

Lagos is the ground of the films, not just in the sense that when cameras are turned on, they make images of Lagos, but also that the films are a means for Nigerians to come to terms with the city and everything it embodies.

# Nollywood in Lagos, Lagos in Nollywood Films

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*Nollywood—the Lagos-based Nigerian film industry—has become the third-largest film industry in the world, and it is by far the most powerful purveyor of an image of Nigeria to domestic and foreign populations. It consists of many small producers working with tiny amounts of capital; it therefore has not been able to build its own spaces—studios, theaters, office complexes—and remains nearly invisible in the Lagos cityscape, apart from film posters and the films themselves, displayed for sale as cassettes or video compact discs. Material constraints and the small screens for which the films are designed shape the images of Lagos that appear in them. Nigerian videos differ markedly from typical African celluloid films, both in their “film language” and in their handling of the city. They present Lagos as a turbulent and dangerous landscape, where class divisions are extreme but permeable, and enormous wealth does not buy insulation from chaos and misery. They show supernatural forces permeating all social levels, particularly the wealthiest. A shared realism, born of location shooting and common strategies for imaging the desires and fears of the audience, creates a considerable coherence in the representation of Lagos, despite the size and variety of the city and the industry.*

Concurrent with the rise of the Nollywood video film industry has been a new visibility, on certain intellectual horizons, of the Lagos metropolis—or “megacity,” as it has been dubbed, as its population approaches 15 million. (It is projected by the United Nations to reach 23 million by 2015—which would make Lagos the third-largest city in the world.) The city owes its new visibility to its serving as an example and case study in discussions of the world’s urban future. On the one hand, there is a genre of lurid descriptions of Lagos as urban “apocalypse”—a term that foreign visitors seem to find unavoidable, as they find in it the ultimate expression of anarchic urban catastrophe, environmental destruction, and human misery; its “crime, pollution, and overcrowding make it the cliché par excellence of Third World

urban dysfunction" (Kaplan 2000:15). On the other hand, there is a postmodernist-inflected celebration of the coping mechanisms and creative forms of self-organization of a population whose ability to survive contradicts ordinary common sense, accompanied by an argument about the inability of conventional modes of understanding to explain what permits this survival. The leading figure in this trend is the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who has been conducting a study of Lagos with students in the Harvard School of Design's Project on the City. Lagos has figured prominently in major art exhibitions in London (*Century City*, 2001), Barcelona (*Africas: The Artist and the City*, 2001), and, most influentially, Kassel, where the exhibition *Documenta 11* (2002), curated by Okwui Enwezor, included a weeklong forum held in Lagos. These shows emphasize the ingenuity of people struggling to survive in the slums and informal economic sector of African cities, the manic energy that pervades city life, and urban artists' creativity (for a review of these discourses on Lagos, see Gandy 2005).<sup>1</sup>

The celebratory character of Koolhaas's point of view has been criticized on several scores: that it ignores the suffering of the poor and the predation of many arrangements in the informal sector (Gandy 2005; Packer 2006); that it obscures the historical processes through which things got to be how they are and who is responsible for them (Gandy 2005); that it effectively takes off the table the possibilities for rational and progressive political and economic change (Gandy 2006); and that it overestimates the extent to which coping with adversity is stimulating, rather than depressing (Subirós 2001b). But, the point that existing vocabularies and analytical frames of reference from urban planning and other disciplines are trapped in an almost entirely negative contemplation of Lagos's deficiencies and failures and are inadequate in showing how things actually operate needs to be given its due.

Nollywood is an extraordinary example of the sort of coping mechanism that keeps Africa alive: out of the impossibility of producing celluloid films in Nigeria (because of economic collapse and social insecurity) came a huge industry, constructed on the slenderest of means and without anyone's permission (Haynes 1995). Cruelly constrained in its material circumstances, it is a heroic act of self-assertion—on the part of Nigeria in general, and of the individual filmmakers. Franco Sacchi's documentary film *This is Nollywood* nicely captures its personality: people are kept going through the seriocomic obstacle course of making a film under Nigerian conditions by a desperate need to hope and dream, by the legendary Nigerian resilience and humor, and by a peculiarly African mixture of resignation and determination.

In 2002, when the term *Nollywood* was coined, it met with opposition from Nigerians who thought it suggested that Nigerian filmmaking was only a copy of the American model, Hollywood. It is here to stay because it expresses the general Nigerian desire for a mass entertainment industry that can take its rightful place on the world stage, but both the term and the phenomenon need to be read as signs that the global media environment has become multipolar, rather than that Hollywood's example is unavoidable

(Haynes 2005). Despite an undeniable imitative element (Nollywood draws on a great number of cultural influences, domestic and foreign, Hollywood among them), Nollywood fundamentally does not resemble Hollywood or anything else—apart from its smaller sibling, the Ghanaian video film industry. The geographers Sallie Marston, Keith Woodward, and John Paul Jones III make a radical theoretical argument for understanding Nollywood not as an example of scalar models of hierarchical relationships (the dominant model in discussions of globalization), which would inevitably find Nollywood to be a defective imitation of Hollywood, but as an example of specifically situated, localized social activity, networked with other sites, that produces something fundamentally different from Hollywood in production, distribution, consumption, and aesthetics (2007).

Salimata Wade, another geographer, makes a point that overlaps with Koolhaas's observation about the inadequacy of Western categories to describe the realities of African cities. As Pep Subirós reports her conversation, she says

the main problem with African cities, at least those in Western Africa, is one of perception and representation. The differences that exist in the images, in the viewpoints, and in the aspirations of the key urban players. Especially between politicians and managers on the one hand and ordinary people on the other. (2001a:20–21)

The former think like Europeans, Wade says, seeing infrastructural problems and so on; the latter bring with them (from the villages from which most of them emigrated) views and habits that cause them to neglect facilities provided for them, or to remake them to suit their own purposes. The city they inhabit or want to inhabit is not the one the authorities understand or want to build.

The commercial success of Nollywood films depends on their expression of the point of view—the values, desires, and fears—of their popular audience, and therefore they help us see what their intended viewers see or want to see when they look at their city. These images differ distinctly from those familiar from other African cinematic and literary traditions.

Lagos is where Nollywood is primarily located, and for budgetary reasons its films are always shot on location, most often in Lagos, which serves as the ground of the films, not just in the immediate sense that when cameras are turned on, they make images of Lagos (or one might even say, Lagos imposes its images on them), but also that the films are a means for Nigerians to come to terms—visually, dramatically, emotionally, morally, socially, politically, and spiritually—with the city and everything it embodies. Nollywood's imagination forms the city's images, making them public emblems of fear and desire. Nollywood is a part of that cityscape, an element in its visual culture. This cityscape is a resource that the films share and an environment that shapes them materially. This essay explores these

reciprocal relationships, always with an eye to material circumstances, aiming to describe the specificities that give Nollywood its character.

## Nollywood in Lagos

Nigerian video film production began in the late 1980s as a humble popular artform, but it has grown into the third-largest film industry in the world, producing more than 1,500 titles per year (National Film and Video Censors Board 2006). The image of the Nigerian nation, literally and metaphorically, is now largely shaped by these films, which have become wildly popular across the African continent and beyond. Video film is the primary expressive medium through which Lagos makes itself visible, both to itself and to external audiences.

Lagos is the center of Nigeria's filmmaking and film distribution, as it is the center of most of Nigeria's industrial and commercial activity, but there are other important Nigerian filmmaking centers, notably Kano, in northern Nigeria, home to a large, parallel, but almost entirely separate Hausa video industry. The term *Nollywood* refers principally to southern Nigerian, English-language films, whose distribution is largely controlled by Igbo marketers, but which are made by people from the full range of southern Nigerian ethnicities. *Nollywood* has come into general use as the name of the Nigerian video film industry, but when used in this way, the term obscures the Hausa branch and Yoruba-language video production based in Lagos, though the Yoruba production partly overlaps with that of Nollywood. The term includes film production and marketing centers in the eastern Nigerian cities of Enugu, Onitsha and Aba, which are integrated with the marketing system based in Lagos.

The central paradox of Nollywood is that it is a huge industry, employing thousands of people and generating large (if largely unverifiable) revenues, but it is built on tiny capital formations. Cheap and easily operated video technology allowed it to arise as an informal-sector activity, like other African "popular arts," such as Congolese painting, the designs and proverbs painted on trucks, and Yoruba traveling theater (Barber 1987, 2000; Fabian 1978; Haynes and Okome 1998). The film that "opened the market," Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage 1* (1992), was made for a few hundred dollars. An extremely dysfunctional distribution system and rampant piracy make large investments in single films risky, holding average budgets down to about U.S. \$20,000. The industry remains disengaged from banks, government loans, and other formal sector sources of capital; it still consists of myriad very-small-scale producers, who make each new film on the profits from the last, or on advances from marketers.

As a result, the Nigerian film industry has had no money with which to construct its own visible spaces. Nollywood is not a place: it consists of nodes scattered across Lagos and beyond, lost in the metropolis. Idumota, the center of marketing and finance, is a market in the oldest part of Lagos;



Figure 1. Video cassettes on sale in Idumota Market, the heart of Nollywood marketing. Photo by Jonathan Haynes

its streets are narrow, filthy, and packed with people and handcarts hauling plastic buckets, consumer electronic goods, and cloth (figure 1). Visiting the major marketers involves balancing on boards thrown over open sewers and penetrating damp warrens of crumbling concrete.

The producers are scattered mostly around the neighborhoods of Surulere and Ikeja, on the mainland, where there are few proper sidewalks and the streets may become nearly impassable when it rains, but there are fashion boutiques and international-style fast-food restaurants, and a forest of cell-phone towers and satellite dishes rises above air-conditioned internet cafés and international telephone call-centers, all powered by generators during the frequent blackouts—independent of the national grid and aimed at the sky. Here where Nigerian films are produced it is surprisingly hard to buy or rent them—video shops are almost entirely dominated by American films. The masses who consume Nollywood films live in poorer neighborhoods. The producers occupy modest bungalows or office spaces on side streets. They have small editing studios, often with respectable digital equipment, and keep their digital cameras locked in closets, but they have no production studios and sound stages.

For years, the principle meeting place for actors and producers was Wini's Guest House, where the floor was sticky with beer and the furniture was apt to tear one's clothing. Under pressure to relocate by neighbors upset by the noise, the frequent blockage of the street, and the difficulty of distinguishing aspiring actresses from prostitutes, the film people moved from Wini's to O'Jez's, a more attractive nightclub and restaurant, located in the



Figure 2. A scene from *The Kingmaker* set at O'Jez Nightclub, Lagos.

National Stadium. The stadium itself is a hulking ruin, the field overgrown, the equipment ripped out and carried away by thieves, and the environs haunted by armed robbers, but O'Jez's is spruce and hums with activity, a suitable home for a vibrant, rising professional community: it has good sound and light systems; and downstairs in the courtyard, film people carry on animated conversations over tables crowded with beer bottles, pepper soup, and cellphones (figure 2).

The exhibition sector of Nollywood is peculiarly hard to see. Video films are commonly (if confusingly, for Americans) called "home videos" in Nigeria, because that is where they are normally viewed: in domestic space, away from the public eye. The horrendous crime rates and general breakdown of public order of the 1990s was an essential condition of the video boom: going out to theaters at night became too dangerous. The theaters in Lagos all closed; many were turned into churches or warehouses. A few gleaming multiplexes have appeared recently, but they show American films. At the other end of the social spectrum, small video parlors serve the poor, offering access to Nollywood via a wooden bench and a video monitor. Those who cannot afford the very modest entrance fee for a video parlor gather on street corners to watch the monitors set up on vendors' stalls (Okome 2007). Newly released films may be screened in rented public spaces ranging from university auditoriums to the most elegant cultural venues in Lagos. Film festivals and award ceremonies are becoming regular occurrences and attract

glittering crowds to fancy places, but these are fleeting occasions; the films are not at home in these places.

Television stations broadcast films into homes and frequently show trailers. A capillary distribution system serves a dispersed audience of workers as they return home: small shops and street stalls sell films; even more people patronize thousands of video rental shops. Film posters decorate these establishments and are plastered anywhere they will stick—a ubiquitous element of visual street culture. These are fairly small posters: the small budgets of the films, the notorious reluctance of marketers to spend much on publicity, and a scarcity of printers that can produce large posters mean that billboard-sized images are rare, and the absence of theaters means an absence of marquee-sized spaces to fill.

Like the jackets of the video cassettes and video compact discs, the posters provide splashes of vivid color in an often dreary cityscape. They are normally identical or closely related to the jackets—which is to say they are designed to work on a small scale. Their function is to scream for attention in a saturated market. Almost invariably they are crowded with actors' faces. As in any commercial cinema culture, a star system is responsible for selling films, and for an audience of uncertain literacy, faces serve better than names. Posters and jackets are always mechanically reproduced; there is nothing like the tradition of "folk art" film posters in Ghana (Wolfe 2000). The need for small but recognizable images of specific actors would itself discourage hand painting, and the industrial scale and rate of Nollywood film production requires mechanical reproduction. In any case, naive folk art runs counter to the ethos and aspiration of Nollywood. *Living in Bondage 1* is considered the inaugural film of the video boom, not because it was the first Nigerian feature film on video, but because it was the first to be packaged in a full-color printed jacket and wrapped in cellophane, like an imported American or Indian film (Madu Chikwendu, personal communication; Haynes 2007) (see color insert 6).

Video compact discs are becoming the dominant medium for Nollywood films in Nigeria. The visual quality of VCDs is poorer than that of DVDs; it is about the same as that of a pristine VHS tape, but considerably better than that of a videotape that has spent a week out in the tropical sun on a hawker's shelf and is then played on a machine full of Harmattan dust. Brian Larkin observes that theories of media generally assume that their infrastructures work perfectly—which is far from the case in Nigeria, where audiences experience films by way of "cheap tape recorders, old televisions, videos that are the copy of a copy of a copy to the extent that the image is permanently blurred, the sound resolutely opaque" (Larkin 2004:314). This technology is embedded in living rooms shared with crying babies, or in video parlors full of shouting adolescents—social environments that shape and color the experience of film viewing (Larkin 2000, 2002, and forthcoming). The whole business is subject to the vagaries of the electrical power grid, which has been deteriorating for decades and is commonly described as "epileptic." Blackouts are unpredictable but routine and often long-lasting,

and when the electricity goes off, the images disappear, except in homes with generators powerful enough to run video equipment as well as a refrigerator and lights. Moving pictures are evanescent by nature; in Nigeria, they have a particularly lurching, fragile existence. Nollywood films have little supporting material culture around them, and so when the electricity goes off, there is not much to look at. Still they shape the national imagination, building their empire in people's heads.

## Lagos in Nollywood films

The urban scene is fundamental in Nigerian films (Okome 2003). Not all Nollywood films are set in Lagos,<sup>2</sup> but Nollywood is inconceivable without it—its personality, dynamism, infinite astonishing stories, and garish glamour—and Lagos is the most common setting.

The first thing to say about how Lagos appears on screen is that it does so in various guises in thousands of films, reflecting the size and complexity of the city and the film industry. The videos are at home at nearly all social levels, and some directors (e.g., Chico Ejiro) and directors of photography (e.g., Jonathan Gbemutuo) have distinctive visual styles. Still, the films share strong commonalities—not because they are the products of a consolidated mass-culture industry mobilizing large amounts of capital to deliver a standardized product, and not because they are shaped in any significant way by government influence:<sup>3</sup> the Lagos in the films is a collectively produced representation because the film industry is heavily imitative and generic—which is the generative structure of African popular culture and its commercial basis (Barber 1987, 2000; Haynes and Okome 1998). Material conditions impose certain features on nearly all films. Location shooting—one of those features—creates a common realism, a mass of interchangeable, conventionally framed shots of Lagos streets and compounds, lavish parlors and ordinary bedrooms, hospitals, and offices. Common desires lard the films with standard images of luxury automobiles, huge houses, and expensive clothes. Common fears take visible form by employing familiar generic resources—melodrama, crime film, and various conventional means of representing the supernatural.

The films are made so fast (shooting typically takes about two weeks, and often less), on such minuscule budgets, and under such unrelenting commercial pressures, that individual artists have few resources and little time to realize a distinctive vision. “Art directors” now sometimes appear in film credits, but the ability to control the look of a film is limited. All shooting is done on location because, as noted earlier, Nollywood does not have the capital to construct its own spaces. Interior scenes are shot in houses borrowed for a few days, so the color of the walls behind an actor cannot be changed. Nollywood films have acquired enough social prestige that wealthy people like to have their houses featured in them, but the crews are there on sufferance and have no real rights. Lighting is a neglected

art, seldom used creatively; filmmakers think they can get along without it because their video cameras are good at picking up ambient light. Though directors are accused of liking to create traffic jams (Nebo 2000:52–53), their ability to control the life of Lagos streets is precarious at best. Time is as hard to control as space: film narratives routinely sprawl across generations, but they never attempt to reproduce the look of a historical period other than the present. Budgetary reasons are doubtless overwhelmingly responsible for the lack of historical verisimilitude, and again the inability to control space is significant: there is no back lot on which to construct a period street, and even a room where period props could be stored may be difficult to come by.<sup>4</sup>

The visual dimension, compared with dialog and narrative, is less important in Nigerian video films than it is in most cinema cultures. The most highly developed arguments about the visual aspect of African films—chiefly the work of a line of Francophone critics (Barlet 2000; Gardies 1989; Gardies and Haffner 1987) thinking perhaps primarily of the stark Sahelian landscapes in films from Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—have stressed the image as the carrier of profound symbolic, social, and political meanings. The importance of the image is emphasized by slow pacing and an enveloping silence. Silence is the essential ground in the Mandingo sense of art and language (Barlet 2000:145), but the coastal peoples of Nigeria are exceptionally voluble, and their films tend to be crowded, frenetic, and noisy, like the film posters, cassette jackets, and Lagos itself. Nollywood films are tailored to the small, low-resolution screens on which they appear. They are narrative-driven and talky, like the soap operas (both domestic and imported) and Latin American *telenovelas* which make up a large part of their DNA. As the director Don Pedro Obaseki says, Nigerian video films were born of television, not cinema, in terms of their personnel (many of whom came from television soap operas), aesthetics, and video technology (Obaseki 2005). In their early days, nearly all Nigerian video films had a distinctively leaden, slow-moving quality; many still do, but on the whole, they have evolved in the direction of a brisker, international professional style of shooting and editing. This movement tends to undermine arguments for an essential African film language and to encourage us to see practical reasons for some of its supposed features. A static medium shot is an easier way to capture a conversation than the international standard shot-reverse-shot pattern, for example, if one is working with one camera and actors who are improvising from a scenario, rather than reciting lines from a script.

Nollywood films are full of close-ups because they are made for television screens. It is fundamentally a cinema of faces, which need to be seen in close-up because we need to see the tears streaming down them or otherwise get close to the emotions generated by almost invariably melodramatic plots (Haynes 2000:22–29). This is an aesthetic of immediate impact, plunging us into each moment and milking it for everything it is worth, rather than subordinating every element in the film to an overall sense of design (Barber 1987:46–48; Barrot 2005). There is some truth in the frequently repeated

notion about African cinema favoring the collective and therefore preferring medium shots to close-ups, but the Igbo and Yoruba and other southern Nigerian cultures that underlie Nollywood films place strong emphasis on individualism—individual dynamism, individual destiny, self-realization through the independent pursuit of money (on the Yoruba, see Barber 2000 and Barber and Waterman 1995). Lagos is notoriously a place where all forms of social solidarity break down, leaving individuals struggling for their survival and advancement, each against all (Oha 2001). The close-up carries these meanings.

Objects are also frequently shot in close-up, commodity fetishism clearly motivating the lingering, even lascivious camerawork. When the camera repeatedly returns to the label on a bottle of wine (*Glamour Girls 2*), product placement is doubtless involved. Most of the luxury objects—clothes, cars, houses—are borrowed from shops, car dealerships, or individuals. Wealth in the most tangible, desired forms is fundamental to the lure of Lagos and is at the heart of Nollywood imagery and thematics. “It’s now I know I have come to Lagos!” crows a mercenary woman who has finally gotten a man to give her a new car in *Living in Bondage 2*.

The films nevertheless pull back to give us the larger picture of the city, and the realism that comes with location shooting compensates for many of the limitations discussed above. Everything we see is Lagos, both what the camera is focusing on, and what we can see over the actors’ shoulders—which is often tremendously revealing. Of course these images are shaped, part of a project of representation. It is not easy to imagine or picture this singularly incoherent city.

As Matthew Gandy writes, Lagos from its origins has been marked by extreme income inequality and a conceptual split between the colonial/European/modern/world city and the “native” areas, left to fend for themselves under the presumed authority of “tradition” because, in fact, the city’s rulers had no interest in paying for a comprehensive urban infrastructure. By now, only a tiny proportion of the city functions as an integrated metropolis: the percentage of households connected to the piped water system has fallen from 10 percent in 1960 to 5 percent now; only 1 percent are connected to a closed sewer system. In the absence of any real pretense at the provision of municipal services, the population lives in atomized units, at every social level. The wealthy build walled compounds with their own security guards, boreholes for water, and generators. In middle-class neighborhoods (such as Surulere and Ikeja, where the film producers are based) the streets are gated and manned by neighborhood-supported security guards in an attempt to fend off gangs of armed robbers. The poor, left to their own devices in two hundred slums spread throughout the city, have no such physical security. Remnants of collective forms of social organization maintain some order, but as (for instance) traditional conceptions of whose responsibility it is to keep a shared compound clean break down, trash piles up. “Traditional rulers” of various kinds exert influence; normally, their roles have become highly exploitative. Functions such as provision of water

are in the hands of even more predatory figures, who charge exorbitant fees and block moves to provide running water because it would reduce their business. As Gandy emphasizes, there is an ideological vacuum where there should be a public sphere, or rather a splintering into ethnic and religious extremisms and the pursuit of individual advancement through patronage networks, strategies that promise a measure of control over immediate environments in the face of an admittedly intractable whole. This means that the situation is likely to stay the same because there is insufficient political pressure to bring about the needed enormous investments in infrastructure. It also means that coherence is hard to achieve, even on the conceptual level, either in popular consciousness, or at the urban-planning level (Gandy 2006).

Of course almost every African city is a mess; Lagos is only the biggest. The two-cities-of-colonialism theme was articulated in classic form by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), and Roy Armes has shown how it informs the treatment of space in the symbolically founding film of African cinema, Ousmane Sembene's *Borom Sarret* (Malkmus and Armes 1991:186–187). Françoise Pfaff introduces a study of “African Cities as Cinematic Texts” in Francophone African celluloid filmmaking by saying “Nowhere but in contemporary African cities is the clash between tradition and modernity better expressed. And it is precisely the dramatic rendition of this theme that lies at the core of the greatest number of African films, especially those set in urban contexts” (Pfaff 2004:89).

It is possible to find Nollywood films in which a polarity between “tradition” and “modernity” is operating, but this polarity does not structure the imagery of Nollywood films in general. The architecture and monuments associated with colonialism that Pfaff finds so prevalent are almost entirely absent; the population of Nollywood, as of Lagos, is young and does not remember the colonial era. The high end of the Lagos cityscape was formed by the era of oil-boom-fueled heroic national aspiration of the 1960s and 1970s, with its freeways and grandiose public buildings, and the era of neoliberal kleptocracy that followed. Money, rather than race, has for decades been the structuring principle, and though class divisions are exceptionally sharp and visible in Lagos, they are permeable (Olaniyan 2004:89–90)—doubtless much more permeable in imagination than in reality, and Nollywood is all about selling the dream of individual advancement. As has been frequently observed, the hope of individual advancement has been a formidable obstacle to the formation of class consciousness in Nigeria (Barber 1987; Jeyifo 1984; Waterman 1990; Williams 1974). Wealthy neighborhoods are now desired, rather than seen under the sign of exclusion, alienation, and disorientation, as in *Borom Sarret*.<sup>5</sup> Rich and poor coexist on intimate terms in a state of incomplete class formation. Many extended families include someone with money, or at least a relationship with a wealthy patron; no extended family is without many poor relations. Hopes for spectacular social promotion and fear of social collapse are almost universal and are the essential socioemotional matrix of the images of the films.

There is immense wealth in Lagos. Between 1971 and 2006, Nigeria earned more than \$400 billion in oil revenues, of which an estimated \$50–100 billion was siphoned off through fraud and corruption; between 2006 and 2020, the country is expected to make \$750 billion more (Lubeck, Watts, and Lipschutz 2007:5, 7). Much or most of this money has flowed abroad, rapidly, or gone elsewhere in Nigeria, but Lagos has gotten more than its share, and it is, with the new political capital, Abuja, the preeminent showcase for wealth. No amount of money, however, can buy complete segregation from ambient misery and danger. Unlike other megacities—such as Bombay, Dhaka, Manila, and São Paulo, which concentrate their poor in discrete satellite cities—Lagos has poverty that permeates all but a few enclaves (Packer 2006:68). Almost all streets have broken surfaces and are bordered by trash, open sewers, and petty commerce. No street is safe from daylight armed robbery and carjacking. All this is visible as a camera tracks a fancy SUV through Lagos. Tejumola Olaniyan gives an example of how difficult it is to produce an exclusive image:

During the reign of the infamous dark-goggled tyrant General Sani Abacha (November 1993–June 1998), his propaganda machine produced a video, *Nigeria: World Citizen*, to burnish his image and the image of Nigeria he had dragged into the mud. The clips of Lagos that appeared in it were all high-angle shots of towering skyscrapers. The vertigo induced immediately tells you that something is amiss far before you are able to make sense of it: conventional eye-level shots that would have shown people on the streets are missing. Yes, the dirt on Lagos streets is so legendary that it subverts any attempt to perfume it over by propaganda. (Olaniyan 2004:101)

But Nollywood has found ways to romanticize the Lagos cityscape, chiefly by pulling the camera far back for establishing shots of the fancier, greener residential areas of the city, or the skyline of high-rise buildings on Lagos Island. A favorite shot—is it actually the same one, recycled from film to film?—is taken from a tall building in Ikoyi, looking over Five Cowries Creek to the exclusive realm of Victoria Island. Another common solution is to shoot at night, when lights sparkle and darkness hides the squalor. Improbably, traffic on the freeways and major streets provides images of urban glamour and mobility (*Tears for Love*); again, shooting at night helps (*Dead End*). The notorious Lagos traffic jams never appear (Haynes 2006). These establishing shots seem to be emulating the look of Hollywood films, and they often occur in romantic films or at romantic moments to provide an image of a desired good life in a normal city (*Violated 1*).

Particular iconic buildings are seldom featured (cf. Pfaff 2004). Politically, this doubtless reflects the fact that Nigeria was under military rule during the rise of the video films, and filmmakers were understandably cautious about sticking a camera in the rulers' faces, even if they had been

allowed to do so. In any case, until 1991, political power was centered in Dodan Barracks on Lagos Island, which presents a blank wall to the city, and then moved to the new capital, where the videos have a weak foothold. Public institutions do not function, as everyone knows well, so there is little reason to show them. Economic power springs from the oil wellheads of the Niger Delta and then cascades through myriad, often secret networks. The videos represent this sort of wealth through totalizing shots of the whole Lagos skyline of tall buildings, or through more or less randomly chosen examples of sleek office buildings and extravagant mansions with fanciful curved concrete work in the modern Nigerian style. The videos have an obsessive interest in people who tap into the sources of wealth—their houses, parties, and cars. Film cultures everywhere give disproportionate attention to the élite, of course; here, social turbulence, moral spectacle, and cynical political analysis are an integral part of the vision of a privileged lifestyle. As Pierre Barrot acutely observes, though Nollywood frankly aims at being an entertainment industry, it does not turn away from the “wounds” of society, as (for instance) the far more escapist Latin American *telenovelas* do: on the contrary, Nollywood deals with these issues constantly (Barrot 2005:64–65).

The ambient chaos is apt to show around the edges of the image unless care is taken to exclude it; even that establishing shot from a tall building in Ikoyi, if it pans inland to the streets below, may seem to develop an exploratory quality (*Illegal Brothers*), though Nollywood shies away from the tendentious shots of garbage piles and traffic jams that are irresistible to foreign documentary filmmakers (*Suffering and Smiling*). These realities are too familiar to need comment; people watch movies to see something else.

The social anxieties that underlie most Nollywood films are apt to be expressed less through direct, social realist images of social chaos or danger than through the plots, which often follow savage campaigns for social advancement that take a toll on innocent victims or illustrate social precariousness through tales of families ruined by unemployment, hospital bills, or the death of a breadwinner which makes it impossible to pay school fees (Haynes 2002). Such stories take place mostly in the standard interior spaces of homes, offices, and hospitals, but they may culminate by melodramatically dumping their protagonists out into the streets, where they search vainly for work (*Dying for the Nation; Shame*), a lost child (*Onome 2*), or a patron (*Dry Leaves*), solicit as a prostitute (*Domitilla*), sit amid household furniture after being evicted (*Died Wretched*), or eat garbage as a raving lunatic (*Living in Bondage 2*).

The dangers of Lagos life are imaged directly in crime films, which are often topical and generally respond to anxieties about violent crime. Some films in this genre convey the terror of the denizens of Lagos with gritty realism; others sympathetically—and melodramatically—explore the social pressures that produce criminals (*Owo Blow; Rattlesnake*); others seem to be constructed mostly out of recycled international film culture. Various strands of iconography have been developed: images of gangsters modeled

partly on actually existing Lagos “area boys” and partly on American and Chinese (*Bloody Mission*) films;<sup>6</sup> equally menacing vigilantes, based closely on the black-clad, amulet-wearing Bakassi Boys, who operated in eastern Nigeria around 2000 (McCall 2004); and slicker, frankly Americanized action film heroes reveling in high-tech gear and dealing with international conspiracies in clean, modern landscapes that hardly exist in Nigeria (*Blue Sea, State of Emergency*). There have been some highly eroticized treatments of gangsters, both male (*Rattlesnake*) and female (*Outkast*). Filmmakers are apprenticing themselves to the arts of American film violence, but their budgets sharply limit what they can shoot up or blow up. I believe *Rituals* (1997) is the first Nigerian film in which a car is destroyed—a landmark for the industry.

Half the population of Lagos lives on a dollar a day, and these people do not get proportional screen time in Nollywood films, but Nigerian filmmakers are on easy and intimate terms with the life of the poor. The low-budget realism that springs from just going somewhere and filming conveys a lot of truth—seldom do we see Hollywood- or Bollywood-style representations of poverty, in which the hovels constructed on sound stages are too large and well-lighted and the actors wear theatrical rags. A sturdy tradition of comedy in Yoruba, Pidgin, and English dealing with ordinary people living in a shared urban compound descends from the Yoruba traveling theater tradition and from the classic 1980s Nigerian television situation comedies, like Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Basi and Company*. The laughter is generated in the struggle for survival in a world full of tricksters and predators (*Lagos Na Wah!*; see Oha 2001). The inspired satire *Holygans* is set at about the same class level. Pidginphone exponents of this tradition often appear in Shakespearean fashion as comic servants—gatemens, househelp—in films about their social superiors.

The fact that public space is incoherent and artistically unmanageable encourages retreat into the family compound and the genre of domestic melodrama, the dominant mode of Nollywood film. Nigerian film culture has the upward social bias normal in film cultures around the world, preferring to set its stories in attractive large houses, or even in luxurious mansions. As Birgit Meyer has observed (speaking about Ghanaian videos, though the point is equally valid for Nigerian ones), an attraction of the films for their audiences, who overwhelmingly live in modest circumstances, is that they purport to provide a glimpse behind the high walls and imposing gates of the wealthy, which shut out the rest of society to shelter bourgeois nuclear families (Meyer 1999:110).

Behind those walls, scenes of luxury unfold; what happens is invariably melodramatic, and it frequently involves the occult. As Meyer argues, making spiritual forces visible is a crucial function of the video films (Meyer 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Oha 2001). The occult permeates all social environments in the world of the videos, and while one can find examples where it is associated with the primitive or village world, as opposed to urban modernity (*Narrow Escape*), more often it is integral to the representation of modernity

and modern wealth.<sup>7</sup> Money rituals in which a human being is sacrificed to bring miraculous wealth were already established in Nigerian popular culture before the rise of the videos, as a figure for the mysterious, unearned wealth of the oil boom (Barber 1982; Smith 2001). Such rituals have been a hallmark of Nigerian videos from their beginning (featured, for instance, in the founding film of the video boom, *Living in Bondage 1*), and they are associated with “bigmen” and the spectacle of flashy wealth in Lagos.

Households at all income levels are haunted by ghosts, often of virtuous wives and mothers wickedly done away with (*Living in Bondage 1 and 2; Blood Sister*); households contain jealousies that give rise to witchcraft attacks (*Iya Ibeji Eleran Igbe*); households are infiltrated by demonic forces that must be cast out by Christian pastors (*The Maid*). Meyer makes a strong argument for the role of pentecostal Christianity in shaping the way occult forces are represented in video films (Meyer 1998, 2002a, 2002b), but Christianity does not have a monopoly on access to the spiritual realm. Diviners are frequently consulted in times of difficulty, and they may be Yoruba *babalawos* or Igbo *dibias*, good (*Iya Ibeji Eleran Igbe*) or evil (*South Connection*), honest (*419 Connection*) or dishonest (*419 Connection* again), effective (*Compromise*) or ineffective (*Rituals*). Occult forces appear in many guises, sometimes in the raffia skirts and kaolin face painting of indigenous religious traditions, sometimes in imitation of Hollywood horror films, sometimes in fanciful original concoctions. Special effects are integral to their representation, from magical appearances and disappearances managed by simply stopping the camera, through spiritual-force laser beams emanating from eyes or fingers, to extensive digitalized imagery, as at the beginning and end of *Six Demons*, where computer-generated demons rise from and sink into a computer-generated sea. Postproduction companies (House of Macro, TFP) specialize in this work. Highly standardized, electronically generated sounds accompany occult manifestations. In these dimensions as well, the occult is associated with the cutting edge of modernity, not with the “primitive.”

Spiritual warfare rages throughout the city—another level of danger and conflict made visible, shadowing the ordinarily visible city. The videos do not agree about the forms of the spiritual realm. In general, they display a range of ideological and cultural positions: liberal and conservative when it comes to women’s roles, Christian fundamentalist and cultural nationalist, grounding themselves in an ethnic or traditionalist morality or emulating a Western-oriented cosmopolitanism, and so on. Nevertheless, in spite of the variety I have noted throughout this essay, there is a remarkable coherence to the representation of Lagos that emerges from these films. Wealth and poverty, the modern and the traditional, the police and the streets, may be valued differently or even oppositely, but they are imaged in much the same way, with a common visual vocabulary. Opposites tend to meet: the lure of garish riches might seem antithetical to born-again Christianity, for instance, but the former serves as the requisite temptation in the morality tales of the latter—and in the many Lagos “prosperity churches,” garish riches are seen as proof of divine favor (Ukah 2003). Tecu Benson is both a

leading practitioner of the American-inspired action genre, filled with images of expensive, sleek urban surfaces (*State of Emergency*), and a leading director, in association with the Reverend Helen Ukpabio, of Christian videos (*End of the Wicked; Highway to the Grave*). From vernacular fooling amid the garbage of a slum, through intimate emotional betrayals and spiritual combat against demonic assailants, to the political maneuvering of the hyperrich, the films seem like pieces of a mosaic, rather than contradictory and competing representations. The popular imagination from which they spring is syncretic (Barber 1987) and elastic; the genres mix and interpenetrate so each film and each kind of film shades into others; the constraints of their budgets and the sharing of personnel and procedures form similar images. All this tends to produce a seamless, motley fabric. Heavily generic and saturated with the supernatural, the films may seem to contradict our notions of realism, but they spring from a common ground—Lagos—and they vividly image their enormous, horrible, fascinating object of knowledge.

#### NOTES

1. Other examples of the recent efflorescence of interest in Lagos include Bregtje van der Haak's documentary film *Lagos/Koolhaas* and her and Silke Wawro's interactive DVD *Lagos Wide and Close*, both stemming from the Rem Koolhaas / Harvard Project on the City research; Kunle Tejuoso and Weyinmi Atigbi's coffeetable book *Lagos: A City at Work* (2005); dele Jegede's contribution to the interactive CD-ROM *Five Windows Into Africa* (McNaughton et al. 2000); Dan Ollman's *Suffering and Smiling*, a documentary about the musician Fela Ransome-Kuti and his children; and a rash of foreign documentaries about Nollywood: Franco Sacchi's *This is Nollywood*, Nick Moran's *Nick Does Nollywood*, and Jamie Meltzer's *Welcome to Nollywood*.
2. Other cities and towns are frequently shown; many films are set in villages; one flourishing genre, the cultural epic, is set in the precolonial or colonial historical past, and such films are typically shot in rural areas. Producers often find it convenient to get their casts and crews away from the distractions of their lives in Lagos to shoot somewhere quieter and cheaper.
3. The Censors Board tries to hold the line on certain fronts—obscene language, excessive sexuality, violence, and inflammatory political or ethnic positions—but does little or nothing to set the agenda of the films, visually or in any other way.
4. The great exception to this rule is the cultural epic. In this case, it is easy to find, or, if necessary, to build, a village of thatched huts off in the bush, and costuming, often fancifully conceived, is a featured attraction. *The Battle of Love*, a film about the Biafran War, works at recreating the 1960s, but this is the only film I am aware of that tries any such thing. The sense of anachronism is not natural; it did not arise in Western culture until the Renaissance and developed slowly thereafter (Garin 1965) and there is little sign that African audiences are disturbed by anachronisms in Nigerian films, though film reviewers in Nigerian newspapers occasionally point them out.
5. In a study of representations of the city in Ghanaian video films, Esi Dogbe comments that "The city is visually and metaphorically the locus of wide-ranging patterns of cosmopolitan consumption in which the camera itself, the filmmakers, the syncretic mix of beliefs represented,

the narratives and fictional characters, are all complicit. This mutual complicity is quite different from Ayi Kwei Armah's (1968) lone 'man' squirming his way detachedly through a sensory overload of putrid smells, disjunctive sights, sounds, and the textures of (neo)colonial buildings that blanket the festering social, political, and economic sores of a rotting new Ghana in the novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*" (2003:230–231).

6. Of course the "area boys" are themselves fans of American and Chinese action pictures and dress accordingly.
7. There is now a large literature on magic and modernity in Africa; seminal texts include Comaroff and Comaroff 1993 and Geschiere 1997.

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