Anticipating Nollywood: Lagos circa 1996
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This essay discusses the Nigerian film *Owo Blow* (1996), as a way to examine an aesthetic tendency that is largely missing in Nollywood, and to explore the relationship between media and the city, particularly in regard to Lagos. I use this film to propose three issues that are worth highlighting for a productive engagement with the relationship between media and urbanity. First, I argue that the current global interest in Nollywood is highly mediated, isolating the English-language-accented, popular genre-formatted sub-genre as the Nollywood film. Secondly, this process of mediation has tended to a kind of totalisation because it emphasises the commercial as the primary identity of the cinematic practice. Thirdly, I argue that the possible globalisation of Nollywood is undercut by limitations on how well the generic type can travel. Although recent and longstanding bureaucratic exhortations of Nigerian filmmakers to promote positive images of the country are often derided, Nollywood already fulfils this expectation by default because a systemic, ideologically explicit critique of Lagos as an urban city, for instance, is hard to come by in the films. I contrast this with *Owo Blow*, which attempts one such critique, a multi-layered analysis of Lagos as a case study of the postcolonial incredible.

**Keywords:** Lagos; urbanism; Nollywood; didacticism; the 1990s

Introduction

By a strange though not entirely inexplicable coincidence, Nollywood, the cinematic phenomenon in Nigeria and Lagos, one of the world’s emerging ‘megacities’, have in the past several years become the focus of global attention in ways too particular and insistent to ignore. As autonomous narratives and as products of a sociocultural formation, Nollywood films represent a new cinematic experience which available models may not sufficiently explain but for which, again insistently, those models serve as reference points. The name Nollywood directly references Hollywood and Bollywood (the Indian film industry) in terms of sheer scale of production and distinct aesthetics.1 Anyone who has closely followed both the rhetoric and the actual practice of Nollywood filmmakers knows that, as far as these models are concerned, a great deal of tension exists between what they profess and what the films reveal on an aesthetic level. This is not unusual; artistic works often speak in excess of the declared intentions of their makers, and being the focus of unprecedented attention is apt to lead the practitioners to other kinds of self-dramatisation.2 The city of Lagos, on the other hand, represents a spectacular example of the postcolonial incredible which, as Tejumola Olaniyan (2004, p. 2) conceptualises it, is ‘that which cannot be believed; that which is too improbable, astonishing, and extraordinary to be believed … an outland-
ish infraction of “normality”. To Olaniyan, (2004, p. 2) the ‘postcolonial incredible’ is the social manifestation of a situation in which all ‘props of stability, normality, and intelligibility’ are dissolved, thus engendering ‘social and symbolic crisis’, and which then threatens to become the norm. Although Olaniyan speaks of the incredible generally as a postcolonial condition, and especially of the ‘complex response’ it elicits from the late Afrobeat musician Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, I find the concept suggestive enough to make it speak to the arresting and confounding character of Lagos as an emergent megacity. Indeed, this incredibility is probably the main reason why Lagos, as much as any postcolonial city, has attracted the kind of attention I mentioned in the opening sentence of this essay.

The rote statistics about the city are by now quite familiar: it is home to a population currently in excess of 15 million that, according to estimations by the United Nations, is expected to reach 23 million by 2015; more than two-thirds of this number live in the shantytowns such as Makoko and Ajegunle, scraping a living from fringe occupations at dumpsites, recycling centres, etc., suggesting a level of poverty at odds with Nigeria’s high earnings from oil revenues; life expectancy is 51% and falling. These statistics reinforce and are reinforced by scholarly, journalistic and artistic commentaries which grow by the month, and are driven by the peculiar reality of Lagos as a magnetic place of contradictions.3 Jonathan Haynes’ (2007) essay presents an excellent and conceptually adroit summary of these commentaries, highlighting the two tendencies in the discussions: the ‘genre of lurid descriptions of Lagos as an urban “apocalypse’” (2007, p. 131) and the ‘postmodernist-inflected celebration of the coping mechanism and creative forms of self-organization’ (2007, p. 132) in the city. The rationale of Haynes’ essay lies in its use of Nollywood as an example of the ‘coping mechanism’ celebrated by the second tendency. I share his sentiments.

My specific aim in this essay is to focus on a pattern in the cinematic descriptions of Lagos that predates the formalisation of Nollywood (as it is currently understood and discussed), and use it to highlight what may be missing from the obviously progressive impulse in the two tendencies identified above. By discussing a film, Owo Blow (1996), at length, I shall argue for a way of looking at Lagos (and maybe some postcolonial urbanities of its ilk) that does not see the two tendencies as incompatible, but nonetheless presents a different kind of argument and thus anticipates the idea of Nollywood as it currently circulates. In this sense, I depart slightly from Haynes (and Koolhaas, with whom he appears to be in sympathy) without standing in opposition to them: what is significant about the image of the city one sees in Owo Blow is both the dystopia of an urban entity where modernity has failed to fully manifest itself and the resilient creativity characteristic of contemporary Nigerian, if not of postcolonial African, urban experiences. Except that the ‘incredibility’ which the two positions convey is not represented in the film as a crippling ‘crisis’ or a ‘norm’ to be coped with, but as a situation that must be changed programatically. As I discuss it below, Owo Blow, a film produced at the height of the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha (1993–1998), represents a discourse about Lagos and its inhabitants in specific, though hardly self-evident, ways. In its concerns for sanity on both individual and social levels, the film powerfully melds the idealism characteristic of Nigeria’s socialist unconscious with the more manifest programme of modernisation that has, however, largely miscarried.

I say ‘socialist unconscious’ because a socialist organisation of the productive forces was not as extensively backed by the resources of the state as was the programme of modernisation with which Nigeria could not but identify, especially
during the period of metaphorical and literal ‘nation-building’ which followed the
civil war. Through this film, I will suggest, we encounter several attitudes toward
social relations that are more deliberate than random human decency, and I want to
direct attention to the different programmes which the country embarked upon as
partial sources of the attitudes we see in the film. In the 1970s, the city of Lagos was
the site of enormous national ‘buildings’: the National Stadium in Surulere; the
National Trade Fair Complex on Badagry Road; the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, and
so on. These projects impacted on the physical geography of Lagos so fundamentally
that they created an aura of urban renewal, tied to the euphoric spirit of petro-naira, of
Lagos as the modern, pan-African city *par excellence*. The most spectacular of these
national ‘constructions’, the National Theatre, is located a few miles from the stadium,
and was imported wholly from ‘socialist’ Bulgaria as the central venue for the Second
World Black Arts Festival, FESTAC 1977, itself memorialised in Festival Town, a
housing scheme located halfway between the theatre and the trade fair complex.4 My
invocation of the ‘socialist unconscious’, however, has affiliations beyond the deal
with Bulgaria: when the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida instituted a
bureaucratic committee to devise a political system for the country in 1985, the
process ended with an unanticipated referendum which overwhelmingly made a case
for socialism. My point is that this unconscious should be understood not merely as
the psychic fragment of an African value system (‘communalism’) but also as a prin-
cipled restatement of governmental projects either set out in blueprints or embarked
upon in a self-governing Nigeria. The projects existed in history either as the policies
of the regional government in Western Nigeria (1952–1960; 1979–1983) or later as
programmes like that of free Universal Primary Education (1976–1979), and were
socialist in spirit and letter, even when they were articulated in the vocabulary of clas-
cic Weberian modernisation. As far back as 1968, deep in the morass of the civil war,
the politician and author Obafemi Awolowo, architect of the aforementioned policies
in the Western region, published *The People’s Republic* (1968), a monumental but
sadly neglected theoretical text, which unequivocally made the case for socialism in
Nigeria. *Owo Blow’s* commitment to an altruistic agenda is in part a result of having
inhabited the world of these social and intellectual changes.

The spectre of militaristic repression haunts *Owo Blow*, but it is far more invested
in life after or in spite of military rule. It is more resolute about reclaiming the path
the city charts in its sober moments, but which it loses as it lurches from one crisis to
another. Rhetorically, the film is didactic; it draws on an aesthetic procedure generally
(and often disapprovingly) described as melodrama. As I have argued elsewhere (see
Adesokan 2009), the fascination of Nigerian films with melodramatic themes, in
conception and resolution, reveals a deep commitment to an inclusive morality that
philosophically grew out of communalism. Indeed, along the lines of the definition
provided by Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, communalism exercises a powerful
force in this film, but it does so in concert with impulses marking the contending
programmes of socialist and capitalist modernisation.5

I cannot talk about this film in a discursive vacuum. Nollywood is today a much
commented upon phenomenon, engaging the interest of critics, journalists and policy
makers alike. But these commentaries reveal a number of patterns in the circulation of
Nollywood films that are worth highlighting in order to underline the significance of
the aesthetic process at work in *Owo Blow*. In a sense, there is a connection between
these films’ preoccupation with a responsible social agenda and their historical prox-
imity to the celluloid tradition in Nigeria. Before turning to an analysis of *Owo Blow*
itself, I want to dwell a little on the context in which Nollywood films are now being received.

In the first place, the current global interest in Nollywood is highly, perhaps even excessively mediated. By this, I mean that Nollywood films circulate as part of a welter of images in a stream of global flows, aided by the intense relationships between media and cultural imaginaries. Secondly, this mediation takes the form of isolating the English-language-accented, popular genre-formatted sub-genre as the Nollywood film – whereas there are at least four linguistic and/or formal categories of films in Nollywood, only the English-language variety which relies on familiar generic conventions is promoted as the default Nollywood film. Thirdly, this process of mediation tends to a totalisation, because it is market-driven. In itself, this is not a negative development, because in the different aesthetic trends within Nollywood the sense of filmmaking as business is primary. A film is considered ‘good’ if it sells; if it is good, it will sell. However, when placed in relation to the triangular impulse which shapes the films (commerce, culture and art), the primary focus on the market has tended to de-emphasise aesthetic considerations in scholarship: one academic approach stresses the economic possibilities of this form, and another sees a film as an embodiment of culture, not as art.

These effects of the mediation of Nollywood films should not be confused with the well known problems of exoticism and cultural prejudice which often dog works of art from non-Western countries in their circulation in the major cities and cultural institutions of the metropolitan West. These problems lie ahead for Nollywood, to be sure, and in ways not difficult to imagine, given the philosophical orientations of those institutions and the available structures within which they operate. As various scholars have argued, the reception of foreign cultural forms in dominant institutions of prestige turns on a sense of difference and otherness which is achieved through a process of commodification. But the process of mediation which currently pertains to Nollywood films is slightly different. Most often, the films are seen as a representation of African realities (the phrase ‘telling our own stories’ often used by Nigerian filmmakers is telling in this regard), and the target audience is less the liberal Western crowd with multicultural impulses than Africans at home and abroad. This approach to self-understanding does not exclude the liberal/progressive/alternative media and intellectuals as such; indeed, the perception of Nollywood as a corrective to the supposedly neocolonial impetus in the majority of works in the African cinema category is stronger among these groups, who also perceive a cultural form to be doubly fascinating as a social form. There is also the sense that Nollywood is a potentially commercial form, given the size of Nigeria as a market and the increasing appeal of the films across geographical and ethnic boundaries. The documentaries that have been produced about Nollywood are partly motivated by these factors. For all of this, however, the aesthetic dimensions of the films do not get enough attention. Due to the sheer scale of production and the excessively repetitive thematic and generic styles, most critics think: if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all. I intend to work against the grain of this paradigm in this essay, and *Owo Blow* provides an excellent opportunity for doing so.

It is often forgotten that a specific tradition of Nigerian films existed before the term ‘Nollywood’ was coined, and even after the collapse of the celluloid format that used to be the accepted mode of filmmaking. These films, including leading director Tunde Kelani’s early work (*Ti Oluwa Nile, Koseegbe* and *Ayo Ni Mo Fe*), Amaka Igwe’s *Violated*, Tunde Alabi-Hundeyin’s *Amin Orun* and *Iyawo Alhaji*, Bunmi and Soji Oyinsan’s *The Golden Cage* and *Owuro L’ojo*, and Tade Ogidan’s *Hostages*, had
quite high production values relative to most films of the period. The ‘star system’ had not developed to the current level of six-figure actors’ fees, in part because the directors and producers were few and relied on highly competent scriptwriters. This gave most of the films of the period (roughly 1993–2001) the feel of a text, with aesthetic and philosophical meanings, including a determinate sense of film as a socially responsible form with didactic possibilities. In short, Nollywood had not become as ‘industrialised’ as it is now, discordant as that process clearly seems to be in comparison to other industrialised systems like Hollywood and Bollywood. In the mediated globalisation of Nollywood, these aspects have become significantly muted. This is the context of the film *Owo Blow*, which bears much aesthetic similarity to the titles cited above.

**Loud in Lagos**

A three-part thriller in Lagosian Yoruba set in General Abacha’s Nigeria, *Owo Blow* announces its immediate and larger aims as a socially responsible drama right from the opening credits. Dedicated ‘to the struggling masses of [Nigeria] and the gradually disappearing middle-class’, the film exhorts its spectator to ‘show kindness to someone today; it would make a positive difference tomorrow’. It is set against the backdrop of two moments of urban Lagos in the 1990s, one historic, the other perennial. The historic event is the massive and catastrophic displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents of the slums of Maroko and Ilado (in the south-eastern parts of the city) by the military regime of Governor Raji Rasaki in 1990, one of the most large-scale of such incidents in peacetime Nigeria. The perennial aspect is the phenomenon of street trading, the informalised and irrepressible transformation of public streets into trading spots, often by small-scale hawkers unable to afford the increasingly exclusive lock-up stores. It is not so much that street trading is beyond the control of municipal authorities; rather, the practice thrives because in the people’s astute understanding of the negotiability of official rules, a portion of the earnings accruing from illegal hawking is earmarked as hush money for the officials who patrol the streets. The ‘Task Force’ officers swoop unannounced on the traders, who hope to trail their confiscated wares to a place where ransoms are extorted. Owolabi and his family run into one such moment of a raid as the film opens. With a loving wife, four kids, and a home in middle class Surulere, Owolabi is almost content, if contentment is a psychological possibility in a context where government is brutish and money short. Revolted at the spectacle of uniformed men seizing wares and flogging the resistant traders, Owolabi, himself an employee of the ‘Task Force’, intervenes and challenges his colleagues, and the ensuing altercation, though brief, ends in several fatal shootings. Indeed, this incident is the second in the fast-paced prologue: in the first, a group of ‘Area Boys’ hustling for money snatches a handbag from Mope, Owolabi’s daughter. But it is a mark of his principled attitude toward the social anomy that moments later Owolabi is defending street traders who belong in the same class as the ‘Area Boys’.

This principled stand is an affront to the Task Force hierarchy. Back at the office and with an injury to show for his trouble, Owolabi confronts the boss, whose office is visibly furnished with the seized goods. This dramatic encounter, the third in the film’s first six minutes, represents a precious moment seamlessly integrating characterisation, plot development and didacticism. Knowing he stands on principle, Owolabi constructs an argument that even the government has not envisaged in dealing with
the problem of street trading. ‘If policemen get to the places before the traders every morning,’ he argues, ‘nobody would dare go there to sell … But [you] won’t do the right thing because you want to share in the booty.’ Although directed at the task force boss, this criticism works in a constructive manner in the diegesis: it is the premise of the film’s larger didactic goals, and represents a conceptual framing of its attitude toward other social ills – drug addiction, petty or armed robbery, prostitution, social parasitism – forming the focus of the subsequent dramatic conflict. It is also consequential in the sense that it seals Owolabi’s fate. Being so audacious as to tell his boss ‘such largesse is an [sic] abominable!’ he is framed for the murders and sent to jail. He will not come out alive.

From this early in the film, the aim of the camera is to track the travails of his family (his wife, son and daughter), which has started to unravel following his imprisonment. Of the three the son, Wole, is of primary interest, and his actions, choices and encounters highlight a pertinent relationship between the dramatic object and the ambience of most of the films of this period: their public-spiritedness as a socially responsive form and the exteriority of the shots. One main criticism of the earliest films, prior to but including this period, is that they relied exclusively on interior shots, a carryover from the situation comedies and television soap operas from which they drew inspiration. But much of the action of *Owo Blow* proceeds in public, under natural, garish light. It deliberately invokes and evokes Lagos, the great metropolis, and its many-charactered features, the film’s explicit interest in a didactic apprehension of the urban conundrum never obliterating the irreducible irony of matching the glamorous skyline of the central business district with the materiality of its human mass, especially the Area Boys.

This aspect of the film, its integration of dramatic object and ambience as socially situated, finds expression in narrative, the sense of a film as a story that develops discursively through incidents and dialogues and to which cinematic images and soundtracks are subordinated. This impulse is present in several ways throughout this sprawling film, but I will synthesise the different manifestations into three main elements so as to highlight its depiction of Lagos as an incredible city. The first of these elements is the materiality of the urban, the second the forging of complex, overlapping communities, and the third the aesthetic procedure of didacticism. As the following discussion will show, these elements are not discrete, nor is any one of them without internal contradictions. Separately and jointly, they constitute the particular relationalities that break down the incredibility of the city, or just make it tolerable. They are proof of the complexity integral to the kind of urban formation the film seeks to illuminate.

If Owolabi’s attitude to the incredibility of the city’s diverse forces is a principled will to reform, his son Wole takes a more desultory track toward the reformist agenda. The imprisonment of the breadwinner leads to the expulsion of the bright child from school, and he resorts to running errands in the neighbourhood, moving on to touting for public transport providers, and from here it is but a short step to small-time pickpocketing. Caught in one such act and saved from lynching by the providential intervention of two of the family’s neighbours (of whom more later) and the chairman of the drivers’ union, Wole feels too disgraced to return home. He is now a street-boy, a quick-learning Area Boy, the exact image of that which menaced his father inside the taxi in the film’s opening sequence. The transformation is not free of tensions, and the movement of the action is very suggestive of the social explanation for this development. Without being explicit, the film shows that the choices Wole makes are the only options he has in the face of the social pressures on his family. In order to keep Wole
in school, his mother has had to first approach her wealthy aunt and then reluctantly turn to the landlord, who uses the opportunity to extract sexual favours from her. Despite her principled refusal, a tongue wags: in a long, totally entertaining moment of gossiping characteristic of urban neighbourhoods, Mama Ojuju, one of the two female neighbours, makes much of the hapless mother’s entreaty to the landlord and of the source of daughter Mope’s sudden goodies. As she memorably sums up later, ‘Mope n prostitute, Wole n pickpocket’ [Mope is prostituting, Wole is pickpocketing]. At a crucial moment in the family’s travails, these acts are what save the younger kids (twins) from the fates of their older siblings as dropouts.

There are two things that I want to focus on through the materiality of the urban depicted in this film—the phenomenon called ‘Area Boys’, and the speech of the streets. Both are connected in the way they signify the limitations of the genteel demeanour of the middle classes whose disappearing values the film laments. When Wole hits the streets after his close shave with the lynch mob, he runs into Jeje, a former classmate who is now fully entrenched in street hustling and its attendant practices, like drug addiction. Area Boys are in perpetual motion, always on the lookout for the next well dressed or important-looking person in a big car, who is to be hailed, cajoled, or brow-beaten into parting with some money. An Area Boy follows a daily routine: a heavy meal in the morning, finished off with a dose of cocaine; the ‘on duty’ hustling lasting much of the day; retiring to Risi’s Special Canteen for endless carousing – food, more cocaine/heroin (‘merchandise’) and marijuana (‘herbal remedy’); card-dealing, frolicking in the alley. It is a life of penury and desperation sustained by the resilience of wit.

Jeje is steeped in all of this and more. A fiery, code-switching hustler, he is also a dropout, and he is surprised to see the more academically promising Wole in such dire straits. Before Wole can start narrating his ordeal, Jeje cuts in:

Jeje: Boy, is it a long story or you want to summarise it?
Wole: The story is long really.
Jeje: Then you have to be patient. Those are my colleagues and I’ve got to catch up with them. I’m on duty, when I come back I will join you. But see that alley, when you get there, turn left, you will see a food-seller. Her name is Risi, tell her I asked you to wait for me. If [on seeing you] they think you’re a lunatic, tell them it hasn’t gotten to that yet.

Jeje’s demeanour and speech sparkle with haste. The subtitling does great disservice, indeed damage, to the brilliance of Jeje’s speech, which is full of specifically Lagosian nuances, and doubles as a vehicle for self-dramatisation. (For instance, the part of his speech subtitled ‘it hasn’t gotten to that yet’ is actually uttered as ‘[lunacy] hasn’t fully entered your body’.) Code-switching does not even describe his speech; it is neither ‘Nigerian English’ nor ‘Yorubanglish’, but a highly nuanced variety of Lagosian Yoruba scattered into the streets and rendered more lively by Jeje’s remarkable acting.10 When he finally grants Wole an audience, he quips: ‘your biography is enough to write a novel.’ The significance of this particular ‘turn’ is underlined by two others, both involving Wole. After Jeje has succeeded in introducing him into the circle and Wole joins a group of hustlers in saluting a rich man, he is caught grinning in fascination at the antics of the Area Boys. One of them pulls him aside:

Area Boy: We were working assiduously and you were laughing. What was so funny?
If you misbehave, we’ll deal with you ...You came in like a lunatic and you’re still behaving like one.
Wole’s misconduct is also the basis of the second reproach, which takes place before Ebosa, the grand leader of the Area Boys, at the end of the day’s business, and here we see mannerisms similar to Jeje’s displayed by other Area Boys. The response of the boss of the Area Boys to briefings from the street is rich in *doubles entendres* motivated by paranoia and illustrating the precariousness of life at the city’s margins. The formation and its speech are inseparable, of course, but they convey the contradictions of the urban through their unfolding against the material landscape of downtown Lagos, where the skyline of corporate buildings appears to create a mismatch with the relentless pursuits of the Area Boys. It is quite telling that Jeje will draw on the bankruptcy of the finance houses, a major fiscal crisis in Nigeria in the mid-1990s, to explain his unwillingness to lend money to Wole. He persuades him instead to join the gang, which has the resources of a ‘PLC’ (public liability company, as opposed to the ‘limited liability’ of the finance houses), and has its durability guaranteed by the social contradictions that produce it. Furthermore, the food-seller Risi, noticing Wole’s personal discipline, warns him against drug addiction or (wasteful) spending on women, and offers to keep his money for him.

Once he saves up to ten thousand naira (worth US $200 in 1996), Wole is ready to return to a results-oriented existence, and as Risi hands the money to him, she renews her old counsels and adds a poignant one: ‘once you are out of here, make sure you don’t come back.’ Without romanticising the phenomenon of Area Boys, *Owo Blow* seems intent on turning the social deviancy it represents on its head and drawing positive meanings from it, which are then set against the more ingrained socially destructive habits, both high (misconduct in the financial world) and low (drugs and prostitution). In this regard, the film can be read intertextually with Wole Soyinka’s *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995), which works with similar materials and was cast and rehearsed clandestinely in Lagos during the dictatorship of Abacha, who would soon charge the Nobel laureate with treason and proceed to try him (and others) *in absentia*. In *Owo Blow*, Wole’s final exit from the gang is precipitated by a bloody, free-for-all fight, but large-scale armed robbery, complete with a philosophy (‘Serubawon’ – only terrify, don’t shed blood), is his next line of work. As I said earlier, although the film is mostly suggestive about the pressures forcing Wole’s resort to this kind of criminality, it also establishes a close connection between events in his family and his choices. Returning from Risi’s Special Canteen, he is informed that his sister, Mope, has died from complications after an abortion. It has since emerged that the elder Owolabi has died in prison. The rebuffed landlord remains incorrigible and petulant, now using Wole’s sudden appearance as an excuse to evict the much harassed family.

The second element of significance in the film is the creation of complex and overlapping communities. Lagos is a trans-ethnic city. Although historically dominated by Yoruba culture, the city’s role as the seat of government from 1906 (until 1991) and its geographical location as a coastal city have enriched it with a multiculturalism that is integral to any modern metropolis. It is cosmopolitan, showy, shallow, elegant and ruthless, but is also the most fitting claimant to social sophistication among Nigerian cities. Lagos is a terminal city. Vertical movements from the northern part of the country as well as horizontal ones from West African and central African countries often conjoin in the city, from where they radiate centrifugally in pursuit of the great business of living. In this kind of setting, residents establish relations that transcend specific social categories, whether familial, ethnic, regional, religious, economic or political. The Owolabi family is Yoruba, as is that of Mama Jide, the more placatory of the two female neighbours. Mama Ojuju has certainly lived long enough in Lagos
to speak Yoruba (the part is played by Binta Ayo Mogaji, an exceptionally talented actor), and from his speech, the landlord (played by the legendary Sam Loco Efe) is most likely from the delta, a man who has inherited his late younger brother’s property. These are the immediate neighbours.

The attitude of these people to the Owolabi family is not completely positive, the most immediate proof being the landlord’s conduct. Mama Jide and Mama Ojuju are less predatory. They constitute the family’s alajogbe (a relationship based on neighbourhood existence) as distinct from alajobi (consanguinity or blood relation). They stand by the family when Owolabi is docked for murder; they providentially appear at the motor park scene when Wole and his fellow pickpocket are about to be lynched; they generally make their presence felt when the viewer needs an extra voice to give perspective to the Owolabi mess. Of the two, Mama Ojuju is more resourceful. You will see her stalking Mrs Owolabi to her aunt’s house, loitering at the door to eavesdrop, pretending that the doorknob is too stiff. She skewers the inept lawyer defending Owolabi, and does not hide her feeling that he needs to return to school. Besides the bus driver Akanni and Jeje, Mama Ojuju is the most entertaining actor in Owo Blow, with an incredible arsenal of lingo. In The Village Headmaster, a long-running television serial during the late 1980s, this type of tale-bearer is characterised as ‘Amoebi’.

Beyond the immediate neighbourhood, there are other kinds of relationality. When Wole finds himself in the street after escaping a lynching, he runs into Chima Okoroji, an Igbo lad whose family has been evicted from Maroko. In fact, Chima lives under the bridge because his father’s three houses in Maroko have been reduced to rubble in the great eviction of 1990. A non-diegetic sound insinuates itself into the warmth between him and Wole, intensifying the epigrammatic exhortation in the opening credits to ‘show some kindness today’. The sequence and the soundtrack are a much needed dramatic contrast to Wole’s recent encounters. A good example, one of many, of the incommensurability of the principled attitude of the Owolabi family and the unpredictability of life in Lagos is to be found in the exchange between Wole and Akanni, the driver of the commuter bus to whom he has just attached himself. After only a few days of apprenticeship, Akanni appears at the motor park to announce that the owner of the vehicle has withdrawn it:

Wole: Without any notice?
Akanni: What did you say? In Lagos? They don’t inform you before you’re dealt with.
It is everybody for himself: Lagos is just too tough for me …

Akanni can leave Lagos and return to the less unpredictable routine of village life, but there is no such option for Wole. Not even the chairman of the drivers’ union can help him, although his intervention is decisive when Wole is caught stealing.

Remarkably, however, each of these people will come to be part of Wole’s ‘family’ later in the film. Having recorded a number of successful ‘operations’ as the leader of the armed robbery gang, Wole wisely invests his money, transforming himself into a philanthropist, the chief executive officer of Owolabi Multi-Investment Limited, and thus a respectable member of society. First he seeks out his past benefactors (Akanni, the drivers’ union chairman) and makes gifts to them in appreciation of past deeds. Then he makes himself available to others who have been unsympathetic to him but are now down on their luck (the landlord, Ebosa the gang leader) and helps them with money. More generally, he establishes a scholarship scheme, a vocational training institute and a housing scheme for the poor. When his past as an armed robber is about
to catch up with him, Wole calls a meeting of these new beneficiaries and instructs them in what roles to play. This sequence is important for a number of reasons. First, Wole makes the significant statement that ‘I have no other relatives than you’, thus binding the disparate individuals into a familial structure on the basis of good deeds turning both ways. All the confreres are men; neither his mother nor his wife, nor the two female neighbours, are present. Second, the sequence is shot in a semi-circle reminiscent of the family palaver scene in Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Quartier Mozart (1992), a cinematic procedure which underlines the intimacy of the situation. Third, the purpose of the gathering, oddly enough, is to encourage the men to deny any previous association with Wole, in case a police investigation targets these people as clues to his past. What is important in this and other sequences of the film where the idea of a community fashioned in trans-ethnic contexts is present, is both the elasticity and the specificity of the idea, because it is often mobilised for instrumental reasons.

The third of the elements I have isolated is the aesthetic deployment of didacticism in the film. This is both a complex and a straightforward element in the film. First, the straightforward. In many ways, Owo Blow is a film that sets out to reform society, to change debilitating situations for the health of all. Right from the start, when the snatching of Mope’s bag shocks Wole into wondering why the government would not find an occupation for the Area Boys, the film does not waste any opportunity to preach about the suitability of a morally reformed society. At every turn, whether in public or in private, the characters constantly take one another to task over the virtues of good neighbourliness. The device of making the elder Owolabi into a social critic and activist is the most formally explicit instantiation of this agenda, and once he disappears from the scene, Wole steps into the role. Courage, social conscience and faith in good name run in the family, to the point that Mope, while naively taking money and gifts from a smooth-talking boyfriend only interested in her body, baulks at Wole’s apprenticeship as a bus conductor, because of the negative social perceptions attached to the job. Wole’s ‘serubawon’ philosophy is motivated by the awareness that stealing or armed robbery is bad, but that wasting human life in the process is worse. So he enjoins his gang members to be conscientious in dispossessing unfortunate victims, so that they will be alive to work to replenish their wealth and hopefully fall victim again.

At the end of the second part (‘The Revolt’), where armed robbery scenes dominate the diegesis, the closing song warns sternly that none of the characters (Jugnu, Wole, Fatai) is an armed robber; they are only acting and this is just cinema. In a sense, this didactic message is a pre-emptive strike against the antics of the film’s Lagosian audience, for people are known to physically attack in public actors who have appeared in negative roles in films. In another sense, it is an argument for the social responsibility of the film itself, which obviously shows that armed robbery pays, but is just as dedicated to the corrective power of the police. That Wole’s well-known philanthropy does not fully buy him immunity from the past is also not accidental; the producers of Owo Blow do not wish to send out the wrong signals to the public.

For an analyst concerned with the sophistication of a work of art on an aesthetic level, didacticism as a formal procedure palls; the idea of putting art at the service of an explicit social agenda, no matter how high-minded, and doing so directly, is generally seen as reflecting a limited understanding of the artistic process. However, for the films of Nollywood, especially in the mid-1990s but also continuing to the present, the social message of a film is primary. The critic may have a healthily ironic attitude toward didacticism, but s/he does not have to run shy of a work which wilfully embraces this procedure. In a film which displays the robber’s gun as the most potent
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magic, a warning against taking the film literally may be heavy-handed, but it is not misplaced. Didacticism thus operates here not as a gratuitous element for the entertainment of the viewer but as the producers’ civic responsibility to contribute to reforming their society. This filmmaker-as-citizen agenda complements the more complex manifestation of didacticism in the film.

In *Lagos Wide and Close* (2005), Koolhaas makes the compelling observation that the inventive, perennially improvisational mechanism of bare survival succeeds in Lagos in part because Nigeria subscribes to a conventional model of modernisation. This is a very significant point. Koolhaas’s work on Lagos is noted for playing up the spirit of inventiveness and improvisation of the city’s inhabitants, and the film is eloquent with postmodernist notions like ‘selective gathering’, ‘systematic layering’ ‘impoverished social formation rich in intelligence’. This view of Lagos as a self-inventing urbanity finds company in some of the more innovative theorisations of African urbanism in recent times (Simone 2004, Nuttall and Mbembe 2008), but as I suggest at the beginning of this essay, we need not conclude from this that a self-inventing society and a well made society are incompatible. The spatial ordering of Lagos may not speak well of the programmes of modernisation and national development which ruled the waves in the 1960s and 1970s. However, these projects (including those derived from the Soviet bloc and adhering to a supposedly socialist vision of the world) left traces on the city, and on the world views of its inhabitants, and since the city remains open to ideas from different parts of the world, its landscape represents a sort of geographical palimpsest.

Moreover, as visitors to Lagos from the mid-2000s have continued to remark, there are concerted efforts to ‘discipline’ the city. These efforts, involving road construction, reorganisation of the transportation system, landscaping projects and other regulatory systems, have been largely the handiwork of the governors Bola Tinubu (1999–2007) and Raji Fashola (2007–). A pertinent example of the possible triumph of ‘rational planning’ over Lagosian improvisation is the plan for the construction of the Lagos Light Rail system from Orile-Iganmu to Badagry, which has been accompanied by the destruction of many illegal structures along the Badagry Expressway. From the standpoint of ‘crisis-as-norm’, the illegality of those structures would have been seen as a permanent feature of the urban terrain. But the current managers of Lagos would have none of that. What this means is that although moral codes may have broken down, leading to the kinds of social deviancy the film depicts, there is also an undercurrent of aspiration toward the lost dreams among its residents. This undercurrent informs the reformist spirit of the Owolabi family and their more sympathetic neighbours and accomplices. Far from suggesting that Governor Fashola is acting out a Nollywood script circa 1996, my point is that the idealism which drives the film’s argument is structural to the city even in its dystopic forms, and the current regime of sanitation is a welcome attempt to give it a new lease on life.

**Conclusion**

It would seem that the set of values I am deducing from *Owo Blow* contradicts the well-known story of Nollywood as an entrepreneurial practice tied to the disintegration of the ‘modern’ Nigerian nation; that the deliberate, reflexive ways in which the film puts its ideas across run contrary to the hit-or-miss pattern which makes Nollywood so vibrant, so very much like Lagos. My argument is that though it comes out of an improvisational economic mode (abandoning the unworkable idea of
celluloid format for which the national colour film laboratory in Jos was established for the privately owned video camera and studio), *Owo Blow* and most of the films of the 1990s appear committed to the vision of a Nigerian society where ideas of rational planning (‘doing the right thing’) reign supreme. In this connection, one could reflect on perhaps the biggest crisis Nollywood currently faces: piracy. For an industry largely indebted to the kind of underground economy where piracy thrives, it is strange that Nollywood should now feel threatened by one of the architects of its success. While the problems of piracy are tied in complex ways to issues of taste, global access, unequal exchange and proliferation of technologies, and may defy simple solutions, it is beyond dispute that these problems have to be confronted within the parameters of an ethical reform which the didactic *Owo Blow* enjoins.\(^{11}\) Besides piracy, Nollywood also faces the problem of cartelisation, that is, the control of production processes – including financing, manpower and distribution networks – by powerful groups and individuals. There are well-known guilds, societies and associations catering to the welfare of Nollywood practitioners and serving as quality control mechanisms. But these guilds, like the Guild of Nigerian Actors, also contain caucuses and alliances whose protocols may sometimes override those of the registered associations. Even *Owo Blow*, produced long before the systems took their current shapes, bears marks of such power plays, given the prominence in the film of actors from the Lagos-based Odunfa Caucus. (Taiwo Hassan, who plays the older Wole, is a major figure in this caucus.) In addition, the end credits of Part Three list the names of several individuals and businesses that contributed to the realisation of the film. In the production context of Nollywood, then and now, this fact suggests a mode of transaction which may be more personal than formal.

The film’s mobilisation of the melodramatic impulse seeks to turn its attitude toward didacticism into an universalisable idea by tacking on to it a communalist spirit. However, the problem with the communalist spirit, as with the patron-client system much debated by anthropologists and historians in West Africa (Barnes 1986, Davidson 1993), is its alignment with a sub-stratum of social practices that are not democratic. It may be rational, depending on official favours or blind spots for self-preservation, as the street traders defended by Owolabi demonstrate, or on a network of ties, such as Wole attempts to mobilise when the lie of his public image is about to be exposed. But this rationality is strategic and calculated; it is escapist, because it only seeks to cope with the manufactured crisis of the city. The film addresses such collusion with the ‘crisis-as-norm’ approach first through Owolabi’s explicit suggestions about what could be done to discourage street trading, and later, by ensuring that Wole’s crimes are not papered over. But it does not reject it entirely, leaving responsibility for Wole’s death in his hands instead of in the hands of the state. A properly formal attitude to social relations would hand him the sentence appropriate to his crime, in spite of his past good deeds. *Owo Blow*’s inability to press this line is a philosophical rather than an artistic failure. Yet the film is significant in many ways; its significance, as with other films from the period (notably Kelani’s *Ayo Ni Mo Fe*, Alabi-Hundeyin’s *Iyawo Alhaji* and Igwe’s *Violated*), lies in the manner in which it recovers the progressive ideas of the competing national projects, neoliberal and socialist, from the Nigerian state, while neither dismissing the state as such nor presuming to replace it. Through a reformist agenda that depicts the police as capable of efficiency, but new-generation financial institutions as unreliable, this film suggests that the well made society and the self-inventing society are not incompatible. In other words, the arguments of the two opposing trends in scholarship about Lagos which
Haynes (2007) summarises are far from mutually exclusive, because versions of them exist and continue to impact on the city, even if in truncated forms.

In this respect, the longstanding ‘national cultural policy’ paradigm in Nigerian cinema, which seeks to turn filmmakers into some sort of cultural ambassador by exhorting them to promote positive images of the country, deserves a response more serious than either the usual derision of the critic or the evasions of the filmmaker. The films produced in Nigeria before Nollywood became a globally attractive phenomenon have an investment in this policy approach, but not in an explicit collusion with the bureaucratic procedures of the state. Unlike most of the current films which fulfil this expectation by default – carefully avoiding systemic and ideologically explicit critiques of their subjects – *Owo Blow* attempts one such critique, to telling effect. It is film as an argument. The argument is about issues that are resonant in contemporary theoretical discussions of urbanism, and the film happens to have been made at a time when those issues were still too inchoate or too theoretical to have percolated into what Raymond Williams (see Williams 1985) calls ‘the structure of feeling’. It does not think of the postcolonial incredible inscribed in the Lagos landscape as a norm to be borne, but as a problem to be addressed. The important thing is that this current within Nollywood was not a historical phenomenon, stagnating in the 1990s. It has continued to thrive in diverse ways, most consistently in the work of Kelani, arguably the justly most recognised of the Nollywood directors. The multi-layered way in which the film looks at Lagos needs to be combined with the current diverse interests to generate a productive engagement with the city, as a sign of ‘postcolonial crisis’ that could and ought to be transformed. These – the specific example of *Owo Blow* as an argument about urbanism, and the persistence of varieties of such argumentation in Nollywood – suggest, I think, a number of theoretical debates about the relationships between representations and philosophical, ethnographic or quantitative methods.

The most inclusive name that has been given to the conceptual frame for these relationships is interdisciplinarity, the idea that it is by bringing different scholarly disciplines together, and putting their different methods, protocols and languages into promiscuous exchanges with each other, that the division of practice underwriting the segmentation of intellectual labours can be bridged. However, as Brent Hayes Edwards (Edwards 2008, p. 191) notes in an important essay on interdisciplinarity, what is useful in this paradigm is ‘the proliferation of interdisciplinary approaches’ to a textual form or object of study. Edwards’ chosen form in that essay happens to be poetry, but the theoretical value of his argument lies in the recognition that the properly interdisciplinary approach is one in which the critical paradigm articulates with the social. If applied to urban studies, the kind of interdisciplinary work urged by Edwards would reflect the coexistence of processes that are simultaneous but contradictory (the rise of urban-based filmmaking in the selfsame period as the destruction of the slums of Maroko), contrapuntal while aiming at ultimately compatible goals: the renewal of Lagos by its enlightened managers coinciding with the groundswell of international attention to the city and its myriad signs, of which Nollywood is one.

**Notes**

1. However, citing the geographers Sallie Marston, Keith Woodward and John Paul Jones, the critic Jonathan Haynes has argued that Nollywood be seen ‘not as an example of scalar models of hierarchical relationships (the dominant model in globalization), which would inevitably find Nollywood to be a defective imitation of Hollywood, but as an example of specifically situated, localised social activity, networked with other sites that produces
something fundamentally different from Hollywood in production, distribution, consumption, and aesthetics’ (Haynes 2007, p. 133).

2. I think that this is why the sense of achievement felt by Nollywood directors and producers (‘We have created an industry without the support of the government’, etc.) and the fascination of foreign journalists and documentary filmmakers suggests a mutually reinforcing relationship.

3. Recent attempts to grapple with the city include scholarly essays (Gandy 2005); journalistic essays (Packer 2006, Bures 2008); the project on Lagos by the Harvard-based architect Rem Koolhaas, formalised in the film Lagos Wide and Close (2005); the coffee table book Lagos: A City at Work (Tejuoso and Atigbi 2007); and most recently the BBC documentary Welcome to Lagos (2010). Although concerned specifically with Nollywood, the documentary This is Nollywood (2007) would count in this body of commentaries because of both its focus on the city, and the similarity of its overall aesthetics to the BBC documentary, for instance.

4. Wole Soyinka’s Opera Wonyosi (1981), first performed in 1977, remains a lively satire of this fanciful period. For a recent scholarly revisiting of the FESTAC as an expression of Nigeria’s transcontinental cultural aspirations, see Apter 2005.

5. Kwasi Wiredu (2000, p.185) has written: ‘A communalist society is one in which an individual is brought up to cultivate an intimate sense of obligation and belonging to quite large groups of people on the basis of kinship affiliations. This inculcation of an extensive sense of the human bonds provides a natural school for the enlargement of sympathies, which stretches out beyond the limits of kinship to the wider community.’


7. The title is untranslatable; it is a famous alias poetically derived from the protagonist’s last name, and freely used for anyone called Owolabi which, apart from other dramatic considerations, is why each part has an English subtitle. The first part is subtitled ‘The Genesis’ and the remaining two parts are subtitled ‘The Revolt’ and ‘The Final Struggle’.

8. ‘Area Boys’ is a generic term for street hoodlums who accost people in the street with a mixture of aggressiveness and importunity. The term derives from ‘Area’, the section of Lagos where the late Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s nightclub was located before the infamous attack of February 1977 – the point being to characterise the aggression as a feature of Fela’s counter-culture crowd. In the film, some of the characters use the expression ‘Alright Sir’ to describe the ‘Area Boys’.

9. Kole Ade-Odutola, the film’s assistant director, said in a personal communication that the inspiration for the script was M.A. Aderinkomi’s Gbewiri, a Yoruba-language play published in the 1970s. The playwright, a reverend, was present at the film’s premiere in 1996. This line of thinking was quite widespread in the 1970s among Nigerian leftist intellectuals, and literary texts depicting the menace of armed robbery, like Femi Osofsian’s Once Upon Four Robbers and TU Nwala’s Justice on Trial make this argument strongly. The ’70s saw the introduction of execution of convicted armed robbers by public firing squad, one of the ills satirised in Soyinka’s aforementioned play (see Note 4 above).


11. For an extended reflection on piracy and Nigerian films, see Brian Larkin (2008), especially Chapter 7. The paradoxical relationship between the problems posed by piracy and an intellectual commitment to global access is poignantly underscored in Jean-Marie Teno’s documentary film, Sacred Places (2008), when the filmmaker encounters Burkinafou youngsters screening a pirated version of Idrissa Ouedraogo’s Yaaba in an Ouagadougou neighbourhood. More recently, leading Nigerian filmmaker Tunde Kelani has spoken distressfully about the impact of piracy on the industry, going so far as to say that ‘[t]he popular Nollywood industry is under great threat and may already be experiencing its death throes’ (Wood 2010, p. 35).

Notes on contributor

References


This is Nollywood, 2007. Directed by F. Saachi. Eureka Film Productions (US)/California Newsreel.


