is at times evidenced in the simple transition from one scene to the next.

At the end of this interlude, Ayangalu sits with his drum and glances up toward the sky, as if addressing his former home, and simply states, “Jogbo, sour like bitter kola” (Image 4.32). Following that the image dissolves into an establishing shot of the community, and then into a pair of luxury automobiles, one recognizable symbol of social mobility and greed in Nollywood, pulling into the palace compound. As
Ayangalu’s comment, which is not directed toward a character but rather to the audience, is juxtaposed with both the quarrels accompanying polygamy and the common theme of materialistic chiefs, it seems as if the drummer is not only implicating these events in Jogbo’s corruption but also reflecting on their overuse as the centerpiece of many narratives. With Saworoide, though, Kelani consistently returns to Yoruba culture, exhortatory practices and reflexive performances and techniques, creating an extremely unique, multi-faceted, measured, and culturally responsible film which references and utilizes Nollywood’s common registers while consistently overriding industry conventions.

As the chiefs emerge from their Mercedes, chirping about the benefits of the good life, Kelani highlights the role of the camera and of the audience initially with a sudden image of a man holding a small camera, which is incidentally pointed in the direction of Kelani’s camera although the shot also gives the impression of being from a chief’s perspective (Image 4.33). While the reporters are eventually expelled from the property, again indicating the lack of checks and balances in Lapite’s regime, their presence and willingness to ask questions about the origins of the automobiles speaks to the role of the
media as a general watchdog in exposing societal corruption (Image 4.34). However, the camera also inevitably serves as a reflexive reminder that Saworoide is also a film, and one in which the current scene soon progresses into a sophisticated combination of editing, cinematography, and sound, while again highlighting the importance of song and proverbs in Yoruba culture. The use of such “restrained” or ‘coded’ speech as a pedagogical tool, a familiar technique in many West African films, is also native to Yoruba culture and a technique employed by Opalaba as he is viewed in medium close-watching the aforementioned confrontation between the reporters and chiefs with a cunning smile from the staircase (Image 4.35). Later in the film, he delivers a series of proverbs to another skeptical chief including, “He wears rags and dances at night, but soon it will be daylight,” referring to the corruption which will soon be exposed; “A burglar offers to fix your doors and you’re not vigilant,” concerning the involvement of foreign loggers when settling community disputes; and “the hawk dances with the dove, the dove dances the dance of death,” referring to the treacherous nature of Jogbo’s partnership with the loggers.

After the reporters are kicked out, though, the film cuts to a low angle view of Opalaba as the camera slowly tracks and zooms closer while the elder begins rhythmically chanting, “These chiefs are reckless,” in a theatrical manner (Image 4.36). This image then dissolves into an image of a marketplace with stunning depth, in which women purchase goods in the foreground with vibrant colors and dilapidated shacks equally peppering the frame (Image 4.37), a group of young men reading the print news and seemingly becoming informed of the growing corruption (Image 4.38), general images of struggle, and as a result fighting amongst a sea of angry people (Image 4.39).
However, this sequence’s reflexive, anti-realist nature is most evident as Opalaba again ostensibly addresses the audience rather than a character, but more importantly because the sound of several voices can be heard, but never seen, singing in the background. In
this moment Kelani blends diegetic and non-diegetic music, thus drawing attention to the role of sound editing and the fact that sources inside and outside the world of the film are harmonizing in order to employ another exhortatory montage with the following message delivered musically: “These chiefs are reckless/They promise to serve the people/Once in power they steal and steal/They take bribes/While the people suffer/There will be repercussions/Who will save us from the logger’s war?” The “repercussions” mentioned in Opalaba’s verse are realized when the Youth League seizes a logging truck and triumphantly rides down the street and even threatening to attack Lapite with their weapons and newfound power following their battle victory (Image 4.40). Eventually this storyline leads to the teamwork of the loggers and the Youth League, including the former supplying the latter with weapons, in order to dethrone Lapite with knowledge that the king refused oaths and incisions and their mission is to steal the brass crown.

After Ayangalu sends the young man, formerly Adebola and now Arese, to Jogbo and the narrative implants the notion that he could be the community’s savior, he soon meets Lapite’s daughter Arapa while dancing and a coming of age romance begins brewing (Image 4.41). What is particularly interesting, though, is how their relationship blossoms amidst the backdrop of drumming and dancing, both integral to Yoruba culture, yet also official corruption plaguing Nigeria in general. At a dance competition featuring Arapa and Arese, the first image is a low angle shot of tree branches while the beating of the bata drums can be heard as the words, “Arapa confronts Arese, tough competition” appear on the screen as if translating what the drums are communicating (Image 4.42).
As the pair continue to dance, the drums persist: “Arapa advances, Arese advances. If I were you I’d dance with my arms, If I were you I’d dance with my legs, If I were you I’d dance with my whole body” (Images 4.43-4.44). This sequence again highlights the integral nature of the talking drum in Yoruba culture, and seemingly paints this young couple’s relationship as comparatively healthy as a result of it spawning from cultural tradition rather than materialism or deception.

However, this event is suddenly and dramatically interrupted by a well-armed youth league who fire their guns and steal the brass crown off Lapite’s head in an attempt to reverse trends of corruption (Image 4.45). When the Youth League is betrayed by the
loggers in favor of Lapite, again a decision based on personal gains, Colonel Lagata is commissioned by Lapite to successfully regain the crown, underscored by a intimidating image of the soldier riding along the front of a car with his loyal men by his side (Image 4.46). Once accomplished, however, Lagata, becoming equally inebriated and power hungry as his character rapidly progresses, castigates Lapite at a party for the retention of the crown, blaming him for the “deplorable state of the nation” and shooting him and several chiefs before claiming the brass crown himself in a trademark scene of dramatic and immoral excess which will serve as an impetus for the exhortatory measures taken in the film’s conclusion (Images 4.47-4.48).

Lagata’s presence is threatening to Jogbo as many of the military leaders had been, particularly considering Saworoide was made in 1999, the same year Nigeria emerged from sixteen years of consecutive military leadership, and thirty total since independence in 1960. His leadership, then, serves as something of an allegorical tale of the evils of pre-Obasanjo era, referring to former President Olusegun Obasanjo who was successfully elected in both the 1999 and 2003 elections and is generally considered a strong, well-respected Yoruba leader who helped stabilize many of the social issues
prevalent during the military regimes. Lapite and Lagata, however, like Sino Abacha before Obasanjo, displays tyrannical traits and even the corrupt chiefs fear his enthronement. While Jogbo is preparing for his reign, Ayangalu and elders are plotting to have the drummer present upon his inauguration in order to play the saworoide and dethrone Lagata due to the mythical headache. Even despite Ayangalu’s subsequent incarceration, his son Ayanniyi hears his father’s communication vis-à-vis the talking drum and, since he also received incision, is able to play the drum at Lagata’s coronation and prevent Jogbo from his wrath and greed in Lapite’s wake.

As the film concludes following Lagata’s defeat due to the mystical power of the saworoide, Arese/Adebola receives his incisions as the prospective future king and the young military members joyfully embrace with the Youth League, seemingly overcoming their differences in the absence of tyrants and attempting to communally move forward in order to restore Jogbo. Opalaba, of course, is consulted once more by Kelani’s camera, as he recapitulates his, and by extension the director’s, exhortatory message concerning the future fo the community” “The young and the old, we should all unite in building a better society. A bird does not perch for nothing, it is gathering information.” After
delivering these final lines, he begins walking away from the camera before a closing freeze frame, reemphasizing Opalaba’s role as a purveyor of knowledge within the film’s diegesis, but also as the conveyor of *Saworoide*’s morals in a manner which breaks through diegetic and non-diegetic boundaries in an attempt to reach audiences and affect individual and societal change.

Ultimately, not only the conclusion but the entire plot of *Saworoide*, and its sequel *Agogo Eewo* (2002) “teach that corruption is not condoned by Yoruba belief, ethics and morality, and that sooner or later justice will prevail by forces of nature” (Onabajo and Binutu 152). Therefore, Kelani’s didactic and exhortatory techniques at the conclusion of the film, also the province of other Yoruba and often Christian filmmakers within Nollywood, result from moral and ethical guidelines established within Yoruba culture which will punish deserving characters within the narrative both naturally and supernaturally. Furthermore, as Onabajo & Binutu explain, as a collective society, “the need for transparency, morality and accountability” act as a “call for participation” (153), which stems from an “innate potential power (ase) that each individual possesses” according to Yoruba belief. It is my belief, then, that Kelani’s aesthetics of exhortation, as coined by Adesokan, have a functional purpose much like *oriki*, one which serves to evoke and draw out the potential power in each individual viewer in order to minimize corruption and unethical behavior. Because the final images of both *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* conclude with direct addresses, they are primary examples of Kelani’s didactic style which urge a war-torn society to progress in a democratic fashion with strong, scrupulous leadership.
This final sentiment is then reemphasized in *Agogo Eewo*, or sacred gong, in which the banging of the title instrument acts, similar to the saworoide drum, as a means to regulate corrupt chiefs. The agogo eewo oath, which been phased out by modern kings, explains that if struck 7 times and a corrupt chief does not confess they will die, a threat to Balogun among others. While the drums are actual elements of Yoruba culture, the gong is fictional, like *Saworoide*’s oath, but symbolizes a similar vow to the people and community when any new government is sworn into office. Furthermore, the king who initiates the revival of the agogo eewo oath, Bosipo, is modeled after former President Olusegun Obasanjo, a comparison about which Kelani added, “Of course I’ve always denied it but yes” (Author Interview), referring to the accuracy behind the character inspiration. In any case, however, *Agogo Eewo* continues where *Saworoide* concluded, with a dangerous, crime-ridden and impoverished Jogbo in need of firmness and stability, arguably some of the same characteristics necessary for Nigeria to continue on a progressive path at the turn of the millennium, once again highlighting Kelani’s call to the Nigerian people to overcome differences, avoid corruption, and lead and live justly.

**HD/DV Griot: Yoruba Culture and Didactics in *Arugba* (2009)**

Technology, Culture, and Enchantment

In an article originally titled “Technological Crossroads” but later dubbed “Spielberg and I: The Digital Revolution,” Kelani realistically considers the level of high quality films in Nigeria and draws a logical correlation between one’s budget and one’s output. In view of Steven Spielberg’s affinity for shooting on celluloid despite his reliance on computer-generated effects, Kelani writes, “I could also be as passionate about the look and feel of
celluloid if I had access to US $50 million,” a modest average slated for the 2003 Hollywood film (“Spielberg and I” 91). But the Yoruba filmmaker, who has consistently produced films of a higher quality than his competitors in the first decade of his video filmmaking career, was optimistic for the wave of the future for Nollywood penetrating the industry by the late 1990s: digital video. Kelani declares, “The assertion that the only way we could produce quality films is by shooting celluloid is just not true” (“Spielberg and I” 91). He continues: “Perhaps we should begin a process of re-orientation before we lose our way completely. The digital revolution if embraced could help us to overcome the divide between us and the developed nations” (“Spielberg and I” 92). Kelani was an early proponent of the aesthetic possibilities of digital technology and began to envision how truly high quality films could be made and screened without the use of celluloid and instead with affordable equipment like the Sony DSR PD 150 pro-super camcorder, digital 5.1 surround sound and a 3,000 lumen projector (“Spielberg and I” 92). Adesokan even posits how this choice by Kelani to adopt new technology originated in something of a transnational realignment. He writes, “Kelani’s call for alternative technologies is to be seen in the context of a decisive shift from the national mode of celluloid film stock, which is modernist and analog, to the digital mode, which is commensurate with the transnational economic process” (Postcolonial Artists 85). While celluloid is not synonymous with Nigerian national film, the case is much different for many nations, both across Africa and the world, the transition from analog to digital also functions as an outcome of globalization and the international power and potential of the internet, a digital medium further enabling transnational relationships.
With Kelani’s *Arugba* (2010), the director’s more recent production—he since produced *Maami* (2012) after a series of piracy scandals—exhibits a sophisticated intersection of colorful imagery, music and dance, sound effects, and his trademark incorporation of Yoruba culture, altogether bolstered by comparatively advanced technology during production. *Arugba*, then, is a valid example of the massive technical potential capable with the transition to high definition digital video and Kelani’s utilization of a Panasonic P2 HD/DV camera for the production. As a result, *Arugba* presents a very innovative style which blends elements of music videos, myth and Yoruba culture, didactic or educational messages, and the use of dream-like sequences, creating a palimpsestic product that reflects the context of production.

This technical advancement is evident from the film’s opening fictional scenes, as a young woman, Adetutu, is climbing down rocks and approaching a stream within a high angle shot highlighted by a dark, almost brass tint and the presence of digitally composited sparkling lights across the frame (Image 4.49). As she bends down to fetch water, though, the sounds of singing, “Yemoja, O,” can be heard, causing Adetutu to glance around the beautiful landscape, an action portrayed by Kelani’s quick swish pans (Image 4.49) (Image 4.50).
back and forth across the setting accompanied by a hovering boomerang sound effect which draws attention to the camera movements. Suddenly, the image of a woman dressed in orange appears as the source of the mysterious singing and shocking Adetutu (Image 4.50). The lyrics of their homage, “Your magic touch turns the river into a flowing herb,” are directed at Yemoja, who Kelani described as the deity of the ocean and nurturing mother of waters (Author Interview), who offers food to Adetutu which she accepts albeit surprised (Images 4.51-4.52). By and large, the scene immediately emits a magical tone over spectators by introducing a narrative punctuated by the power of Yoruba deities, even if the audience soon becomes aware the experience with Yemoja was only a dream when Adetutu awakens in her room at the university.

Perhaps even more striking than the visual imagery in this scene, however, is the mere presence of Yemoja and the incorporation of Yoruba divinities in the story. This feature is interconnected with Kelani’s established devotion to Yoruba culture, first demonstrated by this sequence with Yemoja but emphasized further with the integration of Yoruba “performer king” Sango (to be discussed below) and the backdrop of the film being the masquerade related to the Osun-Osogbo festival. The Osun-Osogbo festival
relates to the terms *egungun*, which can “refer to any masquerade or masked figure” and “at the basis of this definition is the belief in some supernatural force” (Drewal 18).

While the Osun-Osogbo festival can be classified as *egungun*, the term itself has another distinction, Egungun, commonly associated with Oyo, Ibadan, and Osun states which “refers more specifically to the masking tradition generally attributed to the Oyo Yoruba and associated with the honoring of ancestors” (Drewal 18). Ultimately, making a film about such a crucial Yoruba masquerade is a serious task, and with *Arugba* Kelani attempts to harness the capabilities of HD/DV technology to creatively represent the power behind the festival and Yoruba religious beliefs.

According to Adesokan, Kelani believes there is an added “dimension to (the) question of enchantment” (*Postcolonial Artists* 93), other than sorcery and Pentecostalism, when dealing with the presence of otherworldly or fantastic elements in a typical film—a dimension which also involves the power of the cinematic image.

Adesokan contends:

> Because [Kelani] believes that cinema can be a means of cultural redirection for the spectator who is besieged by global images shot through with imposed economic and cultural agendas, he conceives of the image in any of his films as an attempt to retrieve mutually shared symbols…As a filmmaker, Kelani is aware that the concentration of moving images in frames constitutes narrative in cinema, and he believes that some of what is lost to besieged societies in the profusion of external economic and educational policies may be regained if people see things with which they were once familiar. (*Postcolonial Artists* 93)

This quote both makes the claim that Kelani envisions his films as a series of important images, emphasizing framing, which play an important role in the process of retrieving the cultural past, or “mutually shared symbols,” and that the medium of film is the channel through which spectators can be enchanted through the presence of something
previously absent. In the case of *Arugba*, what Kelani is re-familiarizing such viewers with is the power and majesty of Yoruba deities and general culture, first with the figure of Yemoja but overall with the focus on the Osun Osogbo masquerade. And, as this chapter suggests, a film artist like Kelani both possesses the knowledge that and utilizes the power of the medium of digital video which, especially in the face of globalization and technological advancement, may be best equipped to conjure such symbols, and to not only include themes of enchantment but to accomplish the enchanting.

**Between Festivals, Fiction, and Non-fiction**

Before Yemoja’s appearance and Adetutu’s story, though, *Arugba* actually begins with something of a prologue or backstory which interestingly notes the documentary origins of the work and situates the production between fiction and non-fiction. After the introduction of Mainframe and Opomulero as with all Kelani’s films, there is a short introduction first marked by the words “10 years earlier” on the screen and then featuring a digital image of a photo album which opens to reveal the photos on the first page, before zooming into one as if entering the past (Image 4.53). The next image contains an iris within which a crowd of people are bustling behind the words, “In 1995, Tunde Kelani started work on the cultural documentary *Oroki* which highlights the annual Osun Osogbo festival,” alluding to the important annual masquerade and traditional Yoruba ceremony in Osogbo, Osun state, honoring Osun, a Yoruba divinity, or orisha, and the river goddess. As the sequence progresses, the viewer becomes aware that the images within the series of irises are documentary footage of an actual Osun-Osogbo festival. Furthermore, the photo album contains Kelani, the flesh and blood director, along with
‘Gbonjula, who has been chosen as the Arugba, a young virgin girl responsible for carrying the sacrificial calabash, or hollowed-out gourd, during the upcoming Osun-Osogbo masquerade (Image 4.54).

Adeoti elaborates on the cultural significance of the Arugba and the masquerade in general:

The title ‘Arugba,’ is derived from ‘Arugba Osun,’ which refers to the votary maiden who bears the spiritual calabash of Osun, the river goddess. She is the principal figure during the annual worship and celebration of Osun in Osogbo, and ancient city in the south-west part of Nigeria. The Arugba is usually a virgin from the royal household. She leads the ritual procession from the king’s palace to the banks of the Osun river, a distance of about a mile. As she bears the calabash, silently and forbidden from uttering any word to mortals, she is a symbol of fortitude, sacrifice, and altruism. (Adeoti 34)

This introduction of the Arugba then prompts another documentary sequence in which a teacher describes the young girl and a voiceover informs audiences of some of the Arugbas duties during the festival and spectators briefly witness glimpses of ‘Gbonjula as she carries the sacrificial calabash (Images 4.55-4.56). Overall, this sequence acts as a
four minute prologue, connecting *Arugba* with non-fiction by marking its opening with a documentary sequence and real world inspiration. Therefore, by contextualizing Adetutu’s aforementioned dream sequence containing Yemoja as a scene occurring “10 years after” Kelani’s actual experiences, *Arugba* initially blurs fiction and non-fiction by juxtaposing documentary elements and Yoruba divinities, the natural world and the supernatural world, and essentially questions the ontological nature of such boundaries at all.

**Exhortation and Didactics**

Following this documentary opening and then the dream sequence with Yemoja, the audience is introduced to some common characteristics of Kelani’s oeuvre—colorful and traditional Yoruba meetings with the king (Oba Adejare), his greedy chiefs (Aigoro, played by Kelani mainstay Kareem Adepoju) (Image 4.57), and location shooting in Abeokuta—as well as conventions familiar in the video films such as themes of jealousy, crime, poverty and corruption within the fictitious community of Ilu Nla in 2008 (Image 4.58). Ilu Nla, or big town, is argued by Adeoti to include a strong pan-African element
in its portrait of corruption in an unidentified African city or town (Adeoti 34). However, at the same Adeoti discusses the heavy political allegory of the king’s reign and the politics of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, writing *Arugba* is a “panoramic view of and commentary on socio-political events in Nigeria from 1999-2007” (Adeoti 34). By setting the film in 2008, Adeoti points out, Kelani’s Ilu Nla is marked by the period in which the nation transitioned from military rule and through the democratic presidency of twice-elected Obasanjo, and following the controversial 2007 election of Umaru Yar’Adua.

With the establishment of an environment of corruption, as with Jogbo in *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo*, Kelani’s exhortatory devices are evident early in the narrative. After introducing the king, chiefs, and palace milieu, a scene in which a babalawo, or Ifa priest, seeks to ascertain the location of allegedly stolen beads and he requires a virgin to read the sand in his divination tray. When several of the mothers volunteer their daughters, who are all reluctant and thus reveal they are not virgins,
Adetutu offers to glance into the tray, depicted with an initial image of the sand and a second one containing special effects which essentially cause the sand to disappear (Image 4.59-4.60).

While her vision suggests the beads are not actually lost, and the commotion was caused by a slanderous comment by one woman to another, overall the scene works to confirm Adetutu’s sexual abstinence, an important piece of narrative information due to the fact that she was chosen by the king in the previous scene to be the Arugba. Overall, the juxtaposition of scenes are clear in their positive framing of the reward of chastity, the cultural privilege of being chose Arugba, and the message in turn serves a didactic function promoting the same values to address common societal problems. For example, while there is not a direct address espousing moral in any reflexive manner as with Opalaba in Saworoide and Agogo Eewo, the “the practice of sexual abstinence before marriage represented in the votary maiden is one habit that is believed to lessen the exposure to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases” (Adeoti 34). In fact, in a survey conducted following several mobile screenings of Arugba, “the need to pursue chastity” was identified as a major theme and one that survey respondents found
to be a key educational factor in the story (Ojebode 3), suggesting the effectiveness of Kelani’s ‘didactic register.’

*Arugba*’s exhibition capitalizes on history and popularity of Yoruba filmmakers using video projectors for public screening practiced by “traditional” producers associated with the Traveling theater (Haynes and Okome 56-57). Ojebode also situates such screenings in the category of “outdoor entertainment” practiced by the Greeks and the “Yoruba congregation to watch the *alaarinjo* masquerades in the days of the Oyo Empire” (Ojebode 4). *Arugba* was viewed “at cinemas in all the 57 local government and local council development areas of Lagos State” with each show sponsored by the Lagos State Government, the exchange being the inclusion of government messages before and at the middle of the film (Ojebode 3). After the screening, a survey was distributed to all viewers in order to gauge their experience of the film as well as their reflection upon the government messages and the practice of mobile cinema. As the report stated, of the more than 2500 spectators, 99.1 % “enjoyed the film” and over 87% of the viewers desired similar events monthly or at least bi-annually, suggesting the experience was extremely favorable from a number of perspectives, including educational (Ojebode 3). Overall, the survey focused on the didactic aspects of the film and the Lagos State Government attempted to capitalize on the pedagogical nature of Kelani’s work to include educational messages of their own, which were also “enjoyed” by over 98% of the respondents (Ojebode 3).

As mentioned, the film itself demonstrates a number of exhortatory scenes in which Kelani skillfully weaves through the intersection of Yoruba beliefs, magical realism, edutainment, and attention to social issues, many of which are commented on
within the survey. Ojebode describes *Arugba* as “an attempt to weave development issues (health education, cultural revival, chastity) into entertainment,” categorizing the film as edutainment (Ojebode 5). This label is noticeable when dealing with themes such as corruption, unemployment, and decaying infrastructure, but it is perhaps most evident in scenes related to health concerns such as treatment for dehydration and HIV/AIDS. First, Adetutu’s friend Bolatito is having difficulty with her sick infant and the protagonist literally performs a demonstration of how to mix and administer Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) (Image 4.61). When informed of the baby’s consistent diarrhea, Adetutu begins by explaining Bolatito must begin with a bottle of boiled clean water, add five cubes of sugar, and one teaspoon of salt” and her baby will be rehydrated
(Images 4.62-4.64). Because the preparation of ORT is explained visually, step-by-step, and due to the addition of English subtitles to reach non-Yoruba speaking Nigerians, Kelani’s exhortatory health messages maximize the potential of their educational impact for the benefit of children.

Similarly, Kelani weaves an important albeit underdeveloped storyline into the film regarding the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The “World Health Body,” having donated hundreds of thousands of dollars into the establishment of a clinic for preventative education, treatment and care related to the immune disease’s impact in Ilu Nla. While the funds for the project are being embezzled by Aigoro and subsumed by local corruption, the character of Makinwa’s father is quite dedicated to genuinely assisting the community despite the severe consequences of the disease, which are evidenced in two particular cases. First, the doctor himself unfortunately reports the time of death of one woman whose haunting image provides visual confirmation of the physical effects of HIV/AIDS (Image 4.65). In the following moments, one nurse notes how she is the fiftieth AIDS case lost at their clinic, a frightening microcosm reflecting an unthinkable
macrocosm. Additionally, the brief inclusion of a market, featuring two women twice in the film as commentary on the general state of society, is the setting for a young boy who visits the women for food due to the illness of his mother, who the audience learns is not doing well (Image 4.66). While not being directly expressed with dialogue, the fact that both these scenes are incorporated leads one to project the woman pronounced dead may be the young boy’s mother, seemingly creating a narrative backdrop in which death, disease, and orphans are all components which can be temporarily repressed vis-à-vis the next edit, but can never be extracted from the environment as a whole. Still, the lasting image of this subplot, occurring when Bolatito is diagnosed with HIV at the clinic after overcoming a fear of blood screening, is her two hands being warmly embraced by the female doctor while communicating the message that she is under their treatment and care.

While scenes referencing the HIV/AIDS pandemic do carry important messages and equate to real-world experiences, they are only touched upon and seem as if they could be further developed. This overabundance of critical themes and messages is something Kelani commented upon as an element which was challenging to balance.
during Arugba’s production. He remarked, “The problem I have with Arugba is trying to say so many things because each theme is enough to make another film” (Author Interview). I believe that the result of the thematic excess creates an extremely rich and interesting narrative flow, however, which always seems to be amassing energy by capitalizing on the crucial nature of a variety of social issues which do simultaneously impact society and comprise the plot. The effect of this thematic bricolage arguably classifies Arugba as something of Mainframe’s metafilm. This idea may be most identifiable with the theme surrounding the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States, whose name first appears when Makinwa’s original girlfriend Morenike is talking about the “Obama Phenomenon” with a friend living abroad (Image 4.68). While Arugba consistently presents mixed feelings about the global impact of the election, initially Morenike is locally and personally affected by competing with Makinwa’s interest in the American president, revealed with an early cut to the young man reading Obama’s The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream (2006) (Image 4.69). While Makinwa is aligned with the political spirit of the president’s call for rethinking of political principles, Morenike’s friend expresses
unfounded excitement concerning the possibility of Africans having amnesty or easier access to green cards while she seems ambivalent. Likewise, toward the film’s conclusion, the king Oba Adejare is delivered his travel documents in order to spend his secretive foreign bank accounts while abroad. However, this meeting occurs while the king is watching 2008 election night coverage on CNN (Image 4.70). Obama’s speech is clearly audible as the man suggests how the event is a progressive move for the global black race, but ultimately the king is again skeptical about the actual impact, mainly concerned with his own deep pockets (Image 4.71). Nonetheless, Oba Adejare is unquestionably participating in the world of global commerce and travel as he plans to re-circulate his embezzled funds in places like Europe and the United States, ultimately wrapping up the pessimistic storyline of corruption by letting Adejare’s secret dealings play out among a backdrop of a leadership narrative focused on sincerity and hope.

Music, Didactics, and Artistry

The backdrop of the Osun-Osogbo festival and Yoruba culture in general provide ample narrative and artistic space for the inclusion of dancing and music in several forms. Following the dream sequence with Yemoja, the next emphasis on music revolves around
a competition in which Adetutu performs with an all-female group to the admiring response of *Arugba*’s other star, Makinwa (Segun Edefila). Adetutu and her progressively feminist group are dressed in bright orange, performing on a colorful stage and delivering lyrics featuring themes of corruption, vanity, and power with lines such as, “Vain braggart loses all to conceit,” “self-conceited makes himself a public fool,” and “insists on building a castle in the air (Image 4.72). Furthermore, didactic messages can be deciphered when Adetutu sings, “Exercise restraint in politics,” and “Nobody is immune to hunger,” heeding warnings to the audience both within and outside the diegesis.

What is perhaps most interesting about this performance, though, is the rapid editing and impressive cinematography, punctuating the lyrics with a layered, contemporary style resembling a music video. Not only is there a verse delivered in English by a group member displaying hip-hop gestures and vocal intonations (Image 4.73), there are several instances where the camera angles rapidly shifts back and forth, nearly reversing screen direction and breaking the 180 degree rule in a frenetic manner by cutting to a handful angles within a few seconds (Images 4.74-4.77). While the inclusion
of music and dance is inherent to Yoruba cultural products, whether popular, artistic or both, success as a Yoruba actor is often heavily reliant on singing and dancing capabilities; Kelani emphasized how the inclusion of music and dance often unconsciously can be integrated into his films (Author Interview), likely due to the regularity and efficacy of such practices. In addition, in order to target the youth audiences which are such a crucial demographic for many of his exhortations, Kelani further stressed the importance of not only including music, but blending traditional and contemporary trends. In fact, Kelani even mentioned discussion of an *Arugba* soundtrack, as released with the famous plays of Herbert Ogunde with the Yoruba
Traveling Theater, which he suggested would sell better than the film and consequently tap into the extra-diegetic possibilities of his films (Author Interview).

Another figure like Adetutu, who symbolizes such a unique cultural symbiosis, both diegetically and non-diegetically, is Makinwa/Segun Adefila. Introduced as a character seeking more than “mere drumming and dancing” to commemorate the Osun-Osogbo masquerade, he is seemingly entranced by Adetutu’s aforementioned performance, completely ignoring his previous girlfriend and proposing a musical collaboration between himself and the protagonist who claims they have “no space for male membership.” While Makinwa is persistent in his courtship of Adetutu, his musical talent becomes increasingly evident within the narrative when his character is developed as a socially conscious young performer and student of dance, music, and Yoruba culture. This indisputably manifests itself due to the fact that Makinwa is played by Segun Adefila who composed music and choreography for his own performances and was described by Kelani as “totally committed” to Mainframe’s culturally-oriented films. Makinwa’s contributions to the Osun-Osogbo festival highlights Adefila’s devotion to Yoruba culture and divinities with his artistic representation of the story of Sango/Shango, an aforementioned ancestral “performer king” dating back to the Oyo empire and orisha of thunder and lightning, and his bata drummer sate. Spectators initially see Makinwa dancing in the cramped space of his dorm room between his bed and friend who beats the bata drum while singing, “Homage to forerunners in our art,” referring to Sango and Sate (Image 4.78). The retelling of this Yoruba oral tale is beautifully depicted with extreme long shots of the mythic pair atop the rocks of
Abeokuta, while the frame is again tinted with a silver tone indicating its setting in the past while casting a magical aura over the sequence (Image 4.79). The performance continues:

A compelling story of Sango’s love for the bata drum, Sate was Sango’s bata drummer. When they had a performance, While Sango thrilled the audience with his footwork, Sate made the drum roll, Sate had no equal as the bata drummer, Likewise Sango’s shuffling steps had no match, The duo became world-famous, Such that if Sate wasn’t drumming no function was complete, And if Sango wasn’t dancing there was no party.

While transitioning from the extreme long shots and medium close-ups of the mytho-historical counterparts and images of the present-day devotees, the lyrics note, “But once anger blinded reason and they parted ways” leading to Sango’s “loss of rhythm” and Sate
“inspiration” (Image 4.80). However, considering the indissoluble nature of their musical relationship, the story concludes with the notion that “drumming and dancing are inseparable” and that “symbiosis” is a proper philosophical approach to not only music and culture but also life (Image 4.81).

The complexity and layered messages contained within Adefila’s compositions is again highlighted towards the end of the film when Makinwa’s group, minus Adetutu, performs at the University. Directed toward the corrupt leadership and “old guard” of Nigerians whom the lyrics implicate as complicit, Adefila’s choreography and lyrics narrate clashes of language and cultural values in a creative manner like Adetutu’s earlier performance (also composed by Adefila). The performance begins with competing languages as a girl sings in English while a Yoruba commentary immediately follows and overlaps on the soundtrack, an aural representation of the creolized nature of the contemporary Nigerian landscape (Image 4.82). Her plea, “I don’t know what to do?” is matched by questions asking, “What is she saying?,” “Would you speak in the tongue of the tropics?,” and “Hear her ape foreign tongue?” in Yoruba. These responses, delivered by the stereotypically tribal and colorfully costumed dancers, symbolize native culture and the words “ape foreign tongue” seemingly reappropriate racist colonial terminology as a means to reframe English-speaking and thus critique the cultural hierarchy of imperialist relationships.

When another man, recognizable as Makinwa’s partner in their drumming and dancing routine earlier, enters the stage chanting philosophical passages in Yoruba, the English-speaking girl quickly exits the stage and screen. At that point the man musically ponders the limits of humankind and culture while addressing the elders as the cause to
many problems with the lines, “And to you our deluded elders, you watch the country drift, yet you’d been forewarned” (Images 4.83). Again, Kelani uses rapid editing during this performance, cutting from medium close-ups to long shots and altering the angle.
degree, resulting in spatial disorientation as several different images will accompany the same lyrical passage within a second (Images 4.83-4.86). The blending of this contemporary shooting style with themes of cultural imposition and exchange is further emphasized as Makinwa enters the stage and joins the troupe singing the title line, “Mi’O No Choice,” a creative and artistic unification of Yoruba and English (Image 4.87).

Makinwa’s lyrics again implicate elders claiming, “They’ve fouled this land” and “make me weep” indicating the young man’s sincerity for the betterment of his community and nation. Translating into “I have no choice,” Makinwa’s initial words focus on the predicament of the youth—“I don’t want to rob, yet I’m starving, what do I do?—due to the negligence and greed of prior leadership and the seeming institutionalization of corruption. This composition, like Adetutu’s performance, also features another singer which embodies western hip-hop style, glamorizing materialism and promoting foreign over local with the following lines: “Dreamin’ about New York make me want to get high high, Thinkin’ about Nigeria make me want to go why why, Leavin’ for London now makes me want to say bye-bye” (Image 4.88). Finally, the girl from the opening returns with a suitcase and marches across the stage as one of the native

(Image 4.88) (Image 4.89)
dancers calls for the government’s acknowledgement of this sentiment and trend amongst Nigerian youth (Image 4.89). Ultimately, these lines do highlight the many troubles plaguing contemporary Nigeria; but considering how the performance then mocks the initial female for leaving her native land behind for London, Adefila’s message, and Kelani’s, is surely more aligned with the lines “I’m the committed bard and I will keep warning” than the actions of abandoning the problem.

**Self-sacrifice and Repossession: From Votary Maiden to Makinwa**

While Makinwa’s performance is a success, Adetutu was not present to perform due to an occurrence which both accentuates the magical realism present within the narrative and also challenges Adetutu’s role as votary maiden. While threatened by the king when refusing his marriage proposal, the choice of Adetutu as the Arugba requires several checks and balances as well as the endorsement of Ifa oracles. However, since the initial dream sequence with Yemoja the narrative suggests that she has not only been chosen by the community but also by the Yoruba divinities. Nevertheless, the narrative makes it clear that the community and Adetutu are both constantly aware that choice is dependent on her chastity. This decision, while made independently by Adetutu, causes her sexuality to be the focus of local discussion and in some respects assumed to be temporary property of community and tradition. This notion reaches a climax when Adetutu is ultimately confronted by the elders and chiefs before the Osun-Osogbo festival and physically checked by an elder female who confirms she is in fact still a virgin.

While Adetutu was clearly pressured throughout the narrative regarding her chastity, the physical inspection is mainly the result of a newspaper story featuring
another unexpected subplot regarding the kidnapping of a group of children. While hitchhiking home, Adetutu is picked up two men in a van who she immediately realizes are criminals when she sees several children hungry and distressed in the back of the vehicle (Images 4.90-4.91). While the audience ultimately discovers that Adetutu frees the children by tricking and assaulting the assailants, the narrative, however, does not return to this unforeseen storyline until after Makinwa’s performance of “Mi’O No Choice.” Once the audience sees Makinwa holding the newspaper, Opomulero, featuring a front-page headline, “Adetutu saves kidnapped children,” they understand the subplot’s outcome before seeing the body of the action (Image 4.92). In effect, this narrative pattern creates a storyline which is presented in a non-linear fashion beginning with the
introduction but including the ending before the middle and further highlighting the thematic diversity and innovation.

When Makinwa visits the festival celebrations to reveal to Adetutu that he knows the kidnapping is the reason she could not make the performance, Kelani frames the heroine in the foreground, in front of a burning fire, with a muted and shallow background (Image 4.93). Despite the busy and layered mise-en-scene, the focus of the shot visually highlights the protagonist’s stunned but silent reaction as she considers the possible fallout of the kidnapping story being published. As she slowly back peddles away from Makinwa and reenters the celebration, seemingly entranced and compelled to
complete her cultural service, the shot frames Adetutu as physically located between the two figures, or forces, which desire and seek to possess the votary maiden throughout the film: Makinwa and the town of Osogbo itself. Later, upon discovering about the kidnapping the townspeople believe she was raped and will no longer be a suitable votary maiden, leading to Adetutu’s narration of her incredible escape. Ultimately, her role as votary maiden is finally confirmed and the following scenes highlight images from Kelani’s recreation of the Osun-Osogbo festival, from the masked figures, Yoruba drummers, and Adetutu’s carrying of the sacrificial calabash to the river bank (Images 4.94-4.97).

Following the festival, Makinwa and Adetutu are shown in one last scene in which Kelani’s utilization of HD/DV and digital effects highlight their romance now that she has paid her cultural respects as the votary maiden. The first image of the scene frames the couple in a long shot as they climb up the rocks with a picturesque landscape clearly marking their union with the beauty of the natural landscape (Image 4.98). As Adetutu explains her post-graduation plans to establish an NGO focusing on treatment of women and children, the pair get distracted by a sky which changes shade and slightly
darkens (Image 4.99). Discussing their potential relationship, Adetutu symbolically reclaims possession of her sexuality when teasing Makinwa that if he fails to catch her then he will have to wait until after the next Osun-Osogbo festival, prompting a cat and mouse chase. However, the camera then cuts to an image of Yemoja which appears, like in the earlier scene, accompanied by a series of floating magical orb until there is blue tint to the frame (Images 4.100-4.101). As the pair watch in amazement (Image 4.102), the deity formerly associated with Adetutu’s dream becomes an image which can be perceived by multiple characters within the narrative universe. As the pair watch the fantastical image, they are enchanted by Yemoja and her presence signifies Adetutu’s service is complete, seemingly granting approval of their potential union. Ultimately, their story concludes with the symbolic static long shot of Adetutu in Makinwa’s arms
within a frame marked by magical realism vis-à-vis the capabilities of digital video (Image 4.103). Furthermore, after closely analyzing the film, I would argue that Adesokan’s assertion that *Thunderbolt: Magun* is the work in which “Kelani has managed to build a bridge between specific Yoruba (and Nigerian) audiences and the ‘world’” (*Postcolonial Artists* 83), should since be extended to the high quality production of *Arugba*.

In conclusion, lamenting about the losses of famed Yoruba dancers, playwrights, and musicians, Kelani is conscious that Yoruba culture is working “against time” (Author Interview). Kelani summarized the importance of his cultural mission:

That’s my fear for the culture today. The alienation that is setting in…we’ve lost the sense of history and the greatness of our people. In modernity, I suppose, what we are expected to do is to be educated in the western sense and that’s a shame because we can’t even find out how great, we can’t even realize our potential if we have no connection with our past. If we go on like this we are going to have an identity crisis. (Author Interview)

Clearly passionate about the crucial nature of his role, what I have argued to be a film griot, Kelani, by nature of his craft, is aware that his culture must adapt to a modernizing world as he struggles to preserve and promote Yoruba wisdom, and “greatness,” while his films function as the remarkable realization of such cultural potential. Ultimately,
throughout the last two decades of constant production and increasing quality, Kelani has undoubtedly proven he is “clearly in his own class” (*Postcolonial Artists* 81), or at least a very exclusive class. And as the next chapter will introduce, Izu Ojukwu is establishing his own brand of quality filmmaking like Kelani and arguably occupies a similar space.
Chapter 5
Quality Control: The Case of Izu Ojukwu and Sitanda

The State of Things

In one contributing critic’s opinion, “It is easier to extract water from a stone than to get reliable statistics on the home-video industry in Nigeria” (Oladunjoye 63). Nevertheless, within the same book, Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria, editor Pierre Barrot quotes statistics from the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), claiming they are the “undisputed source of statistical information” (33), but there is additional published material that would suggest otherwise, or at the very least make one question the numbers. For example Adesokan writes, “In fact, Nigeria produced 876 feature length films in 2006, in comparison with 1091 in India and 485 in the United States” (Postcolonial Artists 81), citing statistics from UNESCO. This contrasts again with Barrot who includes a table indicating that the total number of films produced in 2006 was 1535, with 641 being made in English, 563 in Yoruba, 279 in Hausa and 52 in other languages (Barrot 33). Barrot further states, in his chapter entitled “Selling Like Hot Cake: Box Office and Statistics,” that “the total since 2004 is the equivalent of between three and five films each working day” (Barrot 33), an astounding number for any nation’s film industry. The unreliability of various published figures on Nollywood is unquestionably an obstacle for researchers and a symptom of the poor infrastructure, archiving sense, and general logistical disorganization of the industry as a result of piracy, powerful marketers, and a poor archiving sense. In any case, though, each statistical variation involves a massive volume of filmmaking while the conflicting numbers speak to the fluid nature of the burgeoning industry over the last two decades.
It is reasonable to intimate, especially in light of the previous chapter about the technical advancements and comparatively less frequent films by Kelani’s Mainframe Productions, how the quality of the standard Nollywood video film produced could increase as the sheer quantity of films decreases. But in most cases what determines the technical quality of a film made in Nigeria is the budget, determining the limitations of the production including the capabilities of casting. Of course a film will not necessarily possess and display technical prowess with money alone, but ample funding is required to supply even the most basic necessities during the pre-production, production, and post-production stages; and the average budget of a Nigerian film was determined by the NFVCB to be the equivalent to a mere 21,000 US dollars. However, Barrot contrasts this estimate with Kelani’s affirmation that nearly 50,000 US dollars to make a quality film in his opinion (Barrot 34). While this budgetary variation may seem beyond negligible to a Hollywood producer, the difference signifies a very real canyon of disparity between degrees of quality among filmmakers who already work with extremely limited resources.

So why do such budgetary limitations exist? The answer lies within the rapid assembly line mentality of the distributors that fuel the market, drive the sales, and essentially determine the rate of production. “Most distributors have in fact a completely commercial approach and insist on the production team working at an ordered pace,” states Barrot, stressing the marketers and distributors as the driving force behind the express rate of production. Teco Benson elaborated on the multi-faceted role of the marketers, especially considering many have also become producers:
Now they are controlling the market, the distribution, and they are controlling production. They have the money, they are businessmen. We [filmmakers] are the professionals, we have the intellect. We don’t have the funds. So we have a very bad situation…basically the whole direction is coming from the guys in the market. And most of them are not educated so because of that the only thing they think about is, “how do I make money?” (Author Interview)

Furthermore, Benson stressed how “people are crazy about new titles, new films,” and that they are disinterested in older titles (Author Interview), prompting marketers to justify their pressure on producers and directors to complete production and post-production at a rapid pace.

One area that is most affected by the small budgets and production schedule is sound quality. Of the millions of copies of films circulating, whether pirated or legitimate, the percentage of those with poor sound is unsatisfactorily high, both as a result of the production rate and illegal copying and recopying. This fact is especially disheartening because “most films are packed with dialogue and people need to understand what the characters are saying” (Barrot 55). Besides the budgetary constraints, however, Barrot provides an additional explanation for the lower sound quality because the “sound engineer does not have enough authority within the film crew to be able to interrupt a shot when the noise of a lorry or generator drowns out the voice of the actors” (Barrot 55). Benson also interestingly commented that he was unfamiliar with sound blankets as a method of at least partially muffling generator or other unwanted production noises (Author Interview). With a reliance on dialogue and the reduced clout of the sound engineer, sound is the main area where the representative Nollywood film would typically need improvement.
In terms of cinematography and the visual attentiveness to framing and lighting, Barrot also affirms “there is no place in the Nigerian video market for the visionary genius who lets a whim or an idea throw out all production schedules and budgets” (Barrot 53). Barrot continues, discussing the technical quality and effort comprising a particular shot:

Technical back-up (such as camera crane, dolly and tracking rails) has become increasingly important in ‘larger scale’ productions, but this equipment is used more for impact than the aesthetics or quality of the shot…artistic success or the technical quality of the shot is secondary; the directors know that their films are only going to be shown, in most cases, on a very small screen. (Barrot 27)

What results is an inevitable difference in quality according to the standards fostered by the cinema of Hollywood, Europe and elsewhere. On the basis of a 2006 study among University of Lagos students, researchers M’Bayo and Alao concluded participants clearly desired significant improvement of all areas of production and that they preferred foreign films (M’Bayo and Aleo 295). While it is difficult to argue that these judgments of quality do not apply to most films and filmmakers in Nollywood, there are certainly some directors who do labor over the aesthetics of the shot, like Kelani and Izu Ojukwu, who will be the focus of the second part of this chapter. These directors seem to separate themselves from the pack by standing out above the marketers in their understanding of celluloid production to be a succession of still images, thus aesthetically designing their films with the importance of the individual frame in mind, and with the ‘big screen’ as their ultimate goal.

Barrot lists the variety of video technologies employed in making a Nollywood production at the time of Sitanda’s production in 2005-2006: “VHS, Beta, DV, DVCam,
Super VHS, DVC-pro and Hi8” (Barrot 5). The utilization of such video technology, despite the technical care by some directors, has still historically been accompanied by several criticisms. For one, it had been a popular conception of filmmakers and academics alike, that celluloid film production produces a more desirable screen aesthetic than video technologies which often end up on undersized electronic screens rather than projected onto larger ones (McCall, “Pan-Africanism” 93). But more importantly there was a belief, particularly related to African film, that “the commitment to the celluloid medium was simultaneously aesthetic and political,” and that celluloid was associated with “elite art” and “social critique” while video was considered “part of the systematic reproduction of capitalist ideology” (McCall, “Pan-Africanism” 93). McCall explains how this schism resulted in the development of video industrialists:

When advances in digital video technology made it possible to produce feature-length movies on video with little more than a camera and a computer, it was not Africa’s celebrated filmmakers who seized this opportunity to produce their work free from the oversight of European grant review boards. It was street-smart entrepreneurs in Ghana and Nigeria who led Africa’s video revolution. (“Pan-Africanism” 93-94)

Likewise, Nigerian video filmmakers, whether Yoruba or Igbo, viewed the situation from the same standpoint and, considering the near impossibility of celluloid production with or without foreign assistance, opted to work with alternative technology which would enable not just greater production, but any production.

Furthermore, at the Nollywood Rising conference, Larkin notes how the filmmakers and Nollywood representatives exuded a “confidence and lack of need to apologize for what they were doing” (“Nollywood Rising” 110), refusing to willingly occupy a collective position of inferiority when compared to celluloid filmmakers. With
the absence of theaters that regularly play Nigerian films, among the very few theaters that even exist, culture of celluloid film production and large screen exhibition is no longer commonplace since the 1980’s. One scholar noted how diverse the video film’s “spaces of seeing” have become—video houses or “dedicated spaces,” inside homes or “private spaces,” “tie-in spaces” like stores and restaurants, and most interestingly in “found spaces” such as nearby video stores for chance viewings without purchasing—but virtually no theater screenings on a regular basis (Ajibade, 2007). Barrot mentions the opening of Silverbird cinemas in Victoria Island (Image 5.1) and other areas of Lagos. Ideally this endeavor would “benefit both celluloid films and the development of video-projectors,” according to Barrot, with the former helping to rekindle celluloid film production while the latter would assist with quality film exhibition (56). However, while these cinemas have encouraged higher quality local filmmaking, they still mainly screen American films and do not constitute a common outlet for the screening of

(Image 5.1; photo by author)
Nigerian films (55-56). McCall also acknowledges that rather than striving for the politically-minded pan-African goals of the “celebrated filmmakers” from other African countries, the pan-Africanism developed by Nigerian video films is one in which African films are actually viewed by African audiences rather than as “embassy films” or at European and North American festival selections.

But, with the absence of common theater screenings, filmmakers and spectators alike who desire an experience beyond the home video network can consider mobile cinema as a healthy and popular alternative in Nigeria to attending expensive theaters. However, quality of projection and sound are crucial factors in the overall positive experience of viewers and are still obstacles for exhibitors with insufficient equipment. Barrot notes a pair of experiences of nightmare public screenings, by the Nigerian Film Corporation in 2003 and the Abuja Film Festival in 2004 (Barrot 56), indicating how technical issues led to unfavorable audience responses, contrasting with the Arugba experience discussed last chapter.

There have been attempts made to enhance the quality of treatment received by those working behind and between the frame by increasing their control, with the creation of several labor and craft organizations like the Filmmakers Cooperative of Nigeria, The Motion Pictures Practitioners Association, and the Actors Guild (Oladunjoye 68). One of these initiatives, the Filmmakers Cooperative of Nigeria, operated from the important Surulere Film Market, where “filmmakers, not distributors, run the film market” (Obaseki 75). Filmmaker, producer, and critic Don Pedro Obaseki describes the relevance of
The Filmmakers Cooperative, which he argues was built with some “class” and “glamour”:

We wanted a place where we had some possibility of controlling events. Most of us have our businesses in Surelere, a neighborhood a bit like Nigeria’s ‘Hollywood’. Everybody who owns a film company in Nigeria is part of the Filmmakers Cooperative. (Obaseki 75)

Many important filmmakers and actors work and reside in this area of Lagos, including Teco Benson with whom I visited at his home in Surelere (Images 5.2-5.3). Benson offered more information about the Cooperative, and its function as a response to the marketing/distribution problem, dubbing it “an association that we found, the independent producers” in order to combat the marketers’ infiltration into production (Author Interview). He explained how the various filmmakers “contributed money, established and opened up shops, elected leaders, and opened distribution outlets” with the end result of “up(ping) the standard” of Nollywood films “so people can identify us with quality” (Author Interview). However, he also claimed that “everything is dead,” claiming lackluster leadership and the failure to guarantee justifiable profits from the
investments curbed this idea, as well as a Film Village which would provide a space for common production sets and locations (Author Interview).

Many critics and filmmakers believe in order for quality to drastically improve, there has to be major involvement from the government. For example, M’Bayo and Onabajo discuss how government funding would help aid attendance by Nigerians at local film schools, like the Jos National Film Institute, to ensure better training and ultimately higher quality products (M’Bayo and Onabajo, 79). In addition, the establishment of the Nigerian Film and Video Sound Archive (NFVSA) as an organization attempting to reestablish film and video culture with public screenings, preservation and restoration of productions, and the creation of a library archive is well documented\(^\text{12}\). However, there is reason to believe that government involvement would lead to corruption and failed infrastructure as in other areas of society. In addition to the contagious corruption among leaders, critics repeatedly note the inability of the state and local governments to provide basic resources, such as electricity, leading many to question whether their involvement would benefit filmmakers. Benson, for instance, notes how the resources of the Nigerian Film Corporation, a government owned film institute located in Jos, seldom reach the Nollywood filmmakers partially due to the central location of the city away from Lagos. Furthermore, Larkin expounds upon the general poor infrastructure across the country.

In Nigeria, no building is constructed without the knowledge that state infrastructures fail. In older buildings, the corners of garages are reserved for generators. In newer ones, special annexes are built to house generators, like the

\(^{12}\) See Nwanneka Okonkwo’s “Jos: Nigeria’s National Film, Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA): Ideas and Expectations” for an example of an article that discusses the development of the organization.
small mosques in wealthy family compounds. The necessity of electrical autonomy is a basic factor in the architecture of built space, the structures of planning, and the form and experience of Nigerian urban life” (Signal and Noise 243).

Overall, with the failure of the government to successfully navigate and provide basic, everyday needs, filmmakers do not feel they are typically the answer to facilitate higher quality productions.

Izu Ojukwu

However, despite these dreadful working conditions marred by a myriad of issues beyond electrical autonomy, directors like Kelani and Izu Ojukwu, the focus of the remainder of this chapter, have risen above the technical standards set throughout Nollywood’s history and set benchmarks of quality as both inspiration and encouragement for other filmmakers. Speaking about the selection of his film Abeni (2006) for screening at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2006, Kelani comments on the compulsion for Nigerian filmmakers to further evolve and improve their work:

We are not quite there yet but we are on our way. My experience in Toronto has further given me so many opportunities which will serve us in the future. At the first screening [of Abeni], I gave a prediction that with this recognition, we have been challenged in Nigeria to be confident enough to come forward, make better films, and reach for the stars. This is a challenge to every Nigerian film producer to step up the quality of our work. (“Interview by Jumoke Giwa”)

Like Kelani, Izu Ojukwu is a filmmaker who had already accepted a similar challenge by establishing a reputation for making quality films. Before receiving training in cinema including a class at the Jos National Film Institute, and as the famous sequence in Jamie Meltzer’s documentary Welcome to Nollywood (2007) both recalls and recreates,
Ojukwu constructed a projector using found materials as a youth. Literally demonstrating the transformation of garbage to treasure, Ojukwu’s actions evoke the nature of the Brazilian “esthetics of garbage” which, according to Shohat and Stam, includes “being condemned to recycle the materials of dominant culture” and is “appropriate to a Third World country picking through the leavings of an international system dominated by first World capitalism” (*Unthinking Eurocentrism* 310). However, considering the sustained success of the largely commercial Nollywood industry, then emphasizing a foundation of “garbage,” and thus a tiered system by which the Nigerian filmmaker is consistently marginalized, disregards that Ojukwu’s indoctrination into the world of cinema not only revolved around his understanding of film as a succession of still images, not as a video technology-based business venture, but was above all ignited by an ambitious, self-driven passion to discover the magic of cinema at all costs.

While initially being associated with action films—within the documentary, *Welcome to Nollywood* (2007), for one Izu is labeled as an action filmmaker, stemming from films like *The World is Mine* (2001) and *The Eleventh Hour* (2001) which include guns, battles, violence, car chases, and fast-paced action—Izu made it clear that, while such films are difficult and dangerous to produce, his scope is more wide-ranging than a specific genre or style of film. Izu commented about being associated with the particular genre:

> Because it is a growing industry, when you do something and do it well you become stock with it. You become a stereotype…then every producer comes to me, you know, with an action script, and suddenly I realize that this will lock me into a corner that I don’t want. I want to make movies that transform lives, that’s all, so I started rejecting action scripts and started to try my hand in more dramatic movies. (Author Interview)
Clearly setting his sights toward loftier goals than one particular genre would allow, Ojukwu then exhibited his talents in an important, stylized, and socio-politically conscious film produced by *Osuofia in London*’s Kingsley Ogoro, *Across the Niger* (2003).

A poignant drama about inter-ethnic strife resembling tensions present from the Biafran war (1967-1970) where Igbo provinces unsuccessfully attempted to secede from Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra, as well as between northern Hausa-Felani dominated provinces and those in the south, *Across the Niger* was an extremely successful sequel to Ogoro’s *Battle of Love* (2001). The beginning of *Across the Niger* lays out its message of unity within the first few moments with the following words on screen: “The military rape of Nigeria was a tragedy but perhaps the greatest tragedy of those unfortunate years was the disagreement which resulted in the historic civil war.” The pedagogical nature of the film’s conclusion, amidst a battle scene highlighted by excessive close-ups, guns, and overwhelming narrative tension, features the grandfather’s acknowledgement that society must overcome ethnic stereotypes, visually symbolized when he holds his Hausa-Igbo grandchild in the air accompanied by the exhortation, “One Nigeria, One Africa.” This message of anti-war and cross-cultural understanding led to Ojukwu’s first personal meeting with President Obasanjo and the adoption of the film by the federal government “to use as a reconciliation tool between the south and the north” (Author Interview).

Like Kelani, Ojukwu believes in the didactic function of film, claiming that edutainment is a personal necessity when making any film, affirming “we always want to teach before we entertain” (Author Interview). Such a statement, while not disregarding the commercial nature of the industry, highlights the intentions of filmmakers to include
exhortatory or didactic elements as an educational tool. For Ojukwu, many of these educational messages relate to the marginalization, stereotyping, and prejudice between various ethnic, religious, and national borders, consequently marking his filmography, including *Across the Niger* and *Sitanda*, with the spirit of unity, understanding, and the breaking down of socially constructed boundaries. Beginning his career involved with Christian films like *Icabad*, a Christian, biblical film” by his own accord, Izu worked with missionaries and filtered the beginning of his professional career through Christian faith (Author Interview). Being from Jos, a cosmopolitan city in Plateau State, Ojukwu was born of Igbo ethnicity but demonstrates the ability to speak Hausa as well as English and Igbo. Furthermore, Ojukwu was filming *The Child* (2010) in Yola, a small city in the northern Adamawa State populated by a Hausa and Muslim majority, during our interview. Overall, Ojukwu seems to occupy a comparatively multi-cultural foundation to both his productions and his life.

The film that really established Ojukwu’s reputation as a quality filmmaker, however, would be *Sitanda* (2006), a critically-acclaimed work which gained the director the winner of Best Picture and Best Director among five awards at the African Movie Academy Awards in 2007. Even Barrot claims *Sitanda* is “of an artistic standard that the home-video audience rarely sees,” but still soon after condemns all but two scenes as being “banal in every way” (105-106), demonstrating the quality ceiling many critics (dis)allow even the comparably most artistic productions. In analyzing *Sitanda* during the remainder of this chapter, I will highlight scenes and moments within the film which exhibit the visionary director’s technical skills, artistic attention to the aesthetics of
framing, creative use of sound, and overall unique boundary-breaking position within Nollywood, while firmly placing the film within its context of production.

_Sitanda_ (Image 5.4) is the first of a handful of Ojukwu’s films to benefit from his financial partnership with Amstel Malta Box Office, who sponsors AMBO, or “The Amstel Box Office Show,” a star-making reality television contest in which the winning actor receives a role in a well-funded film directed by Ojukwu. The result of this partnership with popular television culture and a major international corporate sponsor is the automatic casting of Azizat Sadiq as Sermu, and the admission by Ojukwu that _Sitanda_ was “the first time I got a budget that I thought I could be at least thirty percent comfortable with” (Author Interview). Again demonstrating the multi-cultural elements within Ojukwu’s films, _Sitanda_ “bring(s) together the superstar of the South, Stephanie Okereke [Ann], the most sought after young lead of the Hausa films, Ali Nuhu [Sitanda], and the rising star Azizat Sadiq [Sermu]” (Barrot 106). Nevertheless, Barrot views this unity solely in terms of marketing and as an attempt to appeal to several different audiences, and furthermore in terms of commercial and not artistic appeal, but not at all as a product of Izu’s own background or intentions.
While Barrot is correct to consider the marketing strategies behind Amstel Malta’s influence over the casting, as Ojukwu noted the company’s insistence on not taking political sides or favoring one ethnicity over another, he does not consider the transformations to the script which emphasize the rethinking of cultural stigmas and the questioning of cultural boundaries. In addition to their funding and consequent impact on casting Azizat Sadiq, however, Amstel Malta also shaped the content of the Fidel Akpom’s script and thus caused Ojukwu to adapt an historically relevant cultural story and weave it into Sitanda’s narrative. He describe how the original script contained an element of reincarnation and because Amstel Malta wanted to avoid religious topics the script was altered to instead include a component of the Osu caste system, an historically “outcast” ethnic lineage in Igboland:

My clients didn’t want to dabble into any religious theme so we had to look at a story which is peculiar to Africa, the outcast story, the Osu story, and we had to treat it from a different point of view which is trying to prove that these are people, that there is nothing in their blood that reads outcast. It’s just that society decided to ostracize them, and decided to cast dispersion on them. (Author Interview)

The inclusion of such a theme again speaks to Ojukwu’s natural inclination to produce films with both educational and multi-cultural messages, establishing him as a Nigerian director with both continental and international aspirations. Furthermore, Ojukwu is clear in his explanation that Sitanda is a South African name, coupled with the Nigerian-centered theme of Osu-Igbo ethnic tension, and the story set amongst the Fobo tribe (Author Interview). Ojukwu summarizes this cultural melting pot: “We didn’t present a Nigerian film. We merged various cultures and then made it an African movie” (Author Interview).
Ojukwu’s distinctive production schedule and style become further evident with his preference, like Kelani, to shoot in locations outside of Lagos, typically Jos but as I mentioned above *The Child* was filmed in Yola. Ojukwu elaborates on his locations preferences:

One problem I have is the concentration of everything in Lagos. Even though I relocated to Lagos I always shoot outside Lagos because I feel a lot of people are shooting in Lagos, in Enugu. If this is a Nigerian film we need to give other parts of the country the opportunity…The environment is not conducive for creativity [in Lagos]. It is conducive for business. Jos is better for creativity, you have a more enabling creative environment. (Author Interview)

Ojukwu capitalizes on the picturesque, natural landscape of Jos in his realization of *Sitanda’s* setting and mise-en-scene. Specifically, as I will discuss below, Ojukwu utilizes Plateau State’s Riyom Rock formation as an element of the backdrop of the oral tale which is set in the past and constitutes much of the non-linear narrative.

*Sitanda* begins, however, in the present with the story of a married couple—Ann (Stephanie Okereke) and Amanzee (Bimbo Manuel)—who clearly have an unresolved conflict between them, but as the story initially unfolds Ann is unaware of the root of Amanzee’s resentment. After the opening credit sequence, the plot begins with an image of a car entering a driveway during a pouring rainstorm (Image 5.5). As Amanzee emerges from the driver’s side door, he immediately opens the umbrella above his head in order to shield himself from the downpour as he enters their home. As a result of the static framing, spectators are largely unaware that Ann is a passenger inside the car until she slowly opens the door and stands alone in the rain, visibly offended at being snubbed by her husband while realizing she must drudge through the rain without an umbrella.
Therefore, because the camera remains stationary and outside of the vehicle, Ojukwu does not grant audience members any knowledge about the mood, conversation, or silence occurring between them inside the car, thus encouraging spectator identification with Ann in the film’s opening moments as a result of their mutual desire for information which is being withheld.

Following this opening scene, however, *Sitanda* presents a series of resounding visual statements about the fractured state of the couple’s marriage as the story begins: a symbolic slanted image of their wedding picture on the wall after Amanzee enters the house (Image 5.7); Ann framed in the background over Amanzee’s shoulder as he refuses to engage her in conversation in bed (Image 5.8); and Amanzee leaving for work the next morning without saying a word to his wife or touching the food she prepared him, as Ann stands in the doorway as a figure visually left behind her husband (Image 5.9). Joining scenes with occasional fades into and out of black, Ojukwu punctuates this opening sequence of *Sitanda* with these smooth transitions which formally distinguish themselves from the emotional patterns of customary cuts in Nollywood films which fit the excess-
exhortation model, but function within the narrative to signify the passing of time while creating an atmosphere surrounding their current exchanges that is polluted by this darkness. Immediately following one of these fades, Ann’s worrisome face is viewed through the window of their home as she waits for her husband to return from work, visually confined to a frame within a frame as her agency, and role in her marriage with Amanzee, is being challenged and further marginalized as each scene progresses (Image 5.10).

However, when he does return, seemingly pleasant with a bag of prepared food intended for dinner, he explains to Ann how he has lost his job before beginning to castigate her cooking and appearance, ultimately claiming she is from a “cursed” or
“outcast” family and explicitly highlighting the aforementioned Osu story. It is evident that Amanzee’s demeaning claims about her past are unfounded, but they seriously impact not only their marriage but also Ann’s own self-confidence and identity, leading her to visit her father to inquire about their ancestry. According to many critics, there is a tendency of mistreatment of women in Nollywood stories against which this sequence between Ann and Amanzee should be considered. Anyanwu, for example, surveyed representations of women in Nollywood and concluded “in most Nigerian video films, women are either depicted as catalysts to misfortune or portrayed as victims of the male folk who use them for rituals or as playthings” (87). Likewise, Okome summarizes the role of women inside and outside Nollywood, claiming that “while women constitute the bulk of the video audience, and are said to indirectly dictate thematic preferences for the entire popular public of the video film,” representations are often still born out of “inherited stereotypes of women” (“Women, Religion and the Video-Film” 6).

As the industry was just beginning in the mid-1990’s, Okunna researched the potential effect of many video films’ negative images of women on Nigerian society but with additional conclusions based on spectators’ acknowledgement that the negative portrayals are exaggerated and inaccurate. Concentrating on ten Igbo-language films, Okunna concluded that although the majority of the images were negative—portraying women as gold diggers, liars, and cheaters—still audience members “acknowledge that the extremely negative portrayal of women in the films is unrealistic” (33). As mentioned in the introduction, Carmella Garritano analyzes the representations of Nigerian women in three films—Hostages, Dust to Dust and True Confessions—paying attention partially to the negative portrayals but more so to the construction of gender. In
doing so, Garritano’s feminist reading of three videos makes a number of important observations based on the signification of the narrative, and is one of the few studies to contain a brief discussion based on the use of the voiceover as indicator of narrative authority. As in many video films, authority in the plots of *Hostages* and *Dust to Dust* belongs to the male, who communicate through voiceover to the audience and whose narrative point of view drives the story, while females’ roles remain within the diegesis and often in domestic locations (166-167). *True Confessions*, however, does grant the female character the ability to communicate through voiceover and the tale of her past, even if she eventually reveals her role to be deceitful (Garritano 167-168, 183), demonstrating a reading which both recognizes varying degrees of female authority and also that such a conclusion is only reachable vis-à-vis closer readings of the films’ content.

In the case of Okereke’s Ann in *Sitanda*, this initial mistreatment, while extremely harsh, is a narrative gateway for her cultural journey to discover about her family’s past which her father, as a family elder, delivers to her in the form of an oral tale featuring the title character, Sitanda. This element of the film establishes an “embedded narrative structure” by which an oral tale from the past functions as a means to reflect upon the present, accentuating the past-present-future continuum while employing a narrative structure common across African cinema and recognizable in films such as Dani Kouyate’s *Keita* (1994) (Thackway 62). In *Sitanda*, the purpose of the tale is to dispel the notion that Ann, her family, or any Osu who have been discriminated against and

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13 Ojukwu noted that many viewers believed Amanzee’s behavior is so reprehensible that the reunion of the couple is not a desired narrative outcome (Author Interview).
marginalized have been unjustly judged and that such culturally-based prejudices are social constructs which must be dismantled. The oral tale, then, not only adds an artistic, creative dimension to the film’s storytelling but also plays a practical, didactic role by disseminating an important societal message concerning the nature of caste systems on one hand, and about Ann’s oppression as a woman suffering from her husband’s lingering beliefs, espoused by his father, that Osu are ill-omened. *Sitanda* consequently utilizes the oral tale in manner similar to how the soap opera acts as a form of “secondary orality” through which oral culture and oral storytelling techniques can be transmitted through a modern medium (Haynes, “Introduction” 27). This lineage of popular culture—orature, soap opera, and video film—clearly marks a product where artistic storytelling techniques adapted from oral tales not only intersect with practical, didactic functions, but are ontologically designed to do just that.

As her father begins to inform Ann about her great great-grandfather’s origins in the “legendary Sitanda” (Image 5.11), Ojukwu transitions to the oral tale with a striking visual image of a very young Sitanda walking with his blind father atop an incredible rock formation overlooking a natural waterfall (Image 5.12). The pair is initially framed in an extreme long shot and appear as indistinguishable figures inhabiting a seemingly otherworldly location as a result of the magical nature of the landscape, emphasizing Ojukwu’s propensity for choosing locations outside of Lagos. However, as they walk toward the camera, the pair are officially introduced to the audience from a series of closer angles which both capture the beauty of the location and demonstrate Ojukwu’s careful attention to the aesthetics of each individual shot (Image 5.13).
Sitanda’s father begins explain to the young boy that his name means “greatness” and that the “earth shook” upon his birth, but he is suddenly interrupted by four men with spears who push the old man into the water while absconding with Sitanda before he is informed of his important past. As his father sits in shallow water and pleads for the men to return with the boy, it is evident they are kidnapping young Sitanda as a point-of-view shot is inflected with a much darker tone, the thieves silhouetted as one holds young Sitanda on his shoulders in the middle of the frame until a dissolve provides a seamless transition to an older Sitanda in servitude.
However, young Sitanda was abducted by men from another African tribe, presenting an oral tale based on a story about inter-ethnic or inter-tribal slavery among Africans, without the presence of any white characters in the entire story. A topic also featured in the following chapter about *Slave Warrior*, slavery and servitude between African tribes did exist and is often the subject of Nollywood films set among wars and ancient kingdoms (See *Heart of a Slave* for one example). Besides taking captives when fighting a neighboring tribe, researchers have examined various systems of servitude, some sophisticated and others underdeveloped, in which forms of slavery, servitude, or serfdom did exist in African societies before the development of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. While I do not intend this to be the forum for debating the relationship of indigenous African slavery with the foreign demand for labor, historians widely document that “slavery prevailed on the African continent before the arrival of Europeans,” citing specific examples in Upper Guinea Coast where the ruler-subject relationship was a constant focal point of observation, and in Senegambia where “Wolof nobles had several households, each comprising a wife, children and ‘slaves,’” (Rodney 431-433). Furthermore, one scholar discusses an analysis of Ashanti society in which there are five different forms of slavery and only two “correspond to the European idea of
slavery” (Fage 394). Moreover, it is believed that rights of Ashanti slaves “were far in advance of the rights of any slave in any colony in the Americas,” positing key distinctions between some forms of inter-tribal servitude and the global supply and demand system of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade but clearly acknowledging the practices did occur before the arrival of Europeans (Fage 394).

Like the opening shot of young Sitanda on the rocks from a great distance, the first images of older Sitanda are somewhat obscured and do not grant spectators an unobstructed view of the protagonist’s face, further creating a mysterious aura to the protagonist’s character and ancestry. While such a shot clearly could have been represented in a close-up but Ojukwu, partial to point of view shots, instead includes tree limbs in the lower portions of the frame and even people passing between the camera and its subject (Images 5.16-5.17). Such stylistic choices help generate a more authentic, busy working environment where dozens of slaves clear land and personal and collective emotions are punctuated by a desperation and desire for freedom accompanied by a longing for what was left behind. Ojukwu explained his practice of incorporating point of view shots: “I like more subjective shots, getting the audience involved in what my
principal character feels” (Author Interview). In this case, though, it is not only the protagonist whose subjective viewpoint is involved in establishing the film’s mood or tone, but a tertiary character who simply inquires about Sitanda’s state of mind based on his body language. Sitanda begins telling his fellow slave about his past while being reframed in a clearer close-up image until Ojukwu uses a screen wipe from right to left replacing the protagonist’s face with a black and white scene from his past, visually representing his memories with his father before his captivity (Images 5.18-5.19). While the scene is brief, its existence further exemplifies the types of multi-layered narratives which can exist within both orature and video films utilizing and based on oral storytelling techniques. But regardless, Sitanda’s memories are mechanism of escape
from the harsh conditions he faces as a slave, which are ruthlessly demonstrated when one burly captor beheads someone who had attempted to escape. Ojukwu initially expresses the armed captor’s power by using the depth of field to frame him in the background of the shot with a line of slaves kneeling one by one on the right of the screen (Image 5.20). However, rather than including onscreen violence, he cuts to the reactions of slaves and includes haunting screams and squeals on the soundtrack to intensify the spectators’ feeling of uneasiness as the slaves suffer at the hands of another tribe (Image 5.21).

At this point in the narrative, Ojukwu juxtaposes static shots, resembling the framing of theatrical scenes, with interesting shot-reverse shot sequences, close-ups, and point of view angles which utilize the unique capabilities of the camera and film as a medium. This syncretic style advances the plotline surrounding Sitanda and his love interest, Sermu, also a slave. Working in the bush, he first spots her in an interesting upside-down, through the legs point-of-view shot while bending to pick up some brush, suggesting that Sitanda will somehow reverse his perspective, and position as a result of this relationship. It is clear Sermu is also attracted by Sitanda, initially by returning his gaze and smile but later when framed behind bars yet with a stylized, blue, smoky mise-en-scene as she thinks of Sitanda (Image 5.22). This image is then graphically matched with a two shot of Sitanda discussing his feelings for Sermu (Image 5.23), both characters seemingly connected emotionally and through the juxtaposition of editing. This relationship is then expressed, not through dialogue, but rather a shot-reverse shot series of close-ups which visually exhibits the growing intensity between the couple without
words, granting slaves agency vis-à-vis their silent gazes, not their actions (Images 5.24-5.25).

As this relationship develops, however, the kingdom’s princess also desires Sitanda as a result of his courage. First, as she visits the slaves’ work area, custom dictates that each slave must line up and bow to her one by one, which the three men standing ahead of Sitanda do without hesitation (Image 5.26). However, as Sitanda approaches he refuses to bow, instead standing before the princess with his fist clenched until guards suddenly approach him maliciously (Image 5.27). The princess, though, instead raises her hand and, seemingly impressed with Sitanda’s bravery, calls off her protection while framed in a medium close-up looking in the direction of the camera
This action by Sitanda initiates another series of close-ups in which the power of the gaze is reemphasized and appropriated by Sitanda, a slave. As the protagonist is framed in close-up, the camera slowly zooms into his face while his gaze barely averts looking directly at the lens (Images 5.29-5.30). In this moment, the
powered princess refuses to meet his gaze directly, instead surprisingly rushing away
from the scene as the gravity of Sitanda’s actions seriously impact the remainder of the
narrative. There is closure, though, as Sitanda is revealed to be worthy of the kingdom’s
crown and the princess’s hand in marriage, which he ultimately refuses in order to live a
life in seclusion with Sermu. In the end, Sitanda’s life is spared but he is literally outcast
from society, although not on account of his inferiority.

Throughout the film, Ojukwu occasionally returns to Ann and her father,
reminding viewers of the non-linear narrative just as they further identify with Sitanda’s
story. Okereke may not have narrative authority over tale of Sitanda, but it is told to
inform her, and the audience, that the same virtues and strengths within the story are
exhibited by her family and own blood. It is gradually evident, as well, that not only is
Ann gaining clarity regarding her ancestry, and consequently obtaining more confidence,
Amanzee is feeling extremely remorseful for his hurtful words and actions. And if
considering the abovementioned comment that there was originally an element of
reincarnation in the story, suggesting Sitanda and Ann are actually the same spirit or soul,
the film would further empower her position in the present. Therefore, the film is
punctuated with an exhortatory sequence in which, reversing his actions from earlier in
the film, Amanzee holds the umbrella over Ann as she exits her car, symbolically
punishing himself by standing in the rain to protect his wife.

In conclusion, even though most Nigerian videos made in the twenty year history
of the industry do not resemble African films made on celluloid, it is undeniable that “the
video film has given a voice to the voiceless, hope and visibility to the marginalized,” a
task very familiar to African cinema, and even if “the art is in the emergent stage, it has all the potentials of dynamite” (Ogunleye, “Preface” ix).

I watch well-made films from other parts of Africa…I watch films from other Nigerian directors who I respect [and] I watch films to get inspired. I watch films from people who don’t sleep, who work day and night to create new things. So I can take advantage of what they created and go back to where I also have sleepless nights. (Author Interview)

With these words, Ojukwu clearly envisions himself as someone completely devoted to his craft, to the art of storytelling and filmmaking. Furthermore, as I have argued and demonstrated throughout this chapter, Sitanda is one film in which Ojukwu’s artistic capabilities are realized as a result of the director’s skillful use of aesthetic framing, inventive layering of sound, and overall use of didactic oral storytelling techniques.
Chapter 6

Oral Histories and Digital Futures:
Oliver Mbamara’s Slave Warrior as Nigerian Diaspora Film

While it was always considered that Lagos was the industry’s production center, the popularity of Nigerian video films has stretched well beyond the country’s borders and another equally interesting development is their widespread adoption in other African nations, first Anglophone areas but now Francophone areas as well, leading to the subsequent role of video technology and the development of video industries across Africa and in the Caribbean. As previously mentioned, Nigerian films are extremely popular in Kenya, as explored by Barrot and later Ogova Ondego in “Kenya and Nollywood: A State of Dependence,” Patrick Ebewo studies the video film and drama in Lesotho, and also included in Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria are articles which discuss the adoption of both the films and the filmmaking techniques in areas such as Zambia (Barlet), the proliferation of Evangelical Nigerian videos in Kinshasa (Fuita & Lumisa), and even the role of Hausa videos in French-speaking Niger as discussed by Ibbo Daddy Abdoulaye in his “Niger and Nollywood: the New Romantics.” Furthermore, the Digital Satellite Television channel Africa Magic has been a mainstay throughout the African continent and beyond, devoting about 80% of its programming to the widespread broadcast of Nigerian films (Barrot 43).

So, in fact, Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria indeed devotes a healthy portion of its pages to how the phenomenon does stretch outside Nigeria, but

14 See Phillip Cartelli’s “Nollywood Comes to the Caribbean” in Film International’s 2007 Nigerian film-based edition
little of this is spent exploring the popularity of the films amongst Nigerians living in the United States, and seemingly absent from this discussion altogether is the work of Nigerian Diaspora filmmakers who live in the United States while producing video-films which resemble the work of Nollywood. While much of the debate over the place of Nigerian video films in the place of film study has focused on their compatibility with and differentiation from the tropes of African film criticism, yet another crucial question is posed when considering how the structures of African film criticism fit or diverge from Nigerian Diaspora films, or films made by Nigerians living outside their native country. One Nigerian Diaspora film made in the United States that I will introduce as worthy of close analysis in this dissertation is Oliver Mbamara’s *Slave Warrior* (2006). Therefore, this chapter intends to introduce Mbamara as a director, producer and actor who has garnered no academic attention as a crucial Nigerian Diasporic filmmaker working in the interstices of culture, albeit slightly different than aforementioned models, and style. This chapter contends that and explains how Mbamara’s *Slave Warrior* employs a series of reflexive techniques, a conjunction of realist and anti-realist aesthetics, a socio-historical commentary and exhortatory function, and a contextual nature that situates its production in both Nigeria and the United States.

A Nigerian of Igbo heritage living in New York, Mbamara’s other feature film projects, such as *Spade: The Last Assignment* (2009) for which he produced, directed and starred, and *This America* (2005) for which he was screenwriter and star, naturally revolve around the difficulties faced by Africans, specifically Nigerians, living in the United States. Mbamara, along with *This America* director Bethels Agomuoh and Citor Felix, created African Film Company as a means to realize their film ideas in a market far
from Lagos and Enugu. But Mbamara’s location in the Nigerian Diaspora has not shifted his focus away from his native land, as he discussed: “Though I am mostly outside Nigeria, I still consider myself a part of the Nigerian film industry but one who is in a unique position to help bridge the gap between Nigeria and the world. I proudly use my Nigerian Directors acronym (DGN).” (Author Interview)

The production of Slave Warrior reflects this inbetweenness, requiring two separate month-long trips to Imo State, Nigeria and three months total, contrasting with the legendary week and day-long shoots produced entirely within Nigeria. Filming in Nigeria proved to be logistically difficult and costly, and in the scenes shot in the jungle, a number of “natural elements in the bush such as dangerous snakes, wild ants, and piercing plants” challenged filmmakers and performers alike, adding to the film’s authenticity (Author Interview). Although Mbamara did not divulge an exact figure, likely due to the fact that it was personally funded, he admitted Slave Warrior’s budget was “ultra low low” (Author Interview), and the film is the first part of a trilogy, both common characteristics of Nigerian videos. While budgetary limitations have prevented the production of subsequent films in the trilogy, the same financial hardships which breed creative and cost-effective responses in Nigeria have led Mbamara to employ similar techniques while making Slave Warrior, For example, Mbamara shot the film on DV Cam, which was scripted but not storyboarded to save time and money. However, Mbamara believes the reality of these shooting conditions and the consequent funding added an “element of spontaneity” to the production that would not have necessarily existed otherwise (Author Interview).
As mentioned, Slave Warrior’s narrative content does not stray from this syncretic pattern either, as the film opens with a sequence which marks M bamara’s diasporic location as a filmmaker within a film that suggests an understanding of his position requires a strong relationship with his past in Nigeria. The first image following the film’s title Slave Warrior: The Beginning informs viewers that this story was “Inspired by a true story generations ago passed down by word of mouth,” acknowledging the film’s oral history and indirectly emphasizing the importance of orality in Nigerian culture (Image 6.1). However, the plot then begins by situating the action of the story initially in a metropolis easily recognizable as New York City, M bamara’s city of residence, once the camera tilts down to frame the Empire State Building (Image 6.2). The juxtaposition of these words and images suggests the events of the film Slave Warrior exist somewhere in between these two worlds.

Inspired By A True Story
Generations Ago
Passed down by Word of Mouth

(Image 6.1) (Image 6.2)

Slave Warrior’s diasporic concerns are then immediately highlighted in this urban setting as a Nigerian student, protagonist William played by M bamara, is introduced as a character desiring authentic representations of African culture and history. As the camera
tilts down, two men (who we discover are named William and Fred) round the corner of the busy city block and into the frame (Image 6.3). At the same time, as the camera cuts to a medium two shot, one explains that the William and Fred have spent the day searching the city for “something African, something authentic, something original.” Fred responds by jokingly commenting that William should go to Africa but their location within this urban New York landscape is emphasized and reemphasized with the exchange of angles from medium two shot to a high angle long shot establishing the men’s actual position among the hustling and bustling passers-by (Images 6.4-6.5). Furthermore, the entire opening scene on the streets is shot in a very realistic style, including ambient sound of traffic and crowds. The sense of hectic activity is enhanced
with the loud bass and rhythm tracks of the hip-hop music accompanying the men’s
discussion. The realist aesthetics introduced in this New York sequence is crucial
because, as I will argue throughout the chapter, it is later combined with anti-realist
aesthetics and time travel to create the work’s syncretic style, but furthermore because it
is the scene marked by the realism of the city surroundings in which William’s narrative
mission is equated with Mbamara’s real life undertaking.

Mbamara explains the development of this idea after he moved to the United
States and sought information on the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade:

I realized that some people carried the wrong notion about this piece of
history and it seemed to influence their perception and relationship with
modern day African immigrants/descendants and Africa in general. So I
traveled back home and asked my father to tell me what he knew about
slavery. Incidentally, my father listened a lot to his father, my grandfather
who lived in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. So, he shared the
stories with me and from there I decided to make the film *Slave Warrior* to
fill in some of the gap. (Author Interview)

In this sense, *Slave Warrior* attempts to digitize oral history for the benefit of future
generations by retelling it from an African perspective, both that of the oral tale and
through his own diasporic location. In essence the opening sequence acts as the film’s
ontology while placing William within a location that he will soon leave in order to
explore his Ibo roots in Nigeria, which includes an emotional journey back in time to
when he battled slave traders in another life. In a reflexive and creative manner, William
acts as a stand-in for Mbamara, his quest to absorb African culture echoing the
producer/director/actor’s own frustration with the dearth of authenticity of historical
documentation and scholarship about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.
As a result of this ontology, Mbamara’s retelling of the century old story was not aimed at commerciality but instead meant to serve educational needs as well as entertain, rendering *Slave Warrior* a form of edutainment:

Our plan is to share/distribute the film as a piece of history with helpful educational content. We did not just want to release the movie like any other movie as our goal is not simply to make money from the movie (although that would be encouraging and actually help us realize the making of the subsequent trilogy). (Author Interview)

For example, within the film Mbamara consciously features forms of Pre-Trans-Atlantic slave trade existent in Nigerian societies as a topic rarely discussed outside academic circles, and the film’s website, www.slavewarrior.com, even includes an essay by the director entitled “Slavery In Africa: Who Will Tell The True Story?” (found here, http://africanevents.com/slavewarrior-historynotes.htm), in which he equates such forms of slavery with a replacement for incarceration or community excommunication rather than as a mass market for thingification. While Mbamara bases his arguments against a master narrative about slavery found on internet encyclopedias and not within the scholarly research completed by African historians, which is barely touched upon in chapter five, the spirit of his argument results from a valid notion that mass media images of inter-tribal slavery among Africans are seldom represented by Africans and are consequently misunderstood.

In the film’s opening, however, William is not as solutions-oriented as Mbamara when he disbelieves that Fred actually knows a man in the city that possesses some artifacts, but he is convinced to pay the man a visit. However, the film suddenly shifts to a separate storyline with an abrupt cut to the exterior of a house and a slow pan inside to reveal an unidentified woman who seems deep in thought (Image 6.6). This edit adds
something of an abrupt and jarring element to the transition between these two scenes; before fully being introduced to the first two characters (William and Eric), unaware even of their names, the spectator must shift attention to another woman who later identifies herself as Roslyn and whose connection to the previous scene is unclear, immediately creating a temporal and spatial shift in the narrative which will become increasingly important to the film’s functionality. But the disjunctive nature of the cut to Roslyn is emphasized both by the addition of bright colors to the frame and the non-diegetic music added on the soundtrack. The resulting combination of the loud hip-hop in the opening scene with the gentle acoustic music by US-based Nigerian artist and musician Kuku draws further attention to the transition as the song marking the cut is a love song—“Ife,” the title is a love song and the Yoruba word for love—setting a drastically different mood than the opening scene. This seemingly conflicting arrangement of music, connected by a soundbridge as one image replaces the other, suggests the film is invested in the intermingling, and eventual bridging, of ostensibly disparate elements, further establishing *Slave Warrior*’s nature as stylistically layered.
In the very next shot temporal and spatial continuity is again interrupted as the image of Roslyn displays the effect of being “digitally washed out” as a means to dissolve the image and transition to her flashback of the events consuming her mind (Images 6.7 and 6.8), creating a third location and challenging conventional narrative linearity in the first few minutes. After the dissolve, an iris surrounding the frame makes it evident Roslyn is having a flashback of when she meets the protagonist, and a classic demonstration of crosscutting reveals the pair are literally on a course for physical impact, neither aware of the other’s presence around the corner (Images 6.9-6.10). William’s location in New York is again stressed as his Yankees hat is primarily visible
in the frame. Once the audience recognizes the protagonist from the earlier scene, it is clear Roslyn is consumed with thoughts about her prior encounter with him. After the two actually do bump into one another (Image 6.11), and exchange an initial awkward moment, they simultaneously ask, “Have we met?” While they both seem perplexed as to where and when their paths may have previously crossed, they are unable to resolve that question before William retrieves her dropped keys, introduces himself and they begin talking. While their conversation is partially muted due to the strong presence of “Ife” in the scene, it is clear that the pair has an instant rapport and the meeting affected her emotionally (Image 6.12). However, the initial temporal layering, and the fact that the film explores the interplay of the past and the present indicates that their bond may well be a product of an era past. Nonetheless, this scene elapses quickly without resolving the question of their history while suggesting they may also have a future.

As the flashback ends and the film again returns to Roslyn’s room, “Ife” continues to play as she resumes her thoughts about William, asking herself, “Why am I thinking so much about this guy?” and concluding that she must “get over this.” Again Mbamara’s stylistic choices emphasize the temporal and spatial shifts in a reflexive
manner which suggests Roslyn is wavering between emotions. As Roslyn contemplates these thoughts, she is literally visible in two spaces on screen, created by means of what could be referred to as a digital jump cut or superimposition (Images 6.13-6.14). While the shot slightly shifts, Roslyn’s figure leaves a trace of her former self on screen suggesting fractions of a second have elapsed, reminiscent of Godard’s *Breathless* (1959) with the addition of the superimposed images. Finally, Roslyn lays down and attempts to temporarilly suppress these thoughts and take a nap, followed by a digital wipe as yet another accentuated edit returns the narrative to William’s search (Image 6.15). Overall, this series of reflexive techniques used in the *Slave Warrior*’s first few scenes draws attention to the camera and to the medium of film in a manner uncharacteristically
associated with the Nigerian film industry. However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, those classifications should be developed more carefully and with attention to particular films as works of art. At the same time, the realistic aspects of the sound and documentary-like feel of the opening provide an interesting blend of style from the film’s first images.

Following the wipe and the opening of an elevator door, again emphasized by the transition from Kuku’s “Ife” to a jazzy, horn-dominated soundtrack reminiscent of Nigerian high-life rhythm sections, William and Fred enter to meet the African chief. Perhaps the most interesting and symbolic character in the remainder of the sequence is in fact Chief White (Image 6.16), an American who is actually a crowned Ibo chief according to Mbamara (Author Interview). The director explains:

His role is symbolic of the fact that while many Africans are shying away from their culture and becoming too westernized, there are people who are indeed very interested in African culture and history even though they are not Africans, at least in this lifetime. Yet, the more serious fact is that his role is a caveat to Africans that if we are not careful, if we are not true to ourselves, and if we give up on our culture and tradition, we will get to a point where foreigners will now become the custodians of our tradition. (Author Interview)
While Mbamara uses White as a means to introduce and explore these questions related to authority and African culture, he remains an honorable figure with important wisdom to impart upon the characters and by extension the audience. William is skeptical, however, after the chief inquires if he is the man looking to observe some African art and introduces himself saying, “My name is White, and I am the Collector,” terminology that is often associated with illegal purchase and sale of African artifacts, also the subject of Spade: The Last Assignment (2009), the second film written and directed by Mbamara. Mbamara captures this uncertainty when temporarily framing William in the foreground, guardedly eyeing White as he enters the office to view the collection (Image 6.17).

(Image 6.17)

The sequence following their introductions begins with William expressing his concerns about a white man being the “custodian” of African culture in this instance until the camera cuts to White as he slams a set of keys down atop of a copy of the African Sun Times, the unique weekly American newspaper covering African issues (Images 6.18-6.19). The abrupt edit to White’s action suggests the keys are an extremely important symbol in the film, one which Mbamara elaborated upon when interviewed. Mbamara
commented that “the key is one of the many symbols and open-secret messages in the movie left for the consumption of those who could look beyond the façade to see what lied beneath” (Author Interview). Mbamara emphasizes their importance for the entire unrealized trilogy but notes the multi-varied functions of the keys in Slave Warrior, including the idea that White opens cultural doors for two diasporic Africans although “the keys are still available in the open (on the table) where anyone in need of them may reach them” and “will work regardless of who uses them” (Author Interview). This open-ended gesture relates to White’s comment that skin is only “clothing for the body” and the notion that racial prejudices and beliefs based on those prejudices are problematic and misguided.

After White moderates William’s distrust at the color of his skin, and informs them that he is in fact an Igbo chief, they begin discussing William’s desire to encounter authentic African art for his history paper. As William begins to explore some of the artifacts on White’s table, the chief expresses his wish to properly greet William and Fred with kola nuts as a sign of “good intentions” according to Igbo customs. William again indicates one’s difficulty finding kola nuts in the United States, but White responds that
those “truly intense in their culture” will know where to seek such products. As White removes the kola nuts from his desk drawer, ominous music invades the soundtrack designating another alteration in the overall mood of the narrative. While White prepares the kola nuts, William beings to explore some of the artifacts, first viewed in a medium shot which soon cuts to a close-up angle of his fingers grasping the rod of a branding iron (Image 6.20). In this brief moment, the film immediately flashes back to an image of William, apprehended and in utter distress, with a branding iron inching closer to his body (Image 6.21). While this image is brief, it indicates that the branding iron is connected to William’s past while introducing the audience to another dimension of the film’s exploration with temporal shifts.

William is shaken by this experience as the camera returns to the office where White explains that skin is clothing for the body, as previously mentioned, and asks, “Who is to say that I was not born a black man and you not born a white in a past life?” While Fred nods in agreement with the chief’s proposition, William’s second ephemeral flashback reveals that in his past life not only was he the same color, but severely
persecuted solely on the basis of that color. In this moment a clearer and more close-up shot of William, already marked with blood and burning skin by the instrument of oppression, reappears and lingers long enough to process the scene for nearly an entire second (Image 6.22). After this second disturbing flashback, William asks to use the bathroom and before White can answer he is already halfway down the hall, clutching his chest. When he gazes in the bathroom mirror, the audience becomes aware that William’s shirt is stained with blood in the same circular pattern as the iron (Image 6.23), leading viewers to conclude that William did not just experience this flashback psychologically but physically, an encounter only possible through a massive temporal shift. Therefore, rather than learning about its brutal past via lecture or book, William viscerally experiences history when he comes in contact with chief White’s branding iron. As he continues to stare at the stain, however, a superimposed image of William’s clean shirt replaces the stained one, suggesting the experience may not have been physical after all. Overall, this flashback further emphasizes the anti-realist aesthetics and foreshadows the transference of the plot from New York to Nigeria, in effect causing the narrative to traverse the Atlantic as a means to rediscover his past and reappropriate the tale.
After returning from the bathroom, William quickly departs but White offers him the iron to study, which is covered by a bag as he carries it out while the camera cuts and zooms into the plate of kola nuts, an indication of the Igbo culture to be explored in the remainder of *Slave Warrior*. As he carries the iron onto the subway train, a cut to Roslyn asleep soon becomes another superimposition in which the audience sees a faint image of her asleep accompanied by an image of William holding a woman presumed to be Roslyn (in another life), spinning her around while the pair smile in rapture (Image 6.24). This vision of utter joy is then quickly replaced by one of despair, as the woman in William’s arms is submerged in a pit with outstretched arms and a look of extreme suffering (Image 6.25). As Roslyn awakes in disbelief, she begins to process the possibility that William is a part of her past, simultaneously as he is discovering the depths to which slavery was a part of his past.

The very next scene exposes that William telephones his father in Nigeria (Image 6.26), whom the audience hears inform him, “There comes a time when a man looks at the past to understand the present for the implement of the future,” echoing the proverb, “The celebration of tomorrow’s harvest is dependent on the effort of today’s planting, for
tomorrow soon becomes today.” While William is reluctant to heed his father’s advice to return to Nigeria and not touch the iron again, ominous synthesizer sounds and the rhythmic beating of a drum provide a ritual warning to spectators that reluctance will fold in the face of danger. As William struggles to formulate his paper and falls asleep, the audience is not granted just a glimpse or superimposition of images from his dream, but rather a full audiovisual representation of his vision. Exhibited by the words on screen, “Long Time Ago in the Past,” this vague indicator tells viewers this scene is indeed a flashback, one in which shackled, bloody ankles and feet hurriedly move toward the camera while heavy out-of-breath gasps inhabit the soundtrack (Image 6.27).

After just a few moments it is evident that the character who is struggling to escape in this vision is another form of William (Image 6.28), a representation from his past life, in which he is being targeted and chased through the jungle by trans-Atlantic slave traders. His body is clearly exhausted and beaten as he labors through the brush, accentuated by how the camera lingers behind him and focuses on the long heavy chain attached to the shackles around his ankles which he is straining to drag through the
woods (Image 6.29). As William struggles and this additional facet of his character is developed, his role becomes more complex with two simultaneous and parallel plot lines that essentially highlight Mbamara’s reflexive role in the entire film, as a director directly identifiable with two separate hero quests that transcend the common daily experience: one, as William, who experiences temporal shifts as part of an identity search indirectly related to a past involving slavery, and now a second, as Ike, a character who has been completely embedded in the past as a victim of slave traders. Mbamara’s multi-faceted identity as a Nigerian living in the United States, a figure who is associated with two spaces, is thus reflected in a multi-faceted character who occupies two separate times and spaces in *Slave Warrior.*
While a shackled William/Ike persists on, cutaways to white men wearing colonial garb and carrying muskets, one of which fires at William and causes him to seek shelter in the brush, indicate that he is potentially a victim of trans-Atlantic era slave trading (Images 6.30-6.31). However, Mbamara does not portray the brutal establishment of this human trafficking infrastructure as a binary issue of black versus white, but rather a more complex mixture of power and authority exhibited by black characters that circumstantially assist their mission and degrees of seemingly human sympathy among some white slave traders. For example, the initial scene in which the audience is introduced to the slave traders includes two armed black men also searching for William/Ike (Images 6.32-6.33). Furthermore, William/Ike’s most aggressive act in this initial scene with slave traders is an attack directed at one of the black men, as he reappears from behind the bush and proceeds to strangle him (Image 6.34), severely injuring his eye until he is knocked down by yet another blow by the white slave trader.
While this scene displays to the viewer that William/Ike is recaptured, it also accentuates the inhuman assembly line mentality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, particularly when the dominant trader exclaims, “Let him die, there are many others that will take his place,” about the black man assisting his mission whose life is as expendable as any slave. This scene has something of an anachronistic feel that again emphasizes the anti-realist aspects of the film, initially by the colonial outfits and the essence of the exchanges seeming reminiscent of a dramatization of a historical event, typically the arena of educational documentaries, and later highlighted when one drinks from a modern bottle of liquor. However, this scene emphasizing the anti-realist aesthetics of the film is crosscut with the realistic nature of William/Ike’s punishment and reunification with other slaves. This graphic scene displaying the twenty-four lashes of whipping as punishment for the attempted escape is explicitly and undeniably cruel, and a difficult scene to endure by spectators who are becoming invested in William/Ike’s struggle. As he is chained to the tree, beaten, bloody, and presently helpless, William/Ike groans in anguish while continually thrashed with the whip in a manner that again heightens realism within the film (Image 6.35). This point is underscored by a close-up of a red fire ant climbing up William’s leg while tied to the tree (Image 6.36), an element
of the film which could only be emphasized by the realistic conditions of location shooting in Nigeria, mentioned by Mbamara as a contributor to the film’s authenticity (Author Interview).

As the scene further develops, however, it is also revealed that among the blacks and whites ostensibly working in the service of colonialism and slavery in this scene, there are varying degrees of ruthlessness in their treatment of slaves as within each pair one shows restraint and wants to set limits to the abuse inflicted on William/Ike. Consequently, each situation results in a confrontation between the two sides, first with the dominant white trafficker contesting the novice trader’s reluctance to harm William/Ike with proclamations like “this is a business” and he must “put his heart and emotions aside” in order to enjoy “all the pleasures he could imagine” upon return (Images 6.37); likewise, symbolized by their placement on either sides of the tree to which William/Ike has been tied and whipped repeatedly, one newly introduced black man argues William/Ike has endured his share of lashes for an attempted escape while the
other nonetheless proceeds to whip William/Ike (Image 6.38). While the complexity of interracial and intraracial relationships are both explored further as the flashback continues to develop, these initial scenes highlight the arrival, force, and persuasive techniques used by white slave traders, and consequently how their mere presence would impact the nature or foundation of life in Africa.

After carrying the protagonist to a shallow pit in which slaves are being held, the aggressive black captor continues to whip the all but defeated William/Ike again as he lay in fellow slaves’ arms while their piercing high-pitched screams and shrieks add another level of realism to the soundtrack (Image 6.39). While the community is suffering and
mourning over his body, the camera focuses on a woman, recognizable from Roslyn’s earlier flashback, as she holds up the beaten slave’s body and finally indicates to the audience that his name is Ike when she repeatedly cries it with tears flooding her eyes (Image 6.40). Following this gripping image is a more subdued communal expression of suffering through song as the camera slowly pans across the distressed figures as if it were at the center of the trauma. However, the mood again intensifies when Ike is dragged out of the pit and the same white slave traders from the previous scene reappear to complete their task of branding their escaped slave, an image which is accompanied by sounds of singed and burning skin and Ike’s tormented scream (Images 6.41-6.42). This sequence is arguably Slave Warrior’s most powerful instance in which a synthesis of image and sound work in conjunction to represent the tortuous conditions endured by slaves, and the important notion of community, in a realistic sense. At the same time, the powerful scenes are connected by a digital effect in which the screen flips 180 degrees around while the following shot appears on the other side, challenging conventional modes of identification and enabling spectators to acknowledge the mechanisms of the
digital video film (Images 6.43-6.44). Moreover, within seconds of experiencing the branding iron’s hot surface on his chest, a rapid series of edits first reveals William has suddenly awoke and remains on his couch, while a second cut to an extreme close-up of his eyes and lastly to the iron sitting on his table confirm that William/Ike is no longer skeptical of his father’s words but overtly concerned; and once again, the branding iron-shaped bloodstain fades off of his chest like in White’s bathroom as he completes the temporal shift to the present. Ultimately the interplay of realism and dramatization in this first extended sequence from “A Long Time Ago in the Past” contributes to the eclectic and palimpsestic aesthetic through which the film should be understood in order to properly situate it, as I argue this dissertation does, in a category of Nigerian Diaspora films.

After this experience, the plot immediately shifts to contemporary “Southeastern Nigeria” in order to visit his father. Contemporary Nigeria is not a location and setting in which the story does not spend a great deal of time but a series of important documentary style shots—of okadas and taxi traffic waiting at an intersection (Image 6.45) and long roads surrounded by miles of green vegetation nearing a village (Image 6.46)—and
comments, particularly the fact that the second words uttered inquire about an illness, do serve a crucial function in establishing fundamental images and elements of Nigerian culture and society that would be experienced upon arrival.

Once at his father’s place of residence, the elder almost magically appears to spectators as an image of a seemingly pensive William approaching his father’s hut (Image 6.47) becomes a superimposition as a close-up of the old man dissolves onto the screen like an apparition (Image 6.48). William’s father directs his son through a forested area, pointing out an area “where slave traders sheltered their captors before going to big slave ships,” an area that closely resembles where Ike and the community of
slaves were stored in his past experience (Image 6.49). As the two approach a small
cave, his father claims he cannot go any farther and that William must continue his
journey alone, the journey the audience has already previewed and in which William
relives the experiences of Ike, a form of his past self. As William nears the cave alone,
he begins to hear an unexpected drumming, and places his hand to his ear in wonderment;
his father then informs him from above that they are the drums of time (Image 6.50). In a
similar manner, Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* begins with “drummed invocation exhorting the
ancestral spirits to ‘rise up, step out and tell your story’” (Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking
Eurocentrism* 296). In addition to the inclusion of drumming as the initiating sound of an
experience relating to ancestral spirits or cultural history, the fact that William’s father is
the guide symbolizes the fact that the story of Ike was told to Mbamara by his father, Sir
Lazarus Mbamara Ekejiuba, and is part of an oral tale generationally passed down by
Mbamara’s grandfather, Mbamara Durueshika Ojinkeyaeme Ekejiuba, who lived to be
over 120 years old; in essence Oliver Mbamara’s film, *Slave Warrior*, is the modern
vehicle, or even time capsule in this sense, by which ancestral stories can eternally exist
in digital form.
Upon entering the cave, William is clearly moved to observe the shocking images of chains used to secure slaves still dangling from the rocks. He is first framed in a high angle shot suggesting his guarded nature as he climbs closer to the chains. There is a moment in which he reaches a point higher than the camera though, suggesting William does have agency in his journey ahead. The camera returns to a high angle as William sits perched near the chains (Image 6.51), where he sifts through the remnants of the area and eventually spots a branding iron that looks similar to the one he borrowed from White in New York. As the camera quickly cuts a close-up of the iron and slowly zooms out to situate it in this historical context (Image 6.52), viewers become cognizant that this site is the space in which William will attempt a complete integration with Ike and re-experience his past in Nigeria. However, the protagonist then climbs behind the chains (Image 6.53), an action that evokes images of Ike in captive by white slave traders and implies that the chains of the past are both literally and figuratively standing between the successful reunification of William’s past as Ike with his present.
Returning to Shohat and Stam’s discussion of Gerima’s film, *Sankofa* means “recuperating what’s lost” (*Unthinking Eurocentrism* 296), much like William is seemingly attempting to if he engages with the iron again. It is not the iron, however, that is the instrument of initiation with which William comes in contact with to again reemphasize *Slave Warrior*’s anti-realist aesthetics, but instead an old hand-made drum found within the pile of remnants beneath the chains. As William wipes a layer of sand or dirt from atop the instrument, one again hears the “drums of time” become an increasingly louder element of the soundtrack, beginning the transformation from present to past (Image 6.54). As William holds the drum, an image of another set of hands beating a drum appears in the center of the membrane and wipes away the previous
image with another digital effect (Image 6.55), graphically matching past and present
while transplanting the narrative back into the past for the remainder of the film. Once
the screen wipe is complete, the previous indication of story time, “Long Time Ago in the

Past,” now denotes the story of Ike takes place in the eighteenth century (Image 6.56).
As the camera zooms out of the hands beating the drum, viewers are granted a high angle
view of the drummer revealing he is positioned in a battleground as two warriors with
swords battle beside him (Image 6.57). Therefore, this drum, along with the branding
iron, effectively unites time periods by being the cultural artifact present in both the
eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

This sequence, while providing the diegetic function of connecting past and
present centuries, also significantly supports a comparative reading of Slave Warrior, a
Nigerian Diaspora film marked by the practices of the video film revolution, alongside an
analysis of Gerima’s Sankofa, a film associated with celluloid African filmmaking and
the original post-independence directors whose films have been championed for
aesthetic, political, and cultural achievements. Shohat and Stam argue, “Haile Gerima’s
Sankofa synthesizes the modern and the traditional through an Afro-magical egungun
esthetic: an aesthetic that evokes the spirits of the ancestors as embodiments of a deep sense of personal and collective history” (*Unthinking Eurocentrism* 296). While the Egungun masquerade is associated with Yoruba culture and divinities, as mentioned in chapter four concerning Kelani’s *Arugba*, *egungun* in a more general sense can refer to supernatural forces, both gods/orishas and ancestors, which are concealed (Drewal 18).

In this sense of the word, then, a similar *egungun* feature is included in this sequence in *Slave Warrior*, a film originating from an Igbo oral tale and dealing with Igbo history. Within the film, after following his father’s wisdom and knowledge about the cave, the drums of time themselves evoke the spirits of the past through rhythmic music with the purpose of introducing and educating William about his cultural history via an experience of personal history. Thus *Slave Warrior*, like *Sankofa*, adopts an anti-realist aesthetic that, to extend Shohat and Stam’s term, can be classified as an Afro-magical *egungun* aesthetic. As a result, Mbamara employs a stylistic technique as a mechanism to connect past and present which is also used by a director associated with the pioneers of African celluloid filmmaking. As Mahir Saul and Ralph Austen exemplify, with their collection, *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, that “an extended effort to combine studies of both these cinemas” is a fruitful critical endeavor (Austen and Saul 1), my analysis of *Slave Warrior* vehemently contends that Mbamara’s work is a productive site for the exploration of the combination of the two schools of filmmaking. In doing so, it is a text that reveals the abounding intersections between the two alleged polar opposites, according to initial criticism on the video booms, and points toward new critical
possibilities with a scope which includes Nigerian Diaspora filmmakers working in the so-called “developed” world like Mbamara.

The permanent narrative shift to the 18th century, again where the film ostensibly becomes the tale told by Mbamara’s father, is the section of the narrative where the slave is truly recast as a warrior, “a combination of Rambo and Tarzan” as one comment on the marketed DVD suggests, and essentially as a hero, challenging the initial images of William/Ike and other slaves solely as the bearers of punishment. After the initial high angle image (Image 150) of the 18th century tribal battle, the first image of Ike as a warrior is altered to expose a low angle view of an extremely daunting physical specimen who is marked by face paint and armed with a sword (Image 6.58). But while Ike clearly demonstrates skill and virtuosity on the battlefield as he disposes of one after another of the Umuchi male warriors, other members of the tribe conspire to capture Ike by first detaining his one true love, Ada. After this initial battle sequence, Agu, from the Umuchi tribe, returns to his village with a captured Ike, as well as Ada, and kneels before his father who believes his son fought without deception as a brave warrior, but an image of a captive Ike in the background still hints at the hero’s looming potential power.
(Image 6.59) From that point, the second portion of the film in Nigeria begins with two interwoven storylines, one of love (between Ike and Ada) and the other of war (between Umuchi and Mbaukwu tribes), equally motivating the plot and owing their origins to orality.

Since this segment of the plot begins with Ike’s captivity, there is not a great deal of time to establish his relationship with Ada except via a brief but beautifully shot and edited flashback which includes a love song included in the tale’s oral history according to the director (Author Interview). While Agu is being praised, Ada attempts to stand up for Ike’s bravery and accuses Agu of cowardice before being banished as a slave and

(Image 6.60) (Image 6.61)
separated from Ike. A quick close-up of Ada’s despairing look (Image 6.60) then cuts to black and white flashbacks of her joyous memories with Ike and the viewer witnesses the couple embracing on the ground beneath a tree (Image 6.61), a wide view through sprawling branches of Ada at the stream (Image 6.62)—presumably from Ike’s point of view—and Ike surprising Ada in order to assist her by carrying a water jug (Image 6.63), all while her adoring song fills the soundtrack. Accompanied by these images, lyrics heard in Igbo and translated into English subtitles read, “On my way to the stream Ike is with me” and “Who will marry me? It is my good Ike” illustrate Ada’s fractured self not only lacking her freedom but also the man she loves and envisions as with her.

After Ada and Ike are separated, a storyline concerning the negative effects of Agu’s actions unfolds as he explains how the Umuchi-Mbaukwu battle originated over river ownership, but believes even though the Umuchi gain the Lyiazu river with their victory, that releasing a prisoner of war with Ike’s strength could threaten their tribe in the future. Mindful of that threat, Agu explains to his friend Okwara that he already paid a medicine man to devise a potion which he intended for Ike to consume, leading to the hero’s death and resulting safety for Agu and Umuchi. However, Agu’s plans ran awry
because his wife Ozioma drank the potion instead of Ike and dies in his arms. This event
leads to a series of misadventures fitting for an epic story or fairy tale: while Agu tells his
friend Okwara that the poison drink was meant for Ike, whom he still desires to kill, he is
overheard by Otunwa, the village snitch; Agu kills Otunwa in a fit of rage as Okwara
protests but reluctantly helps hide Otunwa’s body; Agu and Okwara are implicated in the
death of Otunwa; Agu’s father presents Ike in exchange for Agu’s life, an act which saves
the evil Agu and prospectively sends Ike to the forest of death; Okwara’s brother
threatens the village in order to save Okwara in the manner Agu was spared but in the
process Ike escapes before he can be forcibly taken to the forest in shackles; Ike is
recaptured and taken on a trip through the forest to be sold to white slave traders.

However, while Ike escapes from Umuchi control, and is quickly recaptured,
Agu’s father and elder Okorie (played by Nollywood favorite, the late David Ihesie) visit
Okwara’s father Eke (played by Nollywood veteran Fabian Adibe) to convince him to
also offer his own slave instead of his son. Eke, however, is steadfast in his belief that a
man should bear the consequences of his actions, exclaiming that since custom dictates
the death of sacrificed slaves, such a punishment would be unworthy of an innocent
slave’s life. But when Okorie explains to him that instead of killing anyone they could
sell the slaves to the white transatlantic slave traders, Eke agrees to abide by the group’s
decision. Following that concession, though, a brief exchange in which Eke proudly
teaches a young boy, actually Eke’s slave Ndukwe, how to mix the ingredients for his
special medicine establishes Eke has genuine love for Ndukwe and considers him an heir
to his medicinal knowledge (Image 6.64). When Ndukwe beams back at Eke and affirms, “Yes Father” (Image 6.65), it is clear the two have a very special relationship one would characterize as a father-son rather than as slaveowner-slave. This notion is cemented when Eke is informed that Umuchi elders have decided to spare Okwara, and that Ndukwe will instead be sold to white slave traders. Upon hearing the news Eke becomes extremely saddened, emotionally stating “this boy [Ndukwe] is not like a slave to me but a son,” prompting a flashback in which viewers experience Eke’s sacrifice to raise Ndukwe as his own, despite the boy being the child of an oracle and feared to be evil (Image 6.66).
The fact that the lengthy segment of the film taking place in Nigeria begins with significant attention to developing the function of slavery among these West African tribes emphasizes that the relationships of slaves and slave-owners was varied but that many were treated well, only exchanged as a matter of native custom or as punishment somewhat like an exile prison system. Additionally, these sequences depicting Ike’s function as an Umuchi prisoner and Eke’s treatment of his slave complicate William’s earlier flashbacks as a prisoner of white transatlantic slave traders, and the resulting tale of captivity becomes multi-faceted which casts the idea and practice of slavery in a different light, challenging representations dependent on the black/white dichotomy. In an radio interview, Mbamara explains he was trying to illustrate how enslavement in an African setting was something of a replacement for the lack of an official jail system, claiming it serves as a form of punishment for misbehavior like violence rather than an instrument of dehumanization or thingification as demonstrated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade (“Inner Light Radio”). Mbamara, therefore, wanted Slave Warrior to not be about taking sides, or black and white, but about the complex relations between tribes, acknowledging a system of enslavement that pre-dates white invasion of West Africa and focuses on slaves’ humanity (“Inner Light Radio”). This aspect of the film perhaps best demonstrates Slave Warrior’s didactic function in a manner similar to oral tales and more traditional Nollywood productions which follow in that tradition. Even on the film’s website www.slavewarrior.com, an extra-diegetic component of the production with an equally important didactic function, information is included which suggests Mbamara’s representation of slavery in African societies counterbalances the lack of authenticity of Western slavery scholarship mainly because the story originates in the villages with an

Immediately following these sequences about pre-Transatlantic slavery, however, Ike once again quickly escapes by cutting his ropes on a tree and then witnesses, as the viewers do, an encounter between the Umuchi men and the same white trans-Atlantic slave traders from William’s flashbacks (Image 6.67). As the white slave traders discuss their potential riches and peruse the area for potential slaves, the Umuchi men and Ndukwe are captured by the same black men seen assisting slave traders in William’s flashback, where they recoil in horror upon encountering the white slave traders (Image 6.68). While trying to escape upon seeing the white men, one slave trader draws a gun and without hesitation shoots one potential escapee in the back, evidencing the more violent nature of trans-Atlantic slave traders as compared to many African forms of slavery. Ike, meanwhile, witnesses this horrific encounter while hiding in the bush, a fact first revealed to the audience via a point-of-view shot with the hero’s hand in the left of the frame holding back the leaves (Image 6.69). At this point, because the hero’s perspective is symbolic of a spectator in this shot, Ike remains removed from the violence
of the Transatlantic slave traders, as William was from authentic African history. After occupying this point of view, the plot returns to the action proper with a series of shots covering the dragging and hiding of the shot slave’s body, before once again returning to Ike behind another bush. However, in this second image (Image 6.70), Ike’s head is now visible in the immediate foreground of the frame, as if he has stepped into his previous point of view shot and crossed a spatio-temporal boundary in which he will encounter white Transatlantic slave traders, after his initial experience with pre-Transatlantic forms of slavery.

Meanwhile the slave traders continue towards the villages (Mbaukwu and Umuchi) to detain more slaves. After realizing the white slave traders’ plan, Ike truly reveals his humanity by first returning to Umuchi village to save Ada but also warn Okorie and Agu that they must prepare for war with the white slave traders, essentially offering an inter-ethnic unity against foreign (British) imposition. While the pair is escaping back to Mbaukwu, though, they are accosted by the slave traders with Ada first being shot (Image 6.71), and presumably killed although little time is spent dwelling on that point, leading to an ephemeral image of Rosalyn suddenly waking in her bed (Image
This juxtaposition of images again highlights the spatial and temporal shifts still present within the film despite the duration spent in Nigeria since William entered the cave and experienced the effects of the drums of time. However, Rosalyn, like William before he visited Nigeria, is still just beginning to navigate her experiences as Ada in another life while at the same time William/Ike, seemingly an integrated self, frees himself from another brief apprehension and tends to gunshot wounds using natural remedies while in constant, real danger as he hides from the slave traders (Image 6.73). Still, despite his weary and beaten state, the camera frames Ike in the trees from a low angle and slowly zooms out. This view firmly planting him within natural settings which he resumes protecting throughout the scene in manners such as tying branches to himself
for camouflage and even violently breaking the neck of one black man, claiming “You killed my woman,” suggesting to the audience that Ada is in fact dead (Image 6.74). Consequently this event thrusts the film into a different arena in terms of genre, one in which Ike is on a warpath killing anyone involved with the slave traders mission.

Throughout the remainder of this final battle sequence in which Ike disposes of the black men assisting the white slave traders, the leader of these men is focused on while dying in order to explain why he is helping ruthless slave traders. As he takes his last breaths (Image 6.75), a black and white flashback of his family being confronted and shot by the same white slave traders clarifies the origins of their partnership as one of force and gunpoint (Image 6.76). This flashback ultimately suggests that not every African accused of being complicit in the slave trade, especially in an area like Eastern Nigeria where a sizeable portion of the slave population originated, were doing so for financial gain, and that fear and power were major contributors to the resulting relationships.

In the film’s final rescue and chase sequence, after Ike discovers that Ada was not killed by the gunshot and manages to athletically rescue her from the slave traders, the
pair again encounters their captors with muskets drawn, suspending the action in 18th century Nigeria and consequently creating a ripple effect which appears before the audience as a brief montage within the drums of time. The camera initially follows Ike carrying Ada from behind with a handheld camera until the pair stop (Image 6.77) and a swishpan suddenly frames the main slave trader in a long shot (Image 6.78) before quickly cutting to a second slave trader in medium close-up with gun drawn. This image, however, begins to close slightly as an iris appears around the borders of the frame (Image 6.79). As the image shrinks, it first shifts to one of the Umuchi warriors

(Image 6.77)  
(Image 6.78)  
(Image 6.79)  
(Image 6.80)
preparing for war (as they were in the previous scene) (Image 6.80), and then again to Ike
and Ada (Image 6.81) as it becomes apparent the images are appearing on the same
drums of time William encountered in the cave earlier in the film. Following that, the
camera continues to zoom out as the image Ike holding Ada finally becomes the previous
meeting of William and Rosalyn in New York (Image 6.82), essentially connecting past
and present through this brief succession of images contained within the drums of time
still being held by William in the cave. In effect, the symbolic collision of the initial two
images, a reunited Ike and Ada encountering the angered slave traders as they did in
William’s flashback in New York, causes a narrative ripple that leads the hero back to
present day Nigeria to contemplate his supernatural experience. This montage, then,
reiterates the functionality of the *egungun* aesthetic discussed earlier, as the drum is the source of this experience which traversing time and space in the service of ancestral history.

Lastly, once he puts down the drum of time, a full screen image of William and Rosalyn, the two figures whose chance meeting triggered his experience in Nigeria, dissolves into William alone again in the cave (Image 6.83). As William realizes Rosalyn’s role in this strange journey, spectators view the hero through the familiar hanging chains which act as a sign of the onerous effects of slavery in his past, and by extension his present and by all accounts future. As the camera moves to a medium-long shot of William walking away from the drum, a title appears on screen reading, “And this is the beginning” (Image 6.84), undoubtedly referring to the potential sequels to *Slave Warrior* and concluding the film without resolving the plot in a manner accustomed to Nollywood productions. *Slave Warrior*’s lack of closure, as a result of the conclusion’s intimation of serialization in the story’s future, reemphasizes the crossovers between Mbamara’s film and those made in Nigeria, and working in conjunction with the utilization of the aforementioned *egungun* aesthetic *Slave Warrior*’s content and style work through a space equally informed by African films inside and outside Nigeria as well as the producer/director/star’s position as a Nigerian Diaspora filmmaker. But while the promise of *Slave Warrior*’s epic narrative was demonstrated with the completed product of the first installment in the trilogy, Mbamara explained the sales of *Slave Warrior* have been adversely affected by “two main factors: lack of a substantive profitable marketing structure for African films both in Africa and the Diaspora; and piracy” (Author Interview). Nevertheless, Mbamara continues to envision sequels to
Slave Warrior (Part 2: The Rescue and Part 3: Re-Connecting with Africa) whose stories are developed and await proper funding.

To conclude this chapter, I would also like to consider Onookome Okome’s following claim for Nollywood’s significance:

The African Diaspora is awash with enthusiasm for this phenomenon. At home, its place is undeniably more secured than ever. Hate it or like it, Nollywood does not take dictations from elsewhere. It charts its own path. It writes itself on its own terms with all its unavoidable blemishes, and the local audience likes it. It always cries for more. (“Nollywood: Africa at the Movies” 4)

In other words, it is difficult to overstate the important influential position and potential for growth regarding the Nigerian video film industry with the Nigerian and African Diaspora. The path charted by the industry, beginning with travelling Yoruba theater TV productions and landmark epics like Living in Bondage, has long-since landed in the United States and Slave Warrior is in essence a creative diasporic expression of the industry from a director living in the United States and motivated, in this instance, by matters of slavery, orality, and education. As I have argued in this chapter, Slave Warrior is one important example emphasizing why Nollywood deserves critical attention from every direction, inside and out, including consideration of the films made by members of the Nigerian diaspora in the United States.
Conclusion

In summary, following the work of Haynes, Adesokan, Larkin, and others, this dissertation has strategically analyzed a series of Nigerian video films—*Osuofia in London* (2003), *Saworoide* (1999), *Arugba* (2010), *Sitanda* (2006), and *Slave Warrior* (2006), including a brief analysis of *Living in Bondage* (1992) as the prototype Nollywood film—as case studies situating each work both within its proper historical and socio-cultural context, but also while examining the works’ cinematic and narrative contributions as films rather than as puzzle pieces constructing a social phenomenon or video film revolution. By contextualizing the influence of the landmark Igbo film, *Living in Bondage*, I have theorized an excess-exhortation model to describe a standard narrative structure within Nigerian video films, primarily informed by Larkin’s “aesthetics of outrage” and Adesokan’s “aesthetics of exhortation.” As elaborated upon in my reading of the film, while it does introduce an extremely influential model of film structure based on the management of morality, *Living in Bondage* clearly contains evidence of artistic capability and sophisticated storytelling techniques amidst the supernatural foundation of the Nollywood video film industry.

Following that, I have illustrated the important and crucial position of Kingsley Ogoro’s *Osuofia in London*, arguing and illustrating through a close formal and narrative analysis that the film parodies characters whose intentions are completely saturated with foreign desires as a means to *unthink* and challenge such colonial or neo-colonial perceptions. In this manner, *Osuofia in London* explores and critiques intercultural relations and operates as an imperial parody, as media jujitsu, working to deconstruct the
nature of colonial cultural hierarchies and reappropriate agency vis-a-vis framing a world of foreign misconceptions.

Moreover, this dissertation has analyzed Tunde Kelani’s unique and prolific work—mainly *Saworoide* (1999) and *Arugba* (2010)—as the beginnings of a comprehensive, in-depth director study positioning the producer-director’s style at the intersection of techniques popularized in Yoruba theater, Nollywood video film, and celluloid works from Africa and abroad. Ultimately, I make the case that these two films, representative of his entire milieu at two crucial points in his career, classify Kelani as a Yoruba film griot who should not only be recognized among Yoruba filmmakers, or Nigerian filmmakers, but alongside and not in opposition to the greatest of all African filmmakers. Kelani, along with a few others like Ojukwu, stand at the forefront of the technical advancements, real and potential, within the industry which has long been plagued for its technical lack, recognized but debased as a result of a lack of resources. Kelani’s *Arugba*, as I have argued, is an exemplary film in its ability to interweave a didactic function related to music and based on Yoruba culture, reflexive cinematic techniques, a multi-varied sophisticated narrative structure, and aesthetically stunning images with the capability of high definition formats. Likewise, Izu Ojukwu’s *Sitanda* is explored as a corporate-sponsored film, capitalizing on popular reality television and multi-ethnic elements and altogether exhibiting the visionary director’s technical skills, artistic attention to the aesthetics, creative use of sound, and overall unique boundary-breaking contextual location within Nollywood.

The final chapter has introduced Oliver Mbamara as a director, producer and actor who has received no academic attention although whom I vehemently argue is a crucial
Nigerian Diasporic filmmaker working at the interstices of culture and style by explaining how *Slave Warrior* employs a series of reflexive techniques, a conjunction of realist and anti-realist aesthetics, a socio-historical commentary and exhortatory function, and a contextual nature that situating its production in both Nigeria and the United States.

As I have argued in this dissertation, many critics have generally practiced an “arm’s length approach” to Nigerian video films, in which the phenomenon is lauded but individual films ignored, and a paradigm shift is therefore needed. This dissertation has demonstrated that one successful new paradigm desired and partially delivered by critics and researchers of African cinema could emerge with these types of deep, shot by shot, contextual analyses of video films *as* films, and subsequently as works capable of being considered art. This move ultimately requires a breaking down of quality boundaries, a deconstruction of the fences constructed between African cinema, western film criticism, and the field of film studies in general, with video film production and the individual video film. By conducting in-depth interviews with directors and producers in Nigeria and the United States that focus on specific films as complex works of art, crucial information about meaning construction, aesthetics, and how particular Nigerian video filmmakers conceptualize their work in cinematic terms has been discovered and utilized as a means to articulate the multi-faceted value of individual works which can be unlocked. In theory, this practice advocates for a significant methodological and epistemological shift to close analyses of video films in order to demonstrate the complex, multi-faceted, but, in my experience, always worthwhile value of individual video films which are at once educational, artistic, popular and socially conscious.
I firmly believe that due to the abovementioned observations, analyses, and conclusions, this dissertation has revealed that the method of close readings of video films has proven fruitful in combating the “arm’s length” approach to studying Nollywood. Only by looking at the films in more depth, will the films themselves be able to teach critics how to study them, each dictating a slightly different path. While I have focused this methodological shift on films I consider to be exemplary in their respective uniqueness, indicating the types of in-depth readings of films as films, as works of art in cinematic terms, which could provide an exciting turn in video film analysis, it is yet to be determined to what extent these types of readings are not only valuable when viewing exemplary films but every film, of which there are thousands to explore. However, it is imperative that when scholars look they do not only see “mistakes” or “trashiness” but instead a distinctive mode of cinematic expression; and not to ignore the inadequacies present in any industry, but when looking closely at the films, and only when looking closely at the films, it becomes apparent they do not, or cannot, be marginalized by the assumptions and views of others.

In conclusion, Teco Benson summarizes the unique nature of the industry: “Mostly, we are magicians. Out of nothing, we create something, which has held Africa spellbound” (Author Interview). But it is indisputable that Nollywood has not only impacted the African continent but additionally areas like the Caribbean and the United States, where films are bought in droves from websites and even available on cable via Xfinity on demand, Cox or Time-Warner as of February 1, 2013.15 So despite the major

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15 A “Nollywood Hits” section was established as a “Movie Collection” within Xfinity on demand users, initiated February 1, 2013 until the end of March 2013. See the promotional website at http://www.nollywoodoncable.com/n/
differences when compared to other African or global films, Nollywood has made a massive global impact as a collection of popular, heterogeneous, unconventional cultural manifestations which largely reject the notions of classical aesthetics in many cases, but which adopt and even rethink those same notions in others.

At the turn of the century, when filmmaker and critic Martin Mhando insisted against a homogenizing critical approach towards African film, suggesting that closer attention to how a film’s “formal techniques” inform its content would be a productive move (Mhando), scholars did not redirect the conversation toward video film industries. Considering the arguments made about Nigerian films, in this dissertation and by the likes of Haynes, Larkin, and Adesokan, I want to reemphasize how a shift to a closer analysis of formal techniques, and the content of the Nigerian video film’s artistic properties, which has begun blossoming in recent years should fully bloom now, especially as quality steadily improves and industry influence unremittingly expands. It is my sincere belief that although many films may at first appear “trashy,” after a closer look at their content those same films often provide a treasure trove of information about an energetic, syncretic, postmodern and magical industry which has made astonishing local, national, and international marks on the world of visual culture over the last twenty years. Ultimately, by closely analyzing Nigerian video films scholars could sidestep re-examinations of canonic works under the scope of recently canonized literature and instead focus more attentively on old and new works which rarely get a first look within film study.


16 Each of Barrot’s six essays from this volume—“Video is the AIDS of the Film Industry,” “The Italians of Africa,” “Stress Warriors,” “Selling Like Hot Cakes: Box Office Statistics,” “Audacity, Scandal, and Censorship,” “Informal Sector of Video ‘Industry’”—have been referenced along with several of his film profiles.


