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Summary and Keywords

Films and video dramas can become historical sources in different ways. One of them is the use of the filmic images as a source for learning about the physical environment, the layout and look of cities, buildings, rural landscapes, and other cultural elements. The documentation of urban spaces in movies made in the cities that were frequently used as filming locations, such as Dakar in Senegal or Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, furnish cases for extended treatment. Secondly, feature films can comment on the past as a kind of "history writing," by offering explanation and perspective on past events, a means of doing what written history does in a different medium. The invention of fictional characters or dialogue and filmic strategies such as condensation do not invalidate the contribution that some movies make to the understanding of historical situations. In the case of African history, films by Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo, and Raoul Peck are illustrations of how this has been achieved. Finally, movies also bear witness to the time of their production, because as creations of the intellect they reflect the interests, concerns, preoccupations, and possibilities of their time. Studies can focus not only on a movie in itself but also on viewers' perception of it or on critics' responses, either at the time of its first release or in subsequent viewings. In contrasting ways, Gaston Kaboré's pre-colonial era films and Jean-Pierre Bekolo's depiction of Yaounde working class neighborhoods offer exemplary material for this kind of study. Popular films and video dramas can in turn have an impact on their societies and be used deliberately by their makers to disseminate messages, entering in this way the chain of historical causality. In the 1990s the low budget video dramas first produced in Ghana and Nigeria in analogue recordings on VHS cassettes brought a challenge to the established African cinema that was recognized in the international film festival circuit, by combining amateurish production values and commercial success. This mass cultural phenomenon offers an opportunity to explore the economic and cultural roots of a particular style of visual storytelling, as well as the connections between popular audiences' thematic preferences in entertainment and their everyday living conditions.

Keywords: cinema, Nollywood, Dakar, Ouagadougou, Ousmane Sembene, Djibril Diop Mambéty, Gaston Kaboré, Alain Gomis, Jean-Marie Téno, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Raoul Peck, Med Hondo

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Film and Video as Historical Sources

Films and video dramas can become historical sources in a number of ways. Firstly, filmic images can be used as a source for learning about the physical environment, the layout and look of the cities, buildings, rural landscapes, and cultural items such as dress, furnishings, tools, or ephemeral aspects of social life such as behavior, gesture, and speech. The value of African feature films is especially pronounced when it comes to the physical environment, because the early productions were mostly filmed outdoors and in non-artificial settings. The use of films for this kind of historical investigation in the future was not anticipated by their producers. Secondly, feature films about the past can represent a kind of "history writing," by offering commentary and perspective on past events. In this way filmmaking can be a means of doing what written history does in a different medium. Thirdly, films bear witness to the time of their production and can be studied as an intellectual product reflecting the interests, concerns, preoccupations, and possibilities of their time. Popular films and video dramas can in turn have an impact on their societies and be used deliberately by their makers to disseminate messages, entering in this way the chain of historical causality.

Film as Source for the Physical and Cultural Environment of its Time

Film and video dramas can be studied as testimony to the times of their production by providing a photographic record of the natural and human landscape, and they can also bear witness to social and personal features, or to looks (haircut, dress style, ways of moving, proxemics)—intangible aspects of a moment in time that otherwise are difficult to document under most circumstances.

African feature films are especially a treasure trove for records of images of historical physical spaces. The works of the initial four decades of African filmmaking, corresponding to the later part of the 20th century, were mostly filmed outdoors and in settings that had been barely modified for filming. Even for interior scenes, studio sets or on-purpose reconstructions were extremely rare. The interiors in early West African films chronicle for the most part the look, layout, furniture, and ornamentation of actual work and living areas, that is, the spaces where spontaneous formal or intimate social relations took place. In the years following decolonization, the bare look of the offices of local businesses or government services, the spacious but sparsely appointed villas of the post-independence educated elite, the crowded courtyards where humbler urban dwellers rented rooms or apartments, the rustic homes in the villages, locations where common men and women lived their personal dramas, sorrows, and joys, were captured in the low-budget films nearly as they were in daily life. These spaces have been transformed in the time since these movies were filmed. Were it not for the feature movies made in those days, it would be much harder to imagine the look of early postcolonial African societies.

Cities in Early African Filmmaking

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The photographic record preserved in African filmmakers' work has a special pertinence in documenting the development of urban spaces. This is best demonstrated in cities that became frequent settings for movies. Senegal was the country that produced the most and some of the best-known movies in sub-Saharan Africa, and its capital Dakar provides the most compelling example.

Dakar

Ousmane Sembene's first short film, *Borom Sarret* (1963), which brought him international recognition, is a brief portrait of Dakar, including its faceless crowds but also memorable characters, such as the crippled beggar (henceforth a standard feature of Sembene's films), the praise singer, and some urban dwellers in distress. In this inaugural work the city becomes a protagonist of the same stature as the leading actor of the film. The principal character is the driver of a horse-drawn taxi-carriage, in itself a tribute to a bygone era, who finds himself in the "Plateau," the affluent neighborhood of the divided city prohibited to such vehicles. A police officer stops and humiliates him, gives him a fine, and confiscates his animal and carriage.

Sembene's later feature film *La noire de . . .* (1966) includes more extended views of Dakar, which are set in contrast to the scenes of the main character's life in France. The Dakar portions of the film are flashbacks, recollections of a time of freedom, dense ties of community and kinship, and crowded streets. They suggest a clash with the alienation and exploitation chronicled in the claustrophobic interior takes in southern France (Antibes), which also sharply diverge from the way the French Riviera was usually portrayed in films of European origin during those years, a dream vacationland. A dichotomy is already present in Dakar itself. The title character Diouana (played by Therese N'Bissine Diop) remembers her pre-migration life in flashes: in the Medina, among family and acquaintances, but also in the affluent sections of Dakar, where white people live in multistory apartment buildings that require the use of unfamiliar and intimidating elevators and feature hallways that are desolate. Diouana goes to these buildings seeking employment, finding only shut doors, but in one of them also meets her African boyfriend running a business errand. The formal public spaces of the city henceforth become the background for their strolls, places to encounter beautifully dressed rich African women, a monument erected to the heroes fallen in the two world wars, and some members of parliament engaged in serious-sounding conversation near the congress building, reminding viewers of the hollow recent independence of Senegal. The film is "powerfully of its moment" in physical settings as much as in thematic content.[1] The Medina reappears in the coda at the end of the film. After Diouana perishes, her employer comes back to Dakar to return her belongings and give her unpaid wages to her mother. In front of the shop of the letter-writer (played by Sembene himself) the employer is subjected to the judging gaze of the young men of the neighborhood. This final sequence opens and ends with shots of the iron pedestrian bridge over the highway separating the modest African neighborhood from the Plateau where expatriate professionals such as Diouana's employer live, a powerful visual symbol of the social distance between the two poles, but also of their connection. The bridge becomes the

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setting for the final haunting pursuit of a little boy wearing a face mask, which can be read as partly the reflection of the employer's guilty conscience. Another landmark of Senegalese social history that appears for the first time in this film is the passenger ship Ancerville, in service between Dakar and Marseille between 1962 and 1973, a time when air travel was less affordable and uncommon, that carried Frenchmen to Senegal and Senegalese migrants to France.

In Sembene's *Mandabi* (1968), the neighborhoods of Dakar, its dwellings of different styles, and the plazas, boulevards, and government offices, together with a more extended cast of men and women inhabiting and working in these places, find display and sharper focus. In this comedy the value of good house sites in the growing city, real estate speculation, and the greed animating the smooth-talking members of the educated elite who graduated from formal schools and replaced the former colonial masters, are the principal themes. What makes the film endearing and instructive is that the two sides of the "modern" versus "traditional" opposition come under equal scrutiny and powerful irony. The likeable characters representing positive examples are also drawn from both sides. In the pole of tradition we find the uneducated but serious-minded and responsible nephew, who is a migrant in France but preserves his simple Islamic faith and strong moral fiber while sweeping the streets of Paris and sending money to his family (which alas cannot be cashed because of bureaucratic absurdities). In the modern pole we encounter the educated nephew, trustworthy and a good father to his son, who guides the vain but clueless title character in the mysteries of officialdom and also steps in with monetary support when needed. The visuals are a bewildering diversity of urban life forms: the serene, leafy residential quarters of dignified but poor African city dwellers, where private tragedies can occur behind the screens, wide boulevards still sparsely traveled by motor vehicles, the beggars, the makeshift photo studio, the Mauritanian's grocery shop, the ambulant sellers of textiles or of water, and other elements of the human and physical landscape.

When, thirty years later, Sembene directed *Faat Kine* (2000), he had modified his artistic conception and some of his political views, but the physical landscape is also new. The title character of this movie is a successful businesswoman in a world where men occupy formal positions but prove themselves cowards and unable to carry on with the dignity expected in their roles. The sumptuous residence of the woman, where much of the action is set, has the aspect of utopian fantasy rather than daily reality, although it is still contrived to convey cultural nationalism and Third-World political ideology. In contrast, the streets, the gas station, and many other images of public spaces are faithful demonstrations of how much Dakar had changed by the turn of the millennium.

Djibril Diop Mambéty, the other celebrated filmmaker of Senegal, provided a remarkable parallel visual record of Dakar. Starting with his short *Contras' City* (1968), he was often pitted against Sembene, and a chasm exists between Mambéty's idiosyncratic film style and humorous take on social and political issues and the serious realism and pedagogic intent of Sembene's movies, characteristics that were widely shared in 20th-century African filmmaking. As visual documents of Dakar, however, Mambéty's images match

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and complement those of Sembene. The comparison becomes more compelling because Mambéty inserted into his movies sequences that look like spoofs of some well-known scenes in Sembene movies. The twenty-one-minute long *Contras' City* is actually a travelogue documentary focusing on the architecture of Dakar, a city full of contrasts. The oppositions are playful and run along various axes, while the voice-over dialogue is that of a female French tourist conversing off screen with her African guide. The film is not devoid of political content, even if some of its fine points will be lost now to a non-Senegalese viewer. *Badou Boy* (1970) is a fictional short film about a thief who helps run a bus service while dodging an inept police officer. The viewer also meets a blind musician, a hat-and-cane fancy man (played by the director), and Badou's white-hatted buddy Moussa, all of whom display moral ambiguities.

The highest point reached in the visual documentation of Dakar in the 1970s is Mambéty's celebrated *Touki Bouki* (1973), the first of only two full-length feature films made by the director. The editing of this movie, which follows an associative imagination rather than being planned for continuity or narrative clarity, presents a vivid, fractured portrait of Dakar, as eccentric as in the short films of the director. Although lapses in continuity produce uncertainty about the narrative details of the plot, the film as a whole makes a strong impression. Mory and Anta, two young lovers considered to be a mismatch by most of the other people in their lives, stand together against the expectations of the figures around them. These are a diverse lot: state representatives; Anta's faux-progressive and jealous fellow university students; and a senior member of Anta's household, her aunt, a trader and slum landlord, who bears high hopes for her educated and smart niece and dislikes the idle and vagabond boyfriend, rider of a motorcycle adorned with the skull and long horns of a steer, a signal of his unredeemable pastoral background.

The couple drift through different locations in the city, from the deserted beach where they make love to the wrestling arena, where the camera lingers on a trunk containing the magic medicines that one of the contestants has brought along in order to prevail in the competition, but which the couple mistake for a chest of money. Unlike the conscientious migrant nephew of Sembene's *Mandabi*, who remains undefiled by the corrupting influences of Paris, Mory and Anta are obsessed with the thought of traveling to Paris where they expect to find the good life, apparently unencumbered by any moral restraint. Their fantasies show, however, that they also crave dignity and respect at home —the modern kind, in what looks like a dream of a presidential pageant with a full military display in their honor, and the conventional kind, jubilant plebeian crowds cheering their monetary largesse and the acclaim of a traditional praise singer, who takes the likeness of Anta's implacable aunt. The couple try several money-making schemes to attain their aim. When they finally succeed and are about to board the ship, the very same Ancerville that took Diouana to Marseille in *La noire de . . .*, Mory loses his nerve and runs back from the wharf to the city. On the deck of the ship the viewer sees a group of French expats returning home, seated on chairs and chattering about newly independent Africa, revealing their naivety and apprehensions. In between these moments the viewer is treated to shots of other locations reminiscent of Sembene's films:

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the iron pedestrian bridge, the marketplaces with makeshift stalls, the squalid housing of popular neighborhoods. There is also the postman, difficult to imagine as anything other than the antipode to the one depicted in *Mandabi*. Sembene's postman receives a close-up at the end of the movie as he delivers the moral of the story to the characters around him, a representation of the engaged intellectual. This interlude involves a Brechtian distancing effect, as he explains the need to take social responsibility in order to right the wrongs of society. *Touki Bouki*'s postman is instead a hapless petty civil servant who remains silent throughout. The viewer catches glimpses of him in shabby surroundings or trudging uphill on a slope that looks like a pile of dirt. Despite his non-threatening appearance, Anta's aunt loathes him and thinks that he "hides something," because a piece of mail that she is expecting never arrives.

Amadou Seck's *Saaraba* (1988) was released twenty years after *Mandabi* and fifteen years after *Touki Bouki*. The once-young educated elites who took over Senegal at independence have now aged and are running businesses and raising large families. The streets of Dakar are jammed with cars, and the city boasts a large soccer stadium built "by the Chinese." The main story is thwarted love between an idealistic young man who has returned from Europe after many years of formal education there, having tired of its shallow material life, and an unspoiled young woman he meets in his father's village. Their love is threatened by the machinations of a corrupt politician in league with dishonest businessmen, hypocritical village leaders, and the greedy matron of a traditional patrician household, who in concert conspire against the lovers for their own selfish reasons. In the city, rebellious yet powerless young men in dreadlocks hold forth in Afro-centric Rastafari accents, but incongruously seek escape in maligned Europe. Discouraged by the forces opposing him, the protagonist gives up his job in the family business, descends to the seedy surroundings of the downtrodden, and walks the streets at night in a drug-induced hallucination, rendered in the fitful and blurred images of a hand-held camera. In physical settings as in thematic content, the Dakar of *Saaraba* is miles away from the city shown in the early films of Sembene and Mambéty, although barely two decades separates them.

To continue the observation on a major film released in the new century, Franco-Senegalese director Alain Gomis's *Tey (Today)* (2012) also begins with the premise of homecoming after years of exile in migration. This time the years abroad are spent in the USA, reflecting the broadened horizon of African international mobility. The plot then develops along the simplest of storylines, inspired by an old Senegalese belief according to which a person intuits their own death the day before it occurs. The title character, Satché (played by US rapper Saul Williams), having learned that it is the last day of his life, makes the rounds to say his farewells. He visits his parents' house, his childhood friends, his first love, and his wife and children. He looks at his surroundings with estranged eyes, conditioned as much by his extended years of absence as by awareness of his imminent doom. Serenity prevails, however, over tears and shock, while close-ups of great beauty and tenderness capture a sense of the vanities of life. What the viewer sees through the eyes of the protagonist is construction sites and unfinished buildings juxtaposed with towering modern glass and steel skyscrapers, middle-class households,

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and former colonial neighborhoods, alongside popular residential areas of cement blocks and corrugated metal roofs. The film has a dreamlike quality, which prompted comparisons to *Touki Bouki*. It is likewise an homage to the city of Dakar, an ode, with visual qualities accentuated by the near speechlessness of the title character.

Ouagadougou

Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso, is another African city with a significant photographic archive of records preserved in feature films. It follows from the importance of filmmaking in Burkina Faso and the large number of movies made by its accomplished directors, partly thanks to government subsidies. Three films produced approximately a decade apart provide an illustration: Gaston Kaboré's *Zan Boko* (1988), Drissa Touré's *Haramouya* (1995), and Dani Kouyaté's *Ouaga Saga* (2004). A documentary made by the Cameroonian Jean-Marie Téno, *Sacred Places* (2009), complements the record.

Zan Boko was conceived and produced in the climate of opinion that attended widespread political participation, youth enthusiasm, and social polarization during the short period of Captain Sankara's revolutionary government (1983–1987). Unlike Kaboré's first feature *Wend Kuuni* (1982), which presented the story of rural life in an imaginary precolonial past (more on this movie below), *Zan Boko* turned to contemporary life in the capital city with a plot elaborated around a burning social problem: the expansion of the city, crowding and population increase resulting from migration and economic growth, and the struggle to access new or preserve old urban lots in the face of land speculation and political intrigue meant to expropriate the land of farmers who lived in villages close to the city. Powerful urbanites achieve their ends by mobilizing connections to the state and take advantage of urban zoning laws and hygiene regulations. The inequality between a rich and a poor family finds visual expression in the juxtaposition of a lavish villa and a mud brick compound as adjacent neighbors. The movie emphasizes the contrast with high-angle shots of the villager's compound taken from the terrace of the rich man's villa. The soundscape becomes another sphere for the tussle between the parties; the noise of the music emanating from the terrace reception of the rich family wafts over to disturb the sleep of the poor neighbor. This cinematic record is faithful to experience. The disparity between the different sorts of dwellings thrown together in the newly emerging neighborhoods of the urban periphery that was incorporated into the capital continued for several generations, and was also reproduced in the older established zones of the city, as districts changed character and went from newly founded to established, or matured into more even-looking middle-class neighborhoods. As time went by, a larger proportion of families in the newer zones arrived from remote agricultural zones, giving some of these neighborhoods the make-do physiognomy of squatter housing rather than autochthonous village life, but always intermingling with the better-quality buildings of higher-income city dwellers. Elsewhere, *Zan Boko* also recreates the social life that breathes in multiple-family courtyards, where a large number of people in different stations of life or with different occupations and levels of income find shelter in rented rooms built around a shared patio where various household chores are carried out.

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Drissa Touré's *Haramouya* is based on a set of characters and stories that occupy the same space without having a connection between them. Situations and people are intertwined in subplots, building up a colorful and funny mosaic, a sort of collective portrait of Ouagadougou, where the underworld is well represented: bike thieves, corrupt civil servants, drug dealers, fundamentalist clerks, prostitutes, and cascades of two-wheeled vehicles, impressive in their number whether waiting at a stoplight or in motion on the roads, paying homage to the city with more motorbikes than anywhere else in the world. The poor housing of the popular quarters contrasts with the wealth represented in the few and far between massive high-rises seen from a distance. In one of the subplots, as in some other movies from Burkina Faso, cinema self-reflexively enters the story: an elder brother who supports single-handedly the extended household of the pious but unemployed senior father is a projectionist in a movie theater, while his younger brother idles away his time in the city looking for his girlfriend. These episodes are set against the steep 50 percent devaluation of the CFA franc in January 1994, which rocked the countries that are part of the CFA monetary zone with effects that continued for years to come, a unique occurrence in the history of this currency.

Dani Kouyaté's *Ouaga Saga* is a popular comedy with a light touch. The plot presents the parallel stories of ten boys whose lives intersect. Their experiences include magical incidents that pass as unremarkable occurrences. When the movie was released it was hailed as a tribute to Ouagadougou, to the youth of Burkina Faso, and to cinema. Cinema is an affair of the state, of the municipality, and of the population at large in the capital city. Ouagadougou is the permanent host to the continent's earliest and still important cinema event, the international film festival FESPACO (Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou). It used to harbor several open-air movie theaters, most of which are now closed, that held a fascination for the young men, like the characters in this movie, shaping their dreams and giving their lives inspiration. *Ouaga Saga* dramatizes the theft of a motorbike, a common crime in the city that features in other movies as well, but on screen the offense, which is perpetrated by the boys and presented with humor, loses its sting. Diversity, in this instance of class—the underworld versus a fancily dressed, well-heeled woman—is offered as an intrinsic property of urban existence. Fortune arrives at the end with a winning lottery ticket, a rags-to-riches fantasy without the merit argument of the Horatio Alger prototype, which is congruent with the carefree attitude that the characters exhibit in their behavior.

Today's visitors to Ouagadougou encounter a city that looks very different from the one depicted in the three movies mentioned so far: a central downtown that was expropriated from its owners, razed, and rebuilt with sturdy high-rises according to an urban renewal plan initiated and executed by the state. In the residential areas as well, better houses are seen more frequently, but the older ideal pattern lives on: there is a preference for low-rise single-family housing within a building lot, if the family can afford it, leading to urban sprawl out of all proportion to the relatively modest size of the city's population.

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The pre-eminent Cameroonian documentary filmmaker Jean-Marie Téno's *Sacred Places* was filmed on the occasion of his visit to Ouagadougou to attend the FESPACO film festival. It is therefore unsurprising that this film, too, focuses on cinema, but it does so with a twist. The main venue is not one of the theaters screening the festival selections but a popular video parlor with straw mat walls and wooden benches for seating. It is the kind of place more commonly associated with the exhibition of locally made video dramas in anglophone Africa, but in Ouagadougou it shows pirated DVDs of dubbed Asian action movies, Bollywood or Hollywood productions, and periodically also turns off its display monitor and becomes a Muslim prayer hall.[2] Such places are locally referred to as *cine club*, perhaps an unknowing throwback to the 1950s and the beginnings of film enthusiasm in Africa, when the brightest and best educated of the colonized youth gathered in the showrooms provided by the cultural center of the local administration to watch and discuss the avant-garde films arriving from Europe and thus replicate the post-World War II *cinémathèque* fever of the metropole.[3]

A documentary is meant to document, and Téno's, being no exception, provides rich observation and reflection on modern Africa's many paradoxes, but the main reason for including this movie here is because it also supplies a visual record of the physical layout and its inhabitants beyond the intentions of the filmmaker. The film lingers over the neighborhood of Saint Léon, which is tucked away between the cathedral and the central mosque, lying just south of the older town center but spared its destruction and renewal. Three characters lead the display: the owner/operator of the video parlor, who holds forth on the passion for popular movies that the open-air movie theaters of his childhood stirred in him; his helper, who goes around with his drum announcing the show of that evening; and a person who gave up his office job to become a writer on a public wall for all to read. We get views of the everyday life of ordinary men and women: unemployed youth gathered around a teapot, making tea, a newish urban custom that spread like wildfire in West Africa; hairdressers; the makeshift street-side bars and restaurants that give Ouagadougou its vitality; and finally a glimpse of fancy villas scattered between empty plots overgrown with weeds in Ouaga 2000, the enormous luxury neighborhood carved out of the rural zone by the previous regime, but still mostly unoccupied.

"History Writing" in Film

A different way in which feature films connect with history is through what has been called the cinematic writing of the past. A creative director making a "history film" on a subject concerning the past can use the opportunity as a means of engaging with or commenting on that past. The interpretation offered in such a film can be at variance with or alternatively contribute to and enrich written history. This view acknowledges that history films can potentially become contemporary witnesses of the past, in another medium than, but on a par with, professional historians' academic writing. This perspective was articulated in the 1990s as part of a broader trend in the humanities and social sciences that insisted on the relative value of truth and objectivity claims in academic research. According to Rosenstone, a major proponent of this approach, history

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films can be a legitimate and thought-provoking means of rendering the past, of conveying a verity that intersects with the discourse of history.[4] Oral and visual traditions embody aspects of the past that elude the written word. The argument was not that all movies about historical topics automatically do so. For example, the "costume dramas" that stage well-tried romantic plots in the trappings of bygone eras for their exotic appeal do not try to contribute to the interpretation of the past. Rosenstone and associated authors only maintained that fictional elaborations of dialogue and setting, or filmic strategies such as condensation, selection, and highlighting, do not vitiate the quality of a filmic contribution to the understanding of history. Some history films engage the kind of questions that professional historians ask, and the filmmakers' answers are embedded in characters and dramatic situations, which inevitably are also laced with invention.

Two films made by Ousmane Sembene in the 1970s offer examples of this propensity: *Emitaï* (1971) and *Ceddo* (1977).

Senegalese History in Sembene

Emitaï is the story of conflict between a village in the rice-growing Casamance region of Senegal and French colonial troops during the World War II. Before the credits roll, an initial sequence shows young village men being chased and caught in the grassy fields, and others coerced in other ways to surrender to uniformed native colonial soldiers, press-ganged, and herded at gun point to gathering camps for enrollment in the army (in theory, colonial army recruits were supposed to be volunteers). The main story takes place a year later and is about the requisition of fifty tons of rice from the same village, in order to feed the troops stationed in Dakar. That year the village has a bumper crop, but chooses to hide its harvest rather than surrender it. Because of the earlier conscription, the only people left in the village are women, children, and the elderly. They use subterfuge but also try to resist the soldiers by arms. In the conflict one of the elders dies. Only the women have the courage to organize his funeral rites. These sequences work together to suggest that the colonial political order rested on brute force. Besides this broad conclusion, the movie dramatizes different facets of the internal organization of the village and intra-community conflicts: the place of spiritual forces in the local imaginary and in shaping social and political outcomes, the futility of these beliefs when confronted with armed violence, the juxtaposition of gender groups, and the humiliation of the senior men in the face of the courage displayed by the women.

A script for the film was minimally drafted in the preparatory stage of the project, while the detailed plot line and selection of filming locations were determined on the spot, as work progressed under the direction of the villagers. Most of the actors were untrained village men, women, and children, and the dialogue was improvised by them; Sembene had minimal understanding of the Diola language in which they were delivered, and we presume that many villagers did not understand the French dialogue spoken by the white characters in the movie. The project must have been carried out, on set and in post-production, with frequent recourse to translation into Wolof. The plot has no hero protagonists, and many characters with crucial roles in certain sequences are not even

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named. The movie puts collective action on stage, a genuine distinction from the dramatic conventions of European and US filmmaking. This does not mean that the local aspects of the film can be taken at face value. The quasi-ethnographic scenes presenting the interaction of the elder villagers with the spirits behind the enclosure in the sacred grow, although they are dramatically effective as cinematographically,, may not be true to local conceptions or local modes of interaction with supra-human forces. While Sembene was born in the town of Ziguinchor in Casamance, he came of age in a Lebou/Wolof Islamic environment, which gave him little familiarity with the religious representations of rural Diola, and these scenes may have been influenced by exotic depictions of African religion found in other (non-African) movies.

Yet overall, in his visual narration of events Sembene selected from and mediated the villagers' memories, and he conveyed their understanding of colonial events, adding his own interpretation based on anti-colonial, Afrocentric, and Third-Worldist analyses and aspirations. Another level of distinction was added by the fact that these memories were presented with images selected with intimate knowledge of local ecology, thanks to the guidance of the villagers who possessed a collective memory of the relatively recent events, and with props and gestures belonging to local material culture and repertory of verbal communication. All of this makes *Emitaï* a good candidate for the sort of cinematic writing of the past, intersecting with history discourse, as defined by Rosenstone.

In *Ceddo*, Sembene portrays an earlier period of coastal Senegalese history, presenting a confrontation between a group of local Muslims and another group of pagan warriors led by a fearless woman leader. The staging does not suggest a precise or naturalistic reconstruction of a particular place and time or known historical episodes, but seems to present an amalgam of various political events that occurred in the Senegal basin during the 17th and 18th centuries.[5] The historical significance of the film lies in its being a reflection on the part played by the Muslim mystical brotherhoods in Senegalese national politics in the late 20th century. The plot, which has a timeline of less than two days, can be interpreted as a myth turned into a parable condensing the extended stretch of historical time when Islam expanded and consolidated itself in society, triggering a resistance which remained inconclusive. It has also been interpreted as a projection toward the past of the colonial experience of nation formation.[6] By the same token, the film points to a potential utopian future in which freer and more egalitarian social relations become possible. An author described the movie as being "about the revelation of historic process."[7]

Other Historical Leaders in the Writing of African Resistance

Med Hondo's *Sarraounia* (1986) takes a page from the West African wars of colonial conquest at turn of the 20th century. In 1899 in what is now the Niger Republic, a set of Azna villages (non-Muslim Hausa speakers, a.k.a. as Arna) fought against the French military expedition led by captains Voulet and Chanoine, which was rushing to the Chad basin to conquer land that had come under a newly established rival non-European political hegemon and thus establish an effective border between the emerging French

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and British colonial territories. The poignancy of the story lies in the fact that the Voulet–Chanoine column was renowned for the atrocities it committed, even by the grim standards of colonial wars, and that the Azna resistance was led by a woman. The film follows the account of the Battle of Lougou given in the eponymous novel of Nigerien author Abdoulaye Mamani, who also participated in the writing of the script. The film has been celebrated for its visual beauty and the powerful dramatic staging of its crowded scenes, as well as for the subtlety of its depiction of local social relations. The historic value is, once again, in exegesis, not in the precise reconstruction of time and place or cultural details or context. Hausa-speaking intellectuals of Niger or northern Nigeria are often dismayed seeing the movie to find that the desire for broad appeal and pan-African interpretation resulted in neglected local cultural and historical specificities which would have made the story recognizable and persuasive, most irritatingly in the decision to turn the movie in the Bamana/Jula language and not in Hausa as would be proper (some of these features of the film may be due to its filming in Burkina Faso as funding was provided by the Sankara government). The leader, Sarraounia Mangou, was a young priestess/medium of the *bori* spirit-forces according to the religious practice and conceptions of the Hausa and Songhay culture area. The film blends her callings and presents her as a powerful queen, offering an interpretation that is as much about the role of women and gender relations as about the violence of colonial occupation and subsequent colonial rule.

From a different angle, two movies about Patrice Lumumba, hero and victim of the decolonization of the Congo, made by the same filmmaker, the Haitian Raoul Peck, offer the opportunity to reflect on cinematic history writing versus dramatic description for the purpose of raising public awareness. The first film is *Lumumba, Death of a Prophet* (1992). Peck spent his childhood and early school years in the Congo. His father was a diaspora Afro-American professional who had responded to the invitation launched by the newly independent Congo government to fill positions vacated by departing Belgian personnel, and his family lived in the Congo for many years, even after Peck was sent abroad for further education. Peck was eight years old when the Congo won independence in 1960 and Lumumba was elected prime minister; this was followed by riots and secessions and Lumumba's detention, resulting in his murder in January 1961. The film interweaves personal memories with documentary evidence of the first year of independence, to interrogate the erasure of Lumumba's memory and the persistence of distorted images of the man and the movement he created. This documentary becomes a moving work of art announcing the complex body of cinematographic work that Peck would later produce, by assembling a variety of sources—family photos, footage from super 8-mm home movies, archival and newspaper material, and contemporary images—with a continuous voice-over, a poetic first-person commentary that runs in counterpoint to the visuals. The combination of image and word offers viewers a reflection on the historical record surrounding Lumumba's legacy while entering into a critique of many historical claims concerning Lumumba. An author writes that through lyrical abstraction "Peck accomplishes a striking meditation on the practice of historical investigation."[8]

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Released eight years later, *Lumumba* (2000) is a different kind of film, shot and edited for another purpose and a dissimilar audience. Following the genre of biographical picture, it presents a dramatization of the last years of Lumumba's life, starting and ending with disturbing scenes of his execution and the disposal of his remains. Elements are interspersed non-chronologically in the visuals and the voice-over, but by the end of the movie the viewer is able to put together a clear chronological storyline. To add verisimilitude, the movie uses a small amount of archival footage, and offers some re-enactments from historical newsreel material that had been incorporated in the 1992 film. The voice-over, coupled with Lumumba's image, is the interrupted reading of a long letter from a fictional posthumous Lumumba to his wife. Although equally lyrical in tone, this reading is unlike the filmmakers' own voice-over in the earlier film. While it lends the movie a slight touch of magical realism, it removes the autobiographical subjectivity of the documentary, to support instead the formula "This is a true story" which appears on screen at the start.

Peck intended this film for the audiences of the affluent north, especially its young viewers, who know little of the traumas of African decolonization struggles and the Cold War context. This explains why he chose a commercial format for his biographical movie.[9] The juxtaposition of these two films by the same director makes clearer the object of this section. *Lumumba* (2000) is historical in the conventional sense of cinematographic dramatization of a series of significant events of the past, with concern for historical veracity and the enlightenment of the public. In comparison, *Lumumba, Death of a Prophet* (1992), although lower budget and made for a specialized audience, had an innovative configuration that unapologetically assumed a subjective perspective, adding an original voice to the debates on the Congo, African decolonization, and persistent imperialism. It was an exercise in the cinematic writing of the past.

Movies as Witnesses of the Climate of Their Time

A third way in which films or videos can be historical sources is when they become part of a field of study referred to as the history of ideas. As with other products of the intellect, cinematographic works, irrespective of whether they are created for entertainment or as ambitious works of art, reflect and comment upon the time in which they were produced. Sometimes they do this by crystallizing the ideologies and beliefs of the epoch, and thus they can be profitably parsed for insights into the make-up of an era or a social setting, the national mood, collective reactions to particular developments, or swings in public perception. The subject of the movie does not need to be historical for a movie to be viewed in this way. Scholarly studies trying to explain the climate of a movie can focus not only on the movie itself but also on viewers' perceptions of it or critics' responses to it, either at the time of its first release or in subsequent releases and viewings, if such an afterlife has been part of the work's history. Movies that have had an exceptional impact

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on the public are mirrors reflecting not only the conditions of their birth, but also a particular domain of social life or the norms and values of that society in general.

Three decades after the first wave of decolonization in Africa, Mbye Cham reflected on why the first generations of African filmmakers felt an urge to make movies on historical topics.[10] He attributed this trend to African filmmakers' need to respond to prevailing Western views and orthodoxies about Africa and Africans. This propensity is clearly present in the work of Gaston Kaboré, a filmmaker from Burkina Faso that Cham did not consider. Kaboré made two historical films that illustrate his desire to counter a political ideology associated with colonial domination that survived in the postcolonial era, spoiling relations between African publics and those in northern countries. African directors' films were made at that time, and to a large extent still are, for an export market, but Kaboré's movies were meant for the national home audience as much as for European viewership. Therefore, the two movies reveal his commitment to communicating with his fellow countrymen in order to boost their confidence and present them with edifying models. Kaboré's films came right before a sociocultural shift in Burkina Faso toward the valorization of cultural items associated with the past, and it reinforced this trend by creating a fashion. His popularity with international audiences also inspired a new wave of history-themed movies by fellow African filmmakers and extended his message beyond the national borders of his country.[11]

Gaston Kaboré's Return to the Roots

Kaboré's first movie, *Wend Kuuni* (1982), is the story of an orphan boy who was not from the local area but found unconscious in the countryside, brought to a village, and adopted by a family in some unspecified precolonial period. Although the storyline makes room for a few climactic conflicts among the village society, overall the movie creates the impression of an idealized past, a peaceful and harmonious society suffering no serious deprivations. The movie depicts in a leisurely pace sociability among the village people and between them and outsiders, the cherished old village crafts, and, for color, some inoffensive customs. Kaboré explained that he was moved to make this film after he became aware of both the European iconography of the turn of the 20th century, when Africa had just been conquered by European-led armies and colonial rule was being established, and the contemporary television documentaries misrepresenting Africa as an exotic and strange land. Both mediated an ideology of racial superiority. Kaboré wanted to make European audiences understand that Africans had contributed to world civilization and to its universal patrimony. For his own countrymen, Kaboré brought a message of dignity and self-reliance, to give them the resolve to change things for the better through discipline, hard work, cultivation of useful crafts, and honest trade. *Wend Kuuni*'s origin captures this moment of nationalist cultural idealism, which appears almost innocent in light of the polarization and politicization that characterized the following period, starting with Captain Thomas Sankara's energetic government (1983).

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Kaborés' second historical film, *Buud Yam* (1996), produced fourteen years later, is a sequel to *Wend Kuuni*, although different in sentiment and structure. This film is about a quest for medicine in foreign lands, taking the title character on a long and meandering voyage, which becomes the framework for presenting a sequence of contrasting tableaux that feature the nation's major ethnic groups as protagonists. Each group speaks its own language, wears its ethnographic attire, displays stereotyped behavior, and lives in a distinct ecological environment and appropriate housing. Among other things, this parade communicates the need for strengthening the mutual bonds among constituent parts of the nation in a spirit of diversity and tolerance, a gentle but urgent message at a time when tensions between different ethnic and religious groups threatened to tear apart neighboring West African countries.

The cultural politics of these two films resonated with the national mood in those years. The release of *Wend Kuuni* coincided with a widespread turn to "African culture," an interest in physical objects and items of clothing associated with the past, and their ostentatious display in everyday activities as reimagined tradition. The trend gained strength because it also resonated with the populist cultural policy of the Sankara regime. Kaboré's two films contributed to making this culturalism an enduring feature of national self-perception in Burkina Faso. Kaboré's filmmaking style and the message of historicity conveyed in these movies had an influence on other West African filmmakers of the francophone zone, which broadened their impact on other national audiences of Africa.[12]

In an opposite and fascinating way, *Quartier Mozart* (1992), made by the celebrated Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo when he was only twenty-six years old, is a story from working-class Yaounde "betwixt farce and fable." The young director had been trained in television film editing and had made video clips for musicians, skills that he applied to weave a storyline intertwining different strands of the hybrid pop culture of urban central Africa. Even the common medium of the French language was rendered with its distinctive local inflections of sound and vocabulary to become an inseparable element of the mix. Partly a satire of official hypocrisy and gender politics, this movie also displayed with irreverent abandon the profound impact of the US and world culture industries on this corner of Africa, holding a dazzling mirror to its time and place. In a different way and betraying the cosmopolitan Western commentators' penchant to the commonplace, these manifest qualities did not prevent the film from being greeted outside of Africa as reflecting "African traditions" or as "charged with folk tale atmosphere."

Nigerian and Ghanaian Video Dramas

The low-budget commercial video dramas first produced in Ghana and southern Nigeria in the early 1990s offer fertile ground for exploring the social and cultural sources of modern popular entertainment. One origin story for this industry has mythical status: in 1992 Kenneth Nnebue, the owner of a video store in Lagos, was stuck with a large inventory of blank cassettes that were not moving. He came up with the idea of putting

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some content on them to improve their sales prospects. As national TV offerings were meager and bleak, he decided to hire a small crew of technicians and produce a simple video movie. The film was produced in the Igbo language and was called *Living in Bondage*. It is now hailed as the first Nigerian popular video drama.

Observers have pointed out that this new form of entertainment had multiple roots, including television serials, the morality dramas of evangelical groups, and older acting traditions and narrative genres. *Living in Bondage* is the story of a businessman who offers his wife as sacrifice to a satanic cult that promises him great wealth. He becomes rich but the ghost of his wife returns to torment him and in the end he loses everything that he had gained through witchcraft. The video sold an estimated one million copies, spawning many imitators and a business sector that, under the catchy name Nollywood, is often presented as "the third largest movie industry in the world." After 2000, this colossal craft industry found viewers and emulators in other parts of anglophone Africa and in the migrant diaspora, but southern Nigeria remain its strongest division and a powerhouse of innovation.

The appetite for wealth and its symbols, expensive cars, luxury goods, villas, and mistresses is the core theme and the focus of the visuals in these movies, as are moral qualms about the means for achieving great wealth. Common people seek protection and an honest route to prosperity in evangelical churches. Other social concerns, such as the crime wave that struck Nigerian cities in the 1990s (which incidentally brought about the end of after dark jaunts, leading to the closure of movie houses and bolstering the sale of video cassettes for home viewing), also left their mark on the plots of video dramas.[13] The circumstances were closely tied to the structural adjustment programs inflicted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which resulted in the contraction of government jobs and across-the-board declines in urban incomes. The crisis also paralyzed TV broadcasting, because it made the importation of foreign programs more difficult and also interrupted the in-house production of shows and serials.

The home entertainment video dramas had the character of a folk genre, especially in the beginning. They were produced by television technicians, who were hired by local business owners and used inexpensive cameras and little other equipment, on the basis of scripts written by neophytes. Investors and producers had a strong incentive to respond to local tastes and preferences. They needed to work with low budgets, and high rates of piracy meant that they kept a close watch on their competitors and finished production in a matter of weeks and days in order to earn the hoped-for profits. At the same time, the number of locally produced videos reached hundreds per year. The video filmmakers had little training and no foreign or state institutional support or international festival aspirations. They found inspiration in local performance genres and drew content from popular urban narratives of romance, the fight between good and evil, witchcraft, and Christian redemption. At first, the video dramas came under heavy criticism in cultural and academic circles for their low production values and for catering to the atavistic impulses of the poorly educated. Recently, however, the videos have received greater recognition as a new popular tradition. New themes and subject matter emerged as older

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ones went out of fashion and the sector started to become more diversified by genre. For this reason, it is difficult to generalize about Nollywood video dramas. Perhaps only local aficionados, who spend hundreds of hours watching these dramas, have a good idea of the diversity of the sector. Another difficulty for scholars who try to generalize is that most videos are made in national Nigerian languages, whereas foreign and national observers have so far focused mostly on the more easily accessible dramas produced in English.[14]

The Nigerian video drama industry weathered well the transition from VCR to digital format by adopting VCD (which is cheaper but has lower memory and run-time than standard DVDs). But the age of streaming and smart phones posed difficulties because these new technologies lowered sales figures by making piracy easier and simultaneously by encouraging the involvement in Nollywood distribution of large transnational Internet broadcasting firms. The major producers tried to remedy the situation by raising the technical standards of the films, investing in a smaller number of better-funded projects to improve thematic content and production values. This effort was dubbed New Nollywood.

The video drama industry of Nigeria and a few other African countries offers an immense opportunity for interpretive and cultural commentary in terms of both production and audience reception. So far, anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural studies specialists have taken a research interest in them, but as these visual stories age as artifacts and provide insight into more distant time periods, historians will no doubt utilize them as well, provided good research collections are constituted and the videos remain available for study, despite the impermanence of the media on which they are presently recorded.

Discussion of the Literature

Extensive specialized literatures exist on African cinema and on Nigerian and Ghanaian popular videos, written from either a critical or historical angle, but very few of these publications deal with cinema's usefulness to historians as a source. "History and cinema" became a popular topic in the 1990s, and many studies under this rubric focused on the truthfulness of filmic representations, in the sense of conforming to the historical records used by professional historians or the fit between these representations and academic analyses. The edited volume by Bickford-Smith and Mendelsohn is the most important publication in this regard.[15] Some contributions in this volume examine the extent to which films can be relied upon as teaching aids in history classes, while another subset of contributions explore the ways in which films use the past to raise questions about the present. A new trend among historians, as discussed in this article, considers filmmakers as legitimate interpreters of past events and contributors to "history writing" in the film medium.[16] The possible use of movies as historical sources in their own right could be an important research path to explore in the future.

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The academic study of Nigerian and Ghanaian video dramas is also well developed and carried out from a number of disciplinary perspectives, although history is not noticeable among them.[17] The spectacular growth of video dramas and the profits they generate, despite their low technical quality, stand in contrast to the position of African celluloid film, which came into existence earlier.[18] The influence of Nollywood dramas on viewership and production in other African countries and in the diaspora is another subject of study.[19] Two engaging accounts of Nollywood were written by well-informed journalists.[20]

Links to Digital Materials

Africa Magic, The Nollywood website of South Africa's M-Net broadband broadcast company.

California Newsreel, The Library of African Cinema. Primary source for African films in the USA.

Africine. The site of the African Federation of Cinematographic Criticism (in French).

Filmography

Bekolo, Jean-Pierre (Cameroon)

   1992 *Quartier Mozart*

Gomis, Alain (Senegal–France)

   2012 *Tey* (*Today*)

Hondo, Med (Mauritania)

   1986 *Sarraounia*

Kaboré, Gaston (Burkina Faso)

   1982 *Wend Kuuni*

   1988 *Zan Boko*

   1996 *Buud Yam*

Kouyaté, Dani (Burkina Faso)

   2004 *Ouaga Saga*

Mambéty, Djibril Diop (Senegal)

   1968 *Contras' City*

   1970 *Badou Boy*

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1973 *Touki Bouki*

Nnebue, Kenneth (with cameraman Chris Obi Rapu) (Nigeria)

1992 *Living in Bondage*

Peck, Raoul (Haiti)

1992 *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*

2000 *Lumumba*

Seck, Amadou (Senegal)

1988 *Saaraba*

Sembene, Ousmane (Senegal)

1963 *Borom Sarret*

1966 *La noire de . . .*

1968 *Mandabi*

1971 *Emitaï*

1977 *Ceddo*

2000 *Faat Kiné*

Téno, Jean-Marie (Cameroon)

2009 *Sacred Places* (*Lieux Saints*)

Touré, Drissa (Burkina Faso)

1995 *Haramuya*

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Notes:

(1.) A. O. Scott, "Ousman Sembène's 'Black Girl' Turns 50," *New York Times*, May 18, 2016, C1.

(2.) See Onookome Okome, "Nollywood and Its Critics," in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, ed. Mahir Şaul and Ralph A. Austen (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 26–41.

(3.) Mahir Şaul, "Art, Politics, and Commerce in Francophone African Cinema," in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, ed. M. Şaul and Ralph A. Austen (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 133–159.

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(4.) Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (2nd ed.) (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2012).

(5.) Mamadou Diouf, "History and Actuality in Ousmane Sembene's *Ceddo* and Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas*," in *African Experiences of Cinema*, ed. Imruh Bakari and Mbye B. Cham (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 249–251; and Robert Baum, "Tradition and Resistance in Ousmane Sembene's Films Emitai and Ceddo," in *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen*, ed. Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn (Oxford and Athens, OH: James Currey and Ohio University Press, 2007), 41–58.

(6.) Philip Rosen, "Making a Nation in Sembene's Ceddo," in *Otherness and the Media: The Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged*, ed. Hamid Naficy and Teshome Gabriel (Langhorne, PA: Harwood, 1993), 147–172.

(7.) James Leahy, "Ceddo," *Senses of Cinema* 33 (2004) (adapted from *Cinématèque Annotations on Film*).

(8.) Burlin Barr, "Raoul Peck's *Lumumba* and *Lumumba: La mort du prophète*: On Cultural Amnesia and Historical Erasure," *African Studies Review* 54, no. 1 (2011): 85–116, at 86.

(9.) The film's dramatization is overall faithful to the major signposts of Lumumba's life, his political organizational skills, success in the ballot box, and external support in the maneuvers leading to his demise, but it has been pointed out that there were also omissions, especially of events from his personal life, which gave the story a hagiographic dimension (Moore, 2007).

(10.) Mbye Cham, "Official History, Popular Memory: Reconfiguration of the African Past in the films of Ousmane Sembène," in *Ousmane Sembène: Dialogues with Critics and Writers*, ed. Samba Gadjo, Ralph H . Faulkingham, Thomas Cassirer, and Reinhard Sander (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 22–28.

(11.) Mahir Şaul, "History as Cultural Redemption in Gaston Kaboré's Precolonial-era Films," in *Black and White in Color: African History on Screen*, ed. Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn (Oxford and Athens, OH: James Currey and Ohio University Press, 2007), 11–27.

(12.) Şaul, "History as Cultural Redemption," 26.

(13.) John McCall, "Juju and Justice at the Movies: Vigilantes in Nigerian Popular Videos," *African Studies Review* 47, no. 3 (2004): 51–67; and Pierre Barrot, *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria*, trans. Lynn Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

(14.) Carmen McCain, "Nollywood and Its Others," *Global South* 7, no. 1 (2013): 30–54.

(15.) Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn, eds., *Black and White in Colour: African History on Film* (Oxford and Athens, OH: James Currey and Ohio University Press, 2007).

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(16.) Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*.

(17.) Jonathan Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000); and Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016).

(18.) Mahir Şaul, and Ralph A. Austen, eds., *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010).

(19.) Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, eds., *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

(20.) Barrot, *Nollywood*; and Emily Witt, *Nollywood: The Making of a Film Empire* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2017).

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