

Introduction

Screening Nigeria

“Can Hollywood movies be so bad when they inspire gals in Nigeria?”

—*THE FILM DAILY*, JUNE 29, 1948

In 1914, British colonizers established the borders of modern-day Nigeria, calling a discrete yet geographically vast political unit into existence in the name of the Crown. Nearly fifty years later, on October 1, 1960, Nigeria won independence from the United Kingdom. As a postcolony, Nigeria has witnessed dramatic ups and downs driven, at least in part, by some thirty years of military dictatorship. The ostensible restoration of civilian rule in 1999 inspired many observers to draw connections between that historical moment—the weighty turn of the millennium, with its renewed promise of democracy—and the achievement of self-government some forty years earlier. Independence was the watchword, the conceptual pivot, of such comparisons, however partial, inadequate, or imperiled its actual character. The term spoke to ideals of liberation and autonomy, the ongoing dream and outside responsibility of Nigeria, the “giant of Africa.”

If political analogies between 1999 and 1960 seemed, as a new century approached, altogether irresistible, cinematic analogies were perhaps equally available. Decolonization and detachment from military rule both precipitated booms in theater construction and the entrenchment of film companies—foreign as well as domestic—throughout southern Nigeria, the main unit of geographical analysis in this book, chosen as much for its material significance as for the cinematic metaphors that the port city of Lagos, the onetime federal capital and current commercial and entertainment center, has itself inspired over the years. (“Lagos is the Los Angeles of Africa,” proclaimed *Forbes* magazine in 2017, localizing the more familiar assertion of Nigeria as the continent’s Hollywood.)¹ In Nigeria, two modalities of political independence have been distinctly cinematic, inspiring not only filmic representations of the achievement of autonomy but also the deployment and development of ideas about the future of moviegoing.

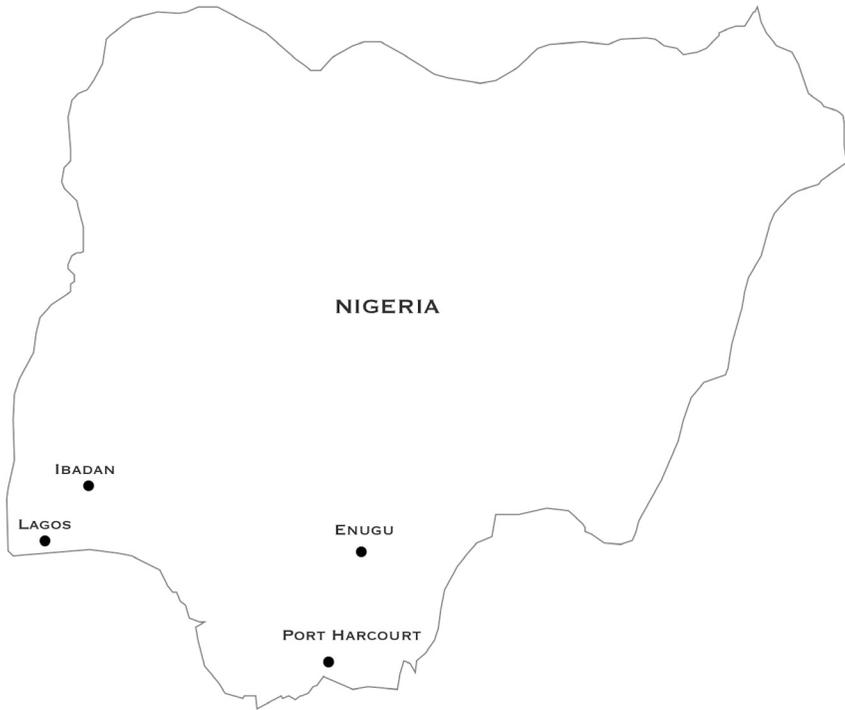


FIGURE 1. Important film exhibition centers in Nigeria. Map by the author.

Produced and released in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of Hollywood films endorsed Nigeria's decolonization struggle, positing political independence as a technological and economic catalyst. (A partial list includes titles examined in later chapters: *The Mark of the Hawk* [Michael Audley, 1957]; *Twilight Forest* [Sydney Latter, 1957]; *12 to the Moon* [David Bradley, 1960]; *Moslem People of Nigeria* [Raphael G. Wolff, 1960]; *A Global Affair* [Jack Arnold, 1964].)

Of course, negative analogies have also gained purchase in the historiography of modern Nigeria, with diplomat John Campbell writing that 1999 "did not mark an end to Nigeria's dysfunctional political culture and style of bad governance any more than had independence from the British in 1960."² There is some truth to this claim, however depressing. But it understates the extent to which the turn of the twenty-first century set off a wave of optimism that gained plausibility from the sheer horrors that had immediately preceded it. In 1999, Nigeria seemingly had nowhere to go but up. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny that bilateral relations between Nigeria and the United States had reached their nadir during Sani Abacha's dictatorship (1993–98), which shocked the world with various human rights abuses, including the execution of Ogoni activists who had dared to oppose the exploitation of the Niger Delta region by international oil companies, particularly Shell.

The end of Abacha's reign, and the subsequent establishment of the Fourth Nigerian Republic, its constitution patterned after the American presidential system, signaled a celebratory atmosphere—a certain hope symbolized by the lifting of a longstanding ban on political organizing and the release of hundreds of political prisoners—that recalled the excitement of independence, the promise of a fresh start. The mere semblance of democracy, following a sixteen-year stretch of military rule (the longest in the country's history), proved sufficiently motivating both internally and for outside interests. It was an appealing reminder of Nigeria's once-trumpeted status as a "showcase for democracy," and thus a magnet for capital. Certain cinematic developments are indisputable: by 2004, multiplex construction—the realization in Nigeria of a particularly extravagant model of theatrical exhibition—had begun, much as, nearly half a century earlier, ground was broken by film companies drawn to the intoxicating qualities of independence.

At stake in both instances is the postcolony's role in global debates about the future of the movie theater. I consider these two historical periods—the decades bracketing independence in 1960, and the years after 1999—not only because they are so significant on their own terms, but also because of what they reveal about widely implemented (and increasingly urgent) efforts to keep cinema alive as a big-screen, theatrical enterprise. The two epochs, that of decolonization and that of the present, are separated not simply by the multiplex's deviations from more modest, antecedent facilities but also by the ontological difference between the mechanical, celluloid-based moving image and what Laura Mulvey calls "post-cinema."³ Somewhere between the two is the electronic image so essential to Nollywood, the Nigerian film (or "film") practice that emerged, and flourished, as a direct-to-video response to the dearth of moviemaking and moviegoing opportunities that marked military rule, when it was plainly safer simply to stay at home.⁴

This book is about the periods that straddle this disappearing act. It is as much a history of ideas as it is an account of precise material practices. For while the latter's province includes the United States and Nigeria (the multiplex, in particular, being very much a North American export), the former's ambit is, because conceptual, even broader.⁵ It rests on, and activates, a notion of film projection that many have associated with political independence. Jean-Luc Godard, for instance, famously proclaimed that theatrical film "was born with the idea of democracy"—that the context of cinematic projection is, throughout the world, inextricably linked to a "feeling of freedom."⁶ What have such pronouncements meant in, and for, Nigeria?

The history of modern-day Nigeria lends substance to Godard's poetic expression, showing how the dream of independence—"imagining democracy," in Mikael Karlström's terms—has indeed been tied to the development of theatrical film, including against the threat of the medium's very extinction.⁷ As Twentieth Century-Fox put it in 1957, in a report that recognized the promise of African decolonization, "The theatre is the key to the future of the motion picture industry."⁸ Decolonization, particularly in Nigeria, was prominent among the

changing circumstances that, in the same year, motivated Jack L. Warner to express “confidence in the future of theatrical motion picture exhibition.”⁹ Yet such confidence, routinely offered by American corporate leaders and other opinion makers, bespoke an emerging form of domination from without—what would come to be known as neocolonialism. As early as 1951, Nigeria, with its large population, was inspiring widespread “faith in the future of the movie theater.”¹⁰ But what would be shown on Nigerian screens? What were the prospects for a truly indigenous film industry? Where would movie theaters be located, with what materials would they be built, and who would own and operate them?

If Nigeria’s changing political fortunes appeared, by the end of the 1960s, to destroy the possibility of the country ever becoming an axis of theatrical film, the end of military rule in 1999 seemed to restore it. For while, pace Godard, some countries have seen film exhibition flourish under military dictatorships (Brazil and Argentina come immediately to mind), Nigeria was not one of them. This is not necessarily to attribute the disappearance of theatrical exhibition to military rule. Nor is it to deny that Nollywood, which filled the gap created by the closure of so many movie theaters, tackled weighty topics in its early, straight-to-video years. For example, Gbenga Adewusi’s aptly titled *Babangida Must Go* (1993) is a sustained expression of political anger—a principled response to the depredations of the titular dictator, particularly his decision to annul the June 1993 presidential election, which sparked global outrage.¹¹ It is, rather, to emphasize the disappearance of the conditions of possibility of theatrical exhibition under men like Babangida and Abacha, whose tenures coincided with the acceleration of structural adjustment programs that helped decimate the middle class and drive Nigerians into the informal sector.

Seismic changes have been underway ever since. Eight years after it was erected, Nigeria’s first multiplex converted to digital projection, though a number of major Nigerian filmmakers, taking inspiration from colleagues like Christopher Nolan and Quentin Tarantino, persist in shooting on film. It is a measure of the multiplexes’ disciplining power that such filmmakers must now convert their work to digital files in order for it to reach Nigeria’s biggest screens, whose survival is repeatedly promised—guaranteed, some say—by the constant “upgrading” of equipment. “Throughout exhibition history,” writes Barbara Stones, “doomsayers have regularly predicted the demise of movie theatres.”¹² While theater closures hit record highs in the United States between 1948 and 1954, even that dire, television-saturated period of suburbanization paled in comparison with the comprehensive shuttering of cinemas in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s.¹³ Indeed, what makes Nigeria so relevant to global debates about cinema’s future is that the medium really *did* become extinct there, to be replaced and repurposed by television (both broadcast and satellite) and home video. That it was eventually resurrected in the flashy form of the multiplex is not simply an achievement of commercial real estate

but also a testament to cinema's persistence—its capacity to stave off annihilation or, in this case, come back from the dead.

A PLAGUE OF CASSETTES

Nigeria, the “giant of Africa,” has long inspired the observation that it lacks sufficient sites for the projection of film. No simple assertion of Africa's need of modernity, this observation has often evinced a prescriptive dimension, resting as it does on the notion that, with its vast population and potential as a continental pacesetter, Nigeria deserves *more* and *better* facilities. In 1934 the American trade paper *The Film Daily* complained that “Nigeria, with 20 million inhabitants, has no theater wired for sound films.”¹⁴ A quarter century later, at the dawn of independence, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rued the dearth of “four-walled, air-conditioned theatre[s]” in a country that “desperately” needed them.¹⁵ In 1977, the *New York Times*, lamenting (incorrectly) that “Nigeria has produced only one or two film-makers,” recommended that the country's then-booming oil economy be redirected toward the construction of new movie theaters to supplement those erected in earlier decades (many already in states of disrepair).¹⁶

That didn't happen. When Nollywood emerged over a decade later, it was as a direct-to-video industry, its products primarily viewed in private homes. The sudden preponderance of such industries across the African continent led some outside observers to view video as a source and not a symptom of theater closures. French filmmaker Jean Rouch, who had long made movies on celluloid using mostly African crews, called video “the AIDS of the film industry” in the late 1990s; the metaphor of sexual transmission served to underscore Nollywood's allegedly deadly productivity.¹⁷ According to Rouch's doomsaying schema, the overabundance of one medium (video) meant the wasting away of another (cinema, which Rouch defined strictly in terms of the projection of a photographically recorded filmstrip in a darkened theater).

Other Westerners were equally willing to view Africa's video boom as portending the worldwide death of moviegoing. When, around the turn of the twenty-first century, Jean-Luc Godard opined that “we can see the shadow of a film on the television, the longing for a film, the nostalgia, the echo of a film, but never a film,” Nollywood, whose earliest practitioners were culled from the ranks of Nigeria's national television network and whose products were watched almost exclusively on small TV sets, formed part of his subtext.¹⁸ Like Rouch, Godard had worked on the African continent: in the 1970s, the government of newly independent Mozambique invited him to develop a state television network. His failure to do so, amid objections to this “European ‘master’ coming to teach the Africans a lesson,” prompted Godard to return to commercial cinema with his “comeback” film

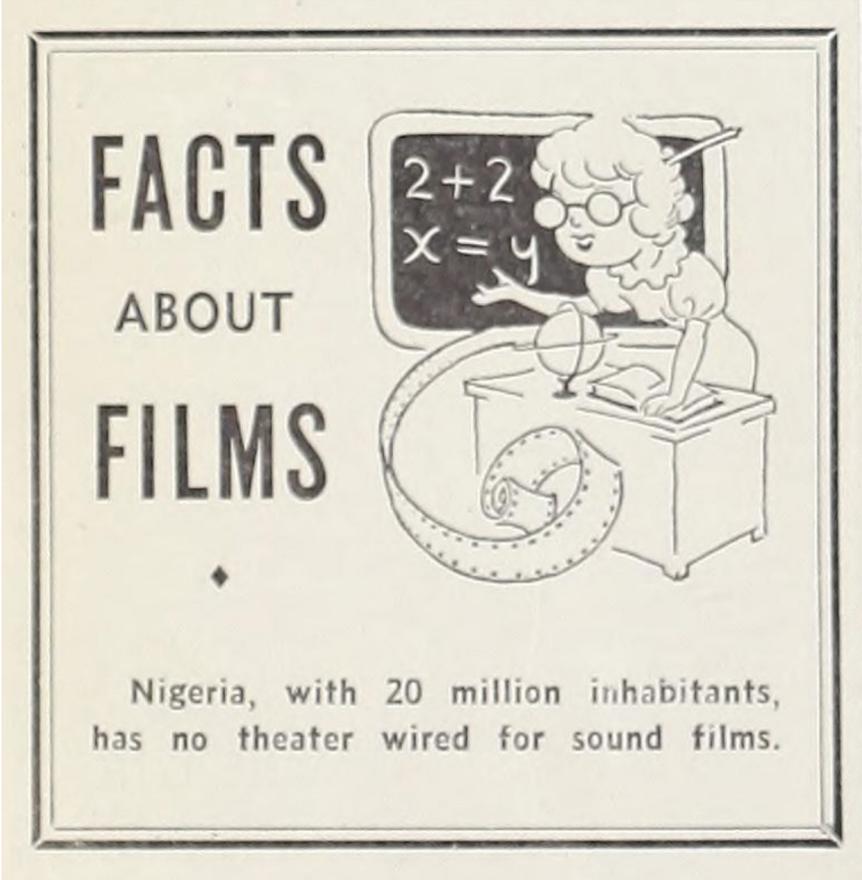


FIGURE 2. In 1934, the American trade paper *The Film Daily* drew attention to Nigeria's theatrical underdevelopment.

Every Man for Himself (1980)—and to suggest that Africans south of the Sahara were missing out on a certain cinematic ideal associated with the big screen.¹⁹

Nollywood's popularity has long placed Nigeria at the center of debates about the future of theatrical film. A cultural and business practice that dates to the early 1990s, Nollywood is typically defined in terms of the low-cost production, small-scale distribution (via modest shops and street stalls), and domestic consumption of direct-to-video films that have only rarely been exhibited on the big screen.²⁰ Jonathan Haynes has suggested that most Nollywood films—designed to be viewed “in domestic space, away from the public eye”—are simply “not at home” in venues like movie theaters and other vast auditoria.²¹ Indeed, Nollywood's emergence is usually explained as a response to the death of filmgoing in Nigeria, to the shuttering of cinema houses that occurred during a period of rampant crime

and insecurity, when a night at the movies represented a particularly dangerous proposition.²²

There is some truth to this shorthand description of Nigerian media history. Whether razed or repurposed, movie theaters really *did* disappear prior to Nollywood's emergence, but it is likely that the industry would have emerged anyway, given the growing availability on the African continent of camcorders, VHS cassettes, VCRs, and a sense that something called "film" did not need to be defined in dogmatic, Western-derived terms. According to Nollywood's decidedly populist spirit, a movie was *not* something that absolutely had to be watched in large dimensions, or in the dark. This process represented a very real cessation, the end of commercial theatrical exhibition, at the same time that it signaled cinema's possible rebirth as the "video-film," Nollywood's answer to the scarcity (and eventual obsolescence) both of film stock and of projection sites.

The scapegoating of Nollywood, and of video spectatorship in general, is more than just a symptom of cinophilia, an expression of contempt for that which seemingly fails to live up to certain "cinematic" standards. It also reflects a lack of understanding of the political and social causes of the shuttering of commercial cinemas in Nigeria in the last two decades of the twentieth century. And it ignores the persistence of filmed theater—records of performances in the Yorùbá tradition that were often screened in makeshift venues and that, had commercial cinemas actually survived, would have been kept out of such spaces anyway, owing to block-booking arrangements that favored more "conventional" fare. Nollywood did not emerge, as in Rouch's crude formulation, to "infect" and destroy theatrical film. Rather, it filled the gap left by the closure of thousands of commercial movie theaters.

Yet it would be difficult to deny that Nollywood has, through its tenacity, called into question the theoretical primacy of theatrical spectatorship: the centrality to film studies of a normative notion of moviegoing that no longer applies to the vast majority of global consumers, who watch films on ever-smaller portable devices, if at all. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Nollywood, derided by Rouch, was also, through its sheer productivity and global popularity, lending support to Philippe Dubois's controversial argument that "with the increasingly boundless diversity of its forms and practices, [cinema] is more alive than ever, more multifaceted, more abundant, more omnipresent than it has ever been."²³ Susan Sontag may have maintained, as late as 1996, that "[t]he conditions of paying attention in a domestic space are radically disrespectful of film"—that "you have to be in a movie theater, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers," in order to qualify as a film watcher—but scholars of Nollywood would powerfully contest such propositions.²⁴ In most cases, however, they would do so without attending to the complicated histories of the big screen in Nigeria. Alessandro Jedlowski's characterization of Nollywood as a "small-screen cinema," meant for modest television sets rather than massive projection panels, is apt: it takes the literal measurements of

Nollywood images without denying or diminishing the industry's aspirations—its ambition to form a true filmmaking practice, a cinema unto itself.

This book is about the early, multidirectional promise of theatrical exhibition in the context of Nigerian decolonization, and the eventual realization of that potential in the form of the twenty-first-century multiplex. It is about a distinct moviegoing experience that, initially understood as incompatible with the Nollywood revolution, now accommodates it, while remaining an index of important geopolitical shifts and a source of enrichment for a wide range of sometimes competing players. More specifically, it is about Nigeria's recurrent salience, for both indigenous and transnational interests, as a site for the construction of roofed, air-conditioned cinemas—for, in other words, the very survival of theatrical film as a means of expanding the profits of local as well as global enterprises. Central to this particular conception of cinema are “big” movies, precisely the sort of capital-intensive productions that Nollywood, beginning in the early 1990s, sought to counter in its own economical fashion.

Understanding what is happening in the Nigerian theatrical marketplace today requires looking at the past through the prism of the big screen. Though largely unrealized at the time, certain ambitions for the movie theater—as source of enrichment, index of modernization, and stimulus to cinematic innovation—were developed in and for Nigeria in the middle of the twentieth century. Such goals would come to eye-catching fruition in the form of the multiplexes whose construction began in Nigeria in 2004. In the realm of theatrical distribution, political independence has never meant national exclusivity. Less a fixed condition or a permanent achievement of self-government, *cinematic* independence is an ongoing challenge, a provocation that raises important political-economic questions. Moviegoing in Nigeria has always depended on imported products, from screens to snacks to feature films. During the period of decolonization (which I date from 1954, when the Lyttleton Constitution established a federal system, to the start of the Biafran Civil War in 1967), hardtop cinemas were imagined, and increasingly constructed, in a complicated dialogue with American companies. Today, about half of the feature films screened in Nigerian multiplexes are derived from (or, to use a less generous term, dumped by) Hollywood. Yet cultural self-determination—what Nollywood, in its earliest forms, arguably epitomizes—remains a major goal, the essence of cinematic independence. For however much they may rely on and support foreign capital, Nigeria's multiplexes are (at least technically) owned and operated by Nigerians. While bringing ever more Hollywood films to Nigeria, the big screen has also facilitated Nollywood's integration into various networks of international cinema culture. Projected in theaters throughout southern Nigeria, locally produced films like Tony Abulu's *Doctor Bello* (2013) and Niyi Akinmolayan's *The Wedding Party 2* (2017) also end up on AMC screens in New York and New Jersey.

Before 2004, the big screen was little more than a figurative force in Nollywood's affairs, a memory and a metaphor. After 2004, it was suddenly a viable, material platform for Nigerian filmmakers willing to make movies on a grander

scale. The multiplex has even inspired a new movement within the Nollywood industry. Known as “New Nollywood,” that movement owes its emergence to the growing presence of movie theaters in twenty-first-century Nigeria. Most New Nollywood films are made expressly for the big screen, their budgets dwarfing those of their direct-to-video counterparts. The latter have hardly disappeared in this age of multiplexes, however. Viewed from a certain vantage, they seem to be at least as popular as ever, particularly among those Nigerians who cannot afford admission to movie theaters, or who live far from any big screen. It would, however, be a mistake to underestimate the disciplining power of theatrical projection in an industry that once prided itself on total (or near-total) national autonomy. Initially touted as a completely independent, even “DIY” alternative to heavily capitalized and compromised co-productions, Nollywood is increasingly accommodating of foreign capital, whether from Air France (which sponsored Kunle Afolayan’s 2016 thriller *The CEO*, a marvel of embedded marketing, like the director’s other recent films) or Coca-Cola.²⁵

Hollywood giants seem particularly comfortable in Nigeria today. The exclusive regional distributor for Warner Bros. and 20th Century Studios (formerly Twentieth Century-Fox, now a Disney subsidiary), Nigeria’s FilmHouse also produces and distributes its own films through a local subsidiary, FilmOne.²⁶ A vertically integrated enterprise serving the interests of in-house productions (including by giving them extensive publicity, prime showtimes, and lengthy runs), FilmHouse has been further conditioned by the needs of its Hollywood partners. It has therefore been difficult if not structurally impossible for a non-FilmOne, non-Fox (now non-Disney), non-Warner-Bros. feature film to become a significant box-office hit in a Nigerian market dominated by the FilmHouse theater chain, whose other corporate partner—Coca-Cola—is just one of the reasons for the rise of product placement in Nollywood. The size and ubiquity, in and around Nigerian multiplexes, of Coke and IMAX signs cannot fail to telegraph the respective investments of those corporations in the country’s largest screens. It is not necessarily immediately apparent, upon entering a FilmHouse location, that Fox has been—and that Disney is now—a factor in its operation, but Coca-Cola’s role is unmistakable: FilmHouse is awash in Coke red.

If, as one Nigerian theater manager told me, “FilmHouse has been a pacesetter in the industry in terms of infrastructure and technology,” that is because, as another manager put it, “FilmHouse is one of Fox’s ‘accounts’—it has Fox firmly behind it.”²⁷ That Fox (now Disney) wants its films to be exhibited in Nigeria is obvious; in order to ensure that they will be, it has gone so far as to partner with local firms, supplying state-of-the-art technology and invaluable expertise in exchange for certain guarantees—including, of course, a significant percentage of box-office returns.²⁸ Chronic theatrical underdevelopment has made Nigeria a frequent target of such Hollywood opportunism. Viewed from this vantage, Francesco Casetti’s comments about cinema’s “spatial expansion”—“Cinema has come to occupy new environments. . . . It has emigrated, founded new colonies. . .”—acquire

the force of the literal.²⁹ In Nigeria today, multiplex formats and Marvel movies have joined immensely popular US imports that include Coldstone Creamery, the upscale ice-cream chain, and Domino's Pizza.³⁰

CLIMATE COSTS

A vast country, the size of France and Spain combined, Nigeria is a place of considerable climatic variation. For much of the twentieth century, the dry northern half of the country played host primarily to open-air cinemas—those distinctly Nigerian establishments whose social contours and implications for film theory Brian Larkin has considered at length.³¹ The far south, with its tropical rainforest climate, has been significantly less conducive to open-air cinemas, an ecological reality that has helped to make this part of the country a magnet for those committed to a particular idea—and ideal—of big-screen spectatorship. For if southern Nigeria is climatically distinct from the northern portions of the country, it has also exhibited political, cultural, and religious differences. Identifiable less with the “unruly” open-air cinemas of the Muslim-dominated north than with the “closed,” “covered,” and “civilized” facilities familiar from European and American models of moviegoing, the dreams of the big screen that have converged in southern Nigeria speak volumes about the area's cultural ambitions and ties to international capital.

The many attractions of population-dense Lagos, the southwestern port city that was Nigeria's federal capital from its amalgamation in 1914 until 1991 when centrally located Abuja took over, have magnetized all manner of foreign and local investors with little if any interest in northern life. Normative definitions of moviegoing, derived from Western contexts of commercial theatrical exhibition, have consistently underwritten this attempt at internal differentiation. Larkin writes of the “bawdy, rowdy atmosphere” of northern open-air cinemas where distractions (including those provided by the skyline itself) abounded, and where Islamic proscriptions against certain activities competed with the pull of commercial entertainment and sheer sociability.³² In 1948, William H. Offenhauser, Jr., an electrical engineer at RCA, observed after a trip to Nigeria, “There is a wide variation in the psychology that you find in theaters in different places. . . . I have seen pictures in the open down in Africa, and I can assure you the psychology of the theater there is quite different.”³³ What the chairman of the National Theatre Supply Company mocked as “the African theater [with] no walls and no ceiling” was thus generative of a different, implicitly lesser form of cinema spectatorship, one that would require a kind of neocolonial intervention—nothing less than the architecturally induced “psychological transformation” of Nigerians.³⁴

The roofed, fully climate-controlled movie house was, in Nigeria as elsewhere, envisioned as a modern site for the close, committed contemplation of cinematic art. As the theater architect Ben Schlanger put it in 1948, referring to moviegoers the world over,

[W]hat we need greatly [is] a theater auditorium where a person can sit down and look at what is ahead of him and not be conscious of the physical shelter in which he is enjoying that picture. He has to be able to look at that picture, lose himself in it completely, and have no reminder of the fact that he is in an enclosure and looking at a picture. . . . In other words, the auditorium has to be a completely *neutral* enclosure, to enable you to enjoy completely that which is being shown to you. . . .³⁵

Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece has examined the so-called “neutralization” movement that Schlanger spearheaded, showing how attention to the physical structures of the movie theater intensified by the middle of the twentieth century.³⁶ This obsession with cinematic architecture matched up well with American imperialist ambitions, particularly in Nigeria. Criticizing the country’s “primitive” open-air cinemas on the eve of independence in September 1960, the MPAA outlined the need for “U.S. interests [to] engage in a theatre-construction program” in the country, where “[m]ost agreed” that “enclosed theatres [would] be profitable in the larger communities”: “Frankly, Nigerian theatres aren’t among the best in Africa. They are open-air affairs and show one program nightly . . . when it doesn’t rain. Ibadan, a city of almost one million, has only four theatres.”³⁷

If, by the middle of the twentieth century, the roofed or “hardtop” movie theater was proposed as a high-class alternative to the “untamed” Africanity of open-air spectatorship, it is today being couched as an equally lofty (and, for many Nigerians, altogether too pricey) alternative to the smartphone and other digital networked technologies that appear to threaten cinema’s preeminence—even its very existence. In the 1950s, as Nigeria was fast approaching independence, the reduction of distraction was deemed essential if the anti-Communist, pro-capitalist messages of American films were to be adequately received and fully assimilated. By mid-decade the independent American production company Lloyd Young & Associates, working in collaboration with the Cinema Corporation of Nigeria (a government-owned body established in 1955), was outlining the construction of hardtop cinemas with these ideological goals very much in mind. While it failed to lay any bricks, Lloyd Young & Associates succeeded in making a film—*The Mark of the Hawk*—that pushed for the penetration of American-style capitalism and the eventual creation of what one character calls “shiny facilities,” including “real” movie theaters, as opposed to the decidedly downmarket venues in which Nigerians were, ironically enough, obliged to watch the film upon its worldwide release.

Between the late 1940s and the early 1980s, Hollywood studios did business in Nigeria via a number of independent organizations and overseas subsidiaries, many of them based in Beirut, Lebanon: Twentieth Century-Fox Import Corp.; Al-Fajar Film Co.; Hikmat Antiba; Mikael Antiba; the Arab Company for Cinema; Atlas Film; Warner Bros. Pictures International Corp.; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer of Egypt; the United Artists Corp.; and Paramount Films of Lebanon, which was managed by Willy Goldenthal during and after Nigeria’s transition to independence. Other intermediaries included the studios’ own individual sales representatives for Africa and the Middle East, as well as the American Motion Picture

Export Company, Africa (AMPECA), headquartered in Apapa, Nigeria (to the west of Lagos Island) and overseen by Abe Gotfried after the death of chairman of the board and MPAA president Eric Johnston in 1963.³⁸ Since 1915, when Fox opened its first office outside North America—a distribution center in Rio de Janeiro—local territory offices have been significant components of Hollywood’s political economy.³⁹ Fox was, of course, hardly alone among major Hollywood firms in setting up shop in Lagos at independence. By 1965, the city was one of only seven official Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) outposts abroad, joining London, Paris, Frankfurt, Rome, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, and Jakarta within the Hollywood imperium.⁴⁰

Many of the Lebanese distributors who conducted business in twentieth-century Nigeria were associated with the Twentieth Century-Fox Import Corporation, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer of Egypt, and Paramount Films of Lebanon, all of which had offices in Beirut beginning in the immediate postwar period, after the end of the French mandate.⁴¹ When Lebanese retailers shifted to the more profitable import trade in the wake of their own country’s independence, they began acting as carriers of a modernity expressed through and embodied by commercial theatrical films. Their transition into distribution and exhibition was therefore part of the rapid postwar growth in imports, symbolized by the establishment in the early 1960s of the Mattar Bros. theater chain, which included venues in various Lagos neighborhoods: the Roxy Cinema in Apapa; Odeon Cinema and Central Cinema in Ebute Metta; Idera Cinema in Mushin; and Plaza Cinema on Lagos Island.⁴² In the political climate of independence, the perception of a “changing composition of demand towards more sophisticated goods” was abetted by collaborations between Hollywood studios (including United Artists, which established permanent offices in Lagos in 1961) and the Lebanese, Indian, and Chinese merchants who helped bring films to Nigerian screens.⁴³

By 1962, six powerful Hollywood studios had permanent offices in Lagos: Twentieth Century-Fox, Columbia, Walt Disney Productions, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Paramount International, United Artists (UA), Universal International Films, and Warner Bros.⁴⁴ A smattering of much smaller firms, from Esther Green Humphrey’s Omaha-based FEPCO Theatre Advertising to New York’s Auriema Group, had also set up shop in the country, where they pursued opportunities from the installation of air conditioning to the marketing of films and associated products (like soft drinks).⁴⁵ Nigeria’s devastating Biafran Civil War interrupted this entrepreneurial flow, as did a succession of mercurial military dictatorships.⁴⁶ Such political upheavals (which included the federal government’s declaration of a state of emergency in the Western Region shortly after the major American studios put down roots there) ensured that Hollywood would, at best, keep the country at arm’s length. With the ostensible restoration of civilian government in 1999, however, Nigeria’s promise was seemingly reignited. The twenty-first century

has thus, in its apparent propitiousness, duplicated some of the excitement of an earlier historical moment.

The two eras, encompassing formal detachment from British colonial rule and the beginning of the so-called Fourth Republic (or the fourth attempt at democratic governance in Nigeria), share more than just the celebration of political liberty. They are also united as precipitants of the rise of film projection in Nigeria, highlighting the country's role in what Gregory A. Waller, referring to a different national context, calls "the story of the movie theater's survival through the Age of Television and into the Age of Video."⁴⁷ When, in the 1960s, Hollywood marketed Cinerama⁴⁸ in Nigeria, the country had no permanent Cinerama theaters, just plastic-and-nylon "Cinedomes" that took eight minutes to inflate with air pumps. The Hollywood firm Cinestar used these structures to promote the Cinerama process, employing multiple projectors and a curved, "hemispheric" screen. At the same time, various American companies simply sold old films to new Nigerian television stations. Via such varied approaches, Hollywood—always less a fixed location than a flexible business practice, a profoundly mutable idea—managed to advance its own interests in and through Nigeria during the period just prior to and in the immediate aftermath of independence.⁴⁹ Today, it is back after a long hiatus fraught with fears of piracy, and it is finding new, well-organized Nigerian firms with which to conduct business, all of them committed to theatrical projection.

A certain infrastructural bias is at work here: Nigerian companies had only to buy up real estate in order to pique Hollywood's interest, providing the industry, as well as select local filmmakers committed to the New Nollywood style, with key projection sites. Piracy may have been a factor in Hollywood's earlier estrangement from Nigeria, but the loss of physical infrastructure was at least as significant. Nigeria has, in other words, periodically played host to "Hollywood's reselling of the motion picture experience," its capacity to consolidate ambitions for the big screen all but guaranteed by its population size.⁵⁰ As the Nigerian filmmaker Ola Balogun maintained as late as the mid-1980s, "in spite of the myriad problems facing [film exhibition] in Nigeria, the prospects are excellent because the basic element (i.e. the audience) is there."⁵¹

Hollywood's willingness to accept modest profits in Nigeria is well captured in a 1962 trade report: "Admittedly, revenues from the so-called underdeveloped nations will be skimpy for some time to come. . . . [They] will not represent a financial windfall by any stretch of the imagination. But past experience has taught American distributors that a limited market can develop into a flourishing one."⁵² What is assumed to have been a "lost period" characterized by "an unremarkable stagnancy"—"a period when nothing happened" and "a period to be skipped" in chronologies of Hollywood internationalism—was in fact an era of innovative, ceaselessly aspirational activity, especially in Lagos.⁵³

As James Ferguson puts it, perhaps too politely, “the picture of Africa as a place that has been simply abandoned by global capital has to be qualified.”⁵⁴ The stubborn assumption of Nigeria’s irrelevance to film and media studies should be seen as part of what Kenneth Cameron calls the “complex of received ideas” about Africa that continues to animate discussions within and beyond the academy.⁵⁵ This epistemic complex functions not simply as a result of screen representations, as in Cameron’s film-specific account (which itself mentions Nigeria only twice), but also in spite of them. Indeed, Hollywood has depicted Nigeria as directly relevant to a variety of US interests since as early as the silent era, albeit in mostly non-canonical films. These include MGM’s *Congo Maisie* (H.C. Potter, 1940), which repeatedly positions Lagos as a global entertainment capital and reliable source of enrichment for Americans, and the same studio’s *White Cargo* (Richard Thorpe, 1940). In the latter Lagos is described as a consumer paradise—a source of expensive items (“Cost plenty at Lagos,” one character says of the latest fashions) and fresh ways of “making money.”

Even prior to World War II, American publications were celebrating Nigeria’s “friendliness” to Hollywood, joining *Congo Maisie* in praising Lagos as what Michael Curtin would later call a “media capital.”⁵⁶ “There is no legislation [in Nigeria] in effect detrimental to American films. . . . There is no special taxation upon distributors and theaters showing motion pictures,” stated an American trade paper, with palpable relief, in 1938, the very year that Arnold Thurman, head of the Anti-Trust Division at the US Department of Justice, filed suit against the major Hollywood studios, demanding that they divest themselves of their first-run theaters.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the paper claimed, “American films are well received [there].”⁵⁸ Nigeria was thus, in such enthusiastic accounts, depicted as doubly conducive to American interests in the wide (and widening) realm of cinema, for not only were manufacturers and distributors made happy by the fact that “cinematograph equipment” and individual films were all admitted “free of duty,” but American motion-picture producers could also take comfort from the knowledge that Nigerian audiences were *already* especially appreciative of Hollywood fare.

By 1967, there were at least three modern movie theaters in Lagos—air-conditioned alternatives to the open-air cinemas so prevalent throughout the country. These elite exhibition spaces included the Plaza, the Glover Cinema (part of Glover Memorial Hall, named after John H. Glover, Administrator of Lagos, which was initially open-air), and the Metro. In a 1968 study, the United Nations Statistical Office praised Nigeria’s “growing number of modern, air-conditioned cinemas, showing good films.”⁵⁹ It was only a matter of time, however, before even these facilities would fall victim to disrepair and the parallel deprivations of austerity and military rule. When major commercial movie theaters returned to Lagos in 2004, they took an entirely new form, one predicated on modes of transnational cooperation and methods of revenue generation previously unfamiliar in Nigeria’s exhibition scene.⁶⁰

METHODOLOGICAL OBSTACLES AND THE SEARCH
FOR THE BIG SCREEN(S)

“A study of the distribution and exhibition of the feature film in Nigeria is a study of foreign interests.”

—HYGINUS EKWUAZI, *FILM IN NIGERIA*, 88

In my 2015 book *Nollywood Stars*, I made a case for the centrality of social media to Nollywood’s star system, particularly as that system evolved beyond the control of the industry’s marketers (producers and distributors, in Hollywood’s parlance).⁶¹ Initially a means of contesting the marketers’ proprietary claims on star images (and, as such, a supplement to television, radio, and print interviews), personal Twitter accounts have become a way for Nollywood professionals to dialogue with something like a global film culture. “Naija Twitter,” as it is affectionately known (“Naija” being contemporary politicized slang for “Nigeria” and “Nigerian”), was a boon to the research that I conducted for this book. Between 2017 and 2019, I tweeted several calls for participation in the project that has become *Cinematic Independence*—requests for interviews mainly with multiplex employees, precisely those workers whom I had overlooked in my previous, production- and reception-centered studies. These were reliably retweeted and otherwise widely circulated by my friends and principal contacts, including Nollywood directors, performers, and cinematographers, and I was eventually able to schedule and conduct multiple interviews both online and on the ground, in my home city of New York and in West Africa. Lagos and Accra are the hubs of the region’s budding exhibition circuits, but I have also met with respondents in other African cities, such as Dakar and Thiès.

My methodological approach is rooted in the recognition that information about imperialist ambition is to be found primarily in the metropole and not in the colony—that Hollywood’s designs on Nigeria are, archivally speaking, more abundant in the United States than in Lagos or Ibadan. Cinematic fantasies assume material forms in archival documents that map corporate aspirations, and it is to such documents that I have turned in an attempt to sketch some of the specific film-related designs and developments of the mid-twentieth century. If the celluloid-centered edifices of that period have been razed in the decades since, their imposing multiplex replacements presently exist as enterable spaces, at least for those who can get past security (the list of forbidden items grows seemingly by the day and is often supplemented by temperature checks and all manner of informal prejudices) and afford the (also steadily rising) price of a movie ticket. The latter half of this book, while not primarily ethnographic, is informed by my experience of large-screen cinema in contemporary Nigeria, as well as by my extensive conversations with current and former multiplex employees. Many of these workers spoke to me on the condition of anonymity, since their positions were precarious even before the coronavirus pandemic forced exhibitors to operate at reduced

capacity (if at all) and furlough hundreds across West Africa. Indeed, as I detail in these pages, the digitization of cinema has dramatically minimized the number of available jobs in the exhibition sector, and most workers are understandably worried about the next innovation bringing with it another spate of layoffs. They also fear reprisals for daring to criticize any aspect of large-screen cinema in Nigeria—whether the “Disney imperialism” that one insider so memorably described or the seemingly more mundane actions of local theater managers.

For those instances in which there is significant overlap between Nigerian and American archives, I have elected to cite the latter, whether the Billy Rose Theater Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, whose offsite holdings include FESTAC programs that are more complete and in better condition than any I have encountered on the African continent, or Harlem’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, with its remarkable array of Nigerian publications, including canonical works of Nigerian film history and criticism. My intention is not to deny the existence of African archives but to point the reader to sites—to specific archival conditions—that are comparatively stable, though, to be sure, subject to their own limitations, particularly during a global pandemic. Andrew Apter, upon whose important account of FESTAC I draw in chapter 3, writes of “the problem of politics” as a kind of witchcraft constantly bedeviling archives in Nigeria, including—perhaps especially—those sites that, like the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), represent “extraordinary resource[s] and achievement[s].” Apter acknowledges the maddeningly “shifting limits” within which one is permitted to conduct certain types of research in Nigeria, and while his account of such constraints looks back to the period of military rule, innumerable obstacles remain in the ostensibly democratic (and certainly fiscally deficient) present.⁶²

In some cases, however, American archives are simply the only storehouses of information on how certain government, corporate, and philanthropic agencies saw Nigeria and (to invoke this book’s subtitle) planned the building and embellishing of exhibition sites in the country. Because I understand the big screen’s construction to be a material as much as a discursive process, I have mined archives that consist of “mere” architectural blueprints, timber orders, and contracts with energy companies—precisely those sources that have long been overlooked by film scholars.⁶³ The Rockefeller Archive Center, for instance, is a repository of documents that cannot, to my knowledge, be found anywhere else. Such archival materials offer insights into companies (like the little-known Cinestar) and products (like the equally obscure Multitrax) that were developed specifically for an imagined Nigerian market. Cinestar and some of the other firms addressed in this book were not Lagos-based, but they were certainly Lagos-fixated, and their files shed considerable light on Western aspirations for cinema in Nigeria.

I have elected to make extensive use of documents housed at the Rockefeller Archive Center for a number of reasons, not least of all because of their origins

in the period on which I focus in the first half of this book. Launched in 1957, and with its main office in Lagos, the West Africa Program of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which was concluded at the end of 1962, provided technical assistance “tailored to the economic development needs of Nigeria,” producing numerous “feasibility studies,” including of the business of film exhibition. The program’s director, Robert I. Fleming, acted as a liaison between the Nigerian government and private US investors like Cinestar International and the Cinerama Corporation. A kind of think tank for Hollywood developmentalism, the West Africa Program kept extensive records of its dealings with those film companies whose ambitions in and for Nigeria I detail in these pages.

Equally useful are the records of the US Department of State, which detail all manner of consular and corporate attempts to make sense of postcolonial Nigeria. Such documents indicate the intense interest with which newly independent Nigeria was viewed by US government officials and Hollywood insiders alike. As Eric Smoodin notes, “historians have paid relatively little attention to Hollywood’s foreign markets”—and almost none to Nigeria.⁶⁴ The same cannot be said, however, either of the US government or of Hollywood companies, as State Department records alone attest. When, in 1948, the American trade paper *The Film Daily* asked, “Can Hollywood movies be so bad when they inspire gals in Nigeria?,” it established certain rhetorical norms for those who sought to describe—and excuse—the industry’s ongoing incursions into the African continent.⁶⁵ But it was also drawing on the US government’s own ways of advancing Nigeria’s “Americanization.” By 1963, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was announcing that Hollywood’s image was “not so bad” in post-independence Nigeria, where, according to the agency’s statistics, “among those who cannot read, an average of 38 percent are regular moviegoers.” That the movies to which such Nigerians subjected themselves were Hollywood productions was an article of faith at the USIA, whose “professional surveys”—reportedly “conducted by independent, impartial institutes of public opinion” and initially reserved “for official use only”—found that “preference for, and enjoyment of, Hollywood films” was pronounced, and that “[i]mpressions of America obtained from these films are generally favorable.”⁶⁶

Beginning as early as the 1950s, Nigeria was also the subject of US Department of Commerce publications that stressed the country’s promise for, among other pursuits, theatrical exhibition. These, too, were generative speech acts—performative reflections of the need to establish overseas markets and investment outlets. Articulations of entwined national and business interests, they suggest a certain kinship between Hollywood and the US government that standard film histories, with their focus on federal antitrust legislation and other state-imposed impediments, tend to belie. By the middle of the twentieth century, Nigeria had become a key site in which such state-private symbiosis could be elaborated, including in the arena of theatrical exhibition. United Artists production executive Steven Bach, whose

company was installed in Nigeria by 1961, noted that “practices very much like block booking were still common” internationally—and actively supported by the US government—even after the major studios entered into a consent decree with the US Department of Justice in 1948.⁶⁷ Again, what was technically forbidden at home was permitted, even actively encouraged, abroad, making decolonizing, population-dense Nigeria one of the cauldrons in which an ostensibly “Americanizing” stew could, by midcentury, be stirred.

Yet such a process was neither unambiguous nor uncontested. In her book *Vernacular Palaver*, Moradewun Adejunmobi cautions against the impulse to read African attachments to English-language media as evidence of assimilationist tendencies—as, that is, “a sign of the surrender of a culturally alienated elite to the culture of the colonizers, a sign of their complicity with the hegemony of Europe [and, by extension, the United States] over various spheres of life in postcolonial Africa.”⁶⁸ Heeding Adejunmobi’s warning, I take official US reports (diplomatic records, policy papers, corporate pronouncements, and “scientific” studies published between the 1950s and the 1970s) not at face value—not, that is, as necessarily offering evidence of “Americanization”—but as wishful projections intended to help materialize the very “market ripeness” that they repeatedly imputed to Nigeria. (Such reports were also increasingly desperate efforts to forestall capital flight, particularly during and after the Biafran Civil War.) As Smoodin suggests, to adopt such a skeptical approach “is not to discount Hollywood hegemony but instead to call for a more nuanced understanding of the place of American movies in the world.”⁶⁹

Indeed, the many interviews that I conducted substantiated, in their own ways, the respective claims of Adejunmobi and Smoodin. All who spoke to me expressed ambivalence regarding the role of American—and, for that matter, Chinese, British, French, and Lebanese—companies in the construction of cinemas in postcolonial Nigeria. In most cases, these cinemas, and the jobs that they have generated, simply wouldn’t exist without foreign capital, foreign equipment, and foreign films. Yet such foreignness is often experienced with a mix of pleasure (Marvel movies dependably entertain audiences all around the world) and pique. Plenty of Nigerian multiplex workers are understandably happy to be paid by the deep-pocketed likes of Disney, IMAX, Pepsi, and Coca-Cola. At the same time, however, few among them are unwilling to use the term “imperialism” to describe such arrangements. The keywords of critical political economy, then, are not unknown outside of academia. The concepts of economic and cultural imperialism are, in fact, widely understood, and just as widely mobilized, in order to account for the complex experience of a specifically cinematic modernity in Nigeria.

Decolonization may have inspired much of the rhetoric of “Hollywoodization,” but it also led to the literal construction of a pronounced American presence throughout Lagos. By the end of the 1950s, US finance capital—including, significantly, that on which Hollywood companies themselves depended—had

entered Nigeria as more than just an idea. The late-colonial establishment in Lagos of US banking facilities reliably promoted large-scale investment by Hollywood studios, effectively presaging the entrance of Hollywood capital into Nigeria. In the lead-up to Nigerian independence—two months before the flag-raising ceremony on October 1, 1960—the Bank of America opened a facility in Lagos, the very first branch of a US commercial bank in West Africa.⁷⁰ The documentary *Nigeria: Giant in Africa* (Ronald Dick, 1960), a production of the National Film Board of Canada, stresses this “building boom” through visual and rhetorical attention to what the voiceover narrator calls “rapidly growing cities like Ibadan, Lagos, Port Harcourt, Onitsha.” “Everywhere,” he continues, “the expanding economy is throwing up new buildings.” The film’s image track shows such edifices in all their modernist splendor. “Nigeria,” the narrator concludes, “is becoming more and more a world of plans and machines.”

The following decade, however, witnessed not merely the emotional reverberations of a bloody civil war but also a series of practical challenges to American investors. In 1976, Nigeria’s Federal Military Government noted in a report on “bilateral U.S.-Nigerian relations” that the immediate aftermath of the assassination of General Murtala Mohammad did not represent a “propitious time for new Nigerian initiatives via-à-vis [the] U.S.”; nor was it convinced of the “durability and relevance of any [new] initiatives [the] U.S. might [under]take with regard to Nigeria.” Numerous American firms remained undeterred, however; they worried only about the “implications of expanded indigenization actions,” in the words of US Deputy Secretary of State Charles W. Robinson. After General Olusegun Obasanjo, who had been appointed military head of state following Mohammad’s death, delivered a major speech on indigenization, one Nigerian diplomat immediately received a “flood of phone calls from U.S. companies wanting to know what the speech meant and whether they were included.” Consular reassurances soon followed, with all of the American firms, including movie companies, being reminded that they could comply “only cosmetically with the requirements for Nigerian participation in management.”⁷¹ Such superficial compliance was, and would remain, the bane of those proponents of “Nigerianization” who witnessed with horror the steady erosion of the possibility of meaningful freedom from foreign influence and ownership.⁷² Even in the 1970s, with the subject of indigenization on the lips of millions, Nigeria’s cinema screens could scarcely be considered independent.

PROJECTING SOFT DRINKS

Examples of the internationalization of exhibition abound in Nigeria today. IMAX, for instance, outfits new (and retrofits “old”) multiplexes, which operate according to the company’s proprietary technologies, much as, in the early 1960s, the MPAA enlisted the Theatre Equipment and Supply Manufacturers Association

of America to design, develop, and construct fully air-conditioned motion-picture theaters in West Africa, including Lagos. As Clement Crystal of Paramount International Theaters Corporation put it in 1948, “The rest of the world looks to us for the latest innovations in theater construction and equipment and they try to follow in our footsteps”—thus “their efforts and endeavors [must] be as American as possible, [with] American plans and devices.”⁷³ Today, Coca-Cola and Pepsi maintain contracts with exhibitors doing business throughout Nigeria; as a result, theater concessions are dominated by the eponymous soft drinks. Indeed, the so-called “Cola Wars” are currently fought on the terrain of theatrical exhibition in Nigeria.

In the twenty-first century, however, local, national, and regional media firms have emerged and expanded against the backdrop of China’s growing influence, offering particular opportunities for collaboration and competition. Indeed, Nigerian companies like FilmHouse and the Silverbird Group, with financing from the Bank of Industry, have effectively created the capacity for the return to the country of commercial theatrical exhibition, even if, or precisely because, they have remained tethered to foreign films and technologies in a manner that recalls earlier transnational relationships. No attempt has been made by any of these companies—or, for that matter, by the Nigerian government (which provided the aforementioned capital through the Bank of Industry)—to stem the tide of media flows into Nigeria.

Instead, a logic of cooperation has subtended the return of theatrical film, indicating the difficulty of devising solutions to screen scarcity in the absence of support from established players like Disney, Warner Bros., and IMAX. During her first term as Nigeria’s Minister of Finance, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala promoted such transnational cooperation, noting its capacity to reanimate the “arrested histories” of the big screen in Nigeria. Indeed, her handpicked economic-reform “dream team” made her “the toast of the international financial community” in the months leading up to the opening of Nigeria’s first multiplex. A former development economist at the World Bank, Okonjo-Iweala built up foreign reserves, negotiated a settlement of most of Nigeria’s foreign debt, and enabled the country to gain access to crucial international credit markets.⁷⁴ Concurrent with these efforts was, of course, Hollywood’s renewed appreciation for the Nigerian market, a renewal precipitated as much by desperation as by the possibilities seemingly afforded by the end of military rule and the growth of Nigeria’s middle class. As Ivan Turok points out, “stagnant markets in Europe and North America mean that foreign corporations are bound to look more favorably on African markets for growth potential.”⁷⁵ Nigerian multiplexes were built, in part, so that Hollywood could return.

Today, press releases and other advertorials routinely imply that the refined, cosmopolitan likes of Ben Murray-Bruce (founder of Silverbird Group) and Kene Mkpuru (co-founder and former managing director of FilmHouse) are at the helm of accountable businesses in a truly competitive market, in sharp contrast to the

“mafia” of uneducated and “corrupt” marketers who have managed the production and distribution of low-budget, straight-to-video Nigerian films since the early 1990s.⁷⁶ This plainly classist suggestion serves to obscure what may well be restrictive and anti-competitive about Nigeria’s new and strengthening oligopoly system, placing a premium on the polished self-presentation of suited businessmen and reading into such gentility a sense of Nollywood as finally having “arrived” as a legitimate industry on a stage shared with the likes of IMAX.

Yet because Nigerians like Murray-Bruce and Mkparu founded and have overseen the country’s multiplex chains, the chains themselves are imbued with a powerful sense of indigeneity, despite the preponderance of American soft drinks and other imported products, and despite the fact that Hollywood films make up at least half of each theater’s offerings at any given time.⁷⁷ Indeed, Silverbird and Filmhouse remain, justifiably, sources of considerable pride among many Nigerians—shiny examples of what Nigerian ingenuity can achieve. They are also important components of what AbdouMaliq Simone calls “the worlding of African cities.” The theatrical innovations of Murray-Bruce and Mkparu suggest that, in Simone’s terms, both men have been “attempting to elaborate a transurban, ‘worlded’ domain of operations” for big-screen cinema in Nigeria, “try[ing] to balance the need to maintain some functional sense of local ‘rootedness’ while at the same time gaining access to opportunities that are more transnational, even global, in scope.”⁷⁸

Emblematic of this access is Murray-Bruce’s early involvement with the Miss World beauty-pageant franchise, through which he developed the continent-specific “spinoff” competition Miss Africa World. A *de facto* diplomacy organ, Miss World would eventually facilitate lucrative partnerships between Murray-Bruce’s Silverbird Group and Coca-Cola. Both brands, the beauty pageant and the soft drink, would give Murray-Bruce some of the capital necessary to construct Nigeria’s first multiplex in 2004. Murray-Bruce has since been hailed in trade publications as a capitalist champion whose enterprise is, almost by definition, Hollywood-friendly. After all, if Silverbird was good enough for the Miss World and Miss Universe franchises, having helped to “internationalize” the pageants through the incorporation of Nigerian events and delegates, then it was—and is—surely good enough for MPAA member studios like Disney and Warner Bros.⁷⁹

Symbolic of this widely touted return to the idea of Nigeria as a space of cinematic invention—a place of particular promise for film production, distribution, and exhibition—is a controversial planned community called Eko Atlantic, which is currently being constructed on land “reclaimed” from the Gulf of Guinea. Set to be surrounded by a massive concrete barrier (already dubbed the “Great Wall of Lagos”) in expectation of worsening storms and sea-level rise, this “planned city,” adjacent to swank Victoria Island and modeled on Dubai and Abu Dhabi, is meant to be a haven for the rich. Eko Atlantic is being set up to serve as the new financial center of West Africa—a hub of commerce on a par with the major

capitals of global finance, as well as a place where “300,000 prosperous and technologically sophisticated people will live in sleek modern condos, fully equipped with fiber-optic Internet connections, elaborate security systems, and a twenty-five-foot-high seawall protecting them from the attacking ocean.”⁸⁰

Eko Atlantic vividly recalls the “charter cities” movement associated with the American economist Paul Romer. As planned, it suggests precisely the sort of “urban free enterprise zone” that Romer has advocated—and IMAX wants in.⁸¹ Tellingly, Eko Atlantic’s sales office promotes a vast (though yet to be constructed) IMAX theater as an indispensable part of this “shiny new appendage to a megacity slum,” the latest in a long line of Hollywood bequests.⁸² Broadly speaking, this is a public-private partnership involving the Lagos State Government (acting with the full support of the federal government) and majority funding from the China Communications Construction Company, which has been conducting business in Lagos since at least 2007. As such, Eko Atlantic is just one example of the clustering of elite, multinational interests around the promise of big-screen spectatorship—a clustering to which Nigeria has periodically played host since at least the late colonial period.

Rather than the realization of a more sophisticated and durable model of urban exhibition than that associated with previous organizational regimes, the manufactured landscape of Eko Atlantic will be no less likely to result in breakdown, despite special “protection” from climate change. In this sense, the commercial detritus so characteristic of Nigeria toward the end of the twentieth century—the empty cinemas bulldozed or converted into churches and warehouses, those graveyards of moviegoing that, in typical accounts, symbolize a broader urban decline and neoliberal transformation—is not an anomaly of military rule but a promise of late capitalism, which repeatedly stages cinema’s death and resurrection. We might recall that the filmmaker Douglas Trumbull turned his back on a Hollywood that, he complained, was “multiplexing itself to death”—only to become a vice president of the IMAX Corporation.⁸³ Like Chevron’s aging infrastructure, abandoned but not decommissioned (and leaching pollutants into the Niger Delta), the defunct movie theater may be seen in Benjaminian terms simply as “symptom and substance of history’s destructive force.” It may be a ruinous inducement to those willing “to take the measure of the ‘fragility’ of capitalist culture from the decaying structures left scattered across our urban and rural geographies,” to quote Ann Laura Stoler.⁸⁴

Nigeria provides plentiful examples of the “ends of cinema.”⁸⁵ The Port Harcourt film laboratory established by the Muhammed-Obasanjo regime “barely had a trial run” before its ruination.⁸⁶ Sanya Dosunmu’s film-processing center in Ikeja was a victim of inflation.⁸⁷ A popular destination for over twenty-five years, Idera Cinema in Mushin, Lagos—part of the Mattar Bros. theater chain—was purchased by Abraham Evangelistic Ministries in 1988 and promptly transformed into a place of worship; like other components of Nigeria’s once-thriving Lebanese-owned

exhibition circuits, it is now in a state of disrepair, all but unrecognizable as a former movie house amid the generally crumbling infrastructures of congested Mushin, abandoned even by the evangelicals, who have newer, glitzier megachurches to attend. The depopulation of Nigerian exhibition sites is not, then, necessarily a failure of individual initiative—of consumers to brave crowds and buy tickets, or of law enforcement officials to ensure safe conditions of consumption. It is plainly continuous with the broader attenuation of moviegoing as entertainment alternatives proliferate and governments—in Europe and North America as well as West Africa—permit the private sector to dictate the terms of big-screen spectatorship according to business models that are rarely viable for very long, if at all.

Though conventional wisdom dates the threatened obsolescence of the big screen only to the late 1940s and the rise of television and suburbanization, the specific infrastructures of theatrical film have always been imperiled, even in the United States. From the nickelodeon's decline to the closure of hundreds of theaters unable to be wired for sound at the dawn of the Depression, film history, when viewed through the prism of infrastructure, suggests nothing less than the constancy of disruption and disrepair. Nigeria's tumultuous experience of the big screen is not unique. Movie theaters are transformed into churches and drugstores throughout the world, or else they are merely abandoned, left to (further) decay as their fossilized marquees continue to advertise the first-run films of long ago. Again, Nigeria's transmogrified infrastructures are not isolated examples, utterly eccentric in their Africanity. Long before Idera was turned into one of Mushin's many houses of worship, the Regent Theater in Harlem became the First Corinthian Baptist Church; Chicago's Central Park Theatre became the House of Prayer Church of God in Christ; the three-thousand-seat Loew's Valencia, once the most successful movie theater in Queens, New York, was sold to the Tabernacle of Prayer for ten dollars; the Warner Hollywood, one of Broadway's grandest cinemas, was reborn as the Times Square Church; the Academy in Englewood was turned into a chapel; in downtown Los Angeles, the United Artists Theatre was leased by the televangelist Gene Scott before becoming the Ace Hotel, while the nearby Warner became a jewelry store; the Golden Gate, in East Los Angeles, became a CVS; the Fox on Venice Beach became a swap meet; and so on.⁸⁸ Constructed to signal a specifically cinematic modernity, roofed movie theaters are also built to be repurposed, their metamorphic fluidity a sign of just how difficult it is for *any* company to remain in business. Even the heavily capitalized, IMAX-equipped likes of the Filmhouse venue in Lekki cannot survive on film exhibition alone. Nor are mere concession sales sufficient to make up for any deficits. Indeed, Nigeria's multiplexes, touted as magnets for movie lovers, must constantly accommodate activities other than film spectatorship. Famous names give well-attended talks while standing beneath blank cinema screens. Corporate retreats are held in IMAX halls, much as they were once convened at the Glover Cinema when that venue was still a "primitive" open-air theater.

While the sheer impermanence of theatrical exhibition is not a uniquely Nigerian phenomenon, the big screen has offered signal demonstrations of development, progress, and modernity in the postcolony. In Nigeria, the complex materiality of theatrical film has, at various historical moments, lent the post-colonial state a powerful symbol of independence—a liberal modernity distinct from the minimalism of the mobile cinemas once introduced by Britain—even as the big screen has played host to new imperialisms. The multiplex’s aesthetics, its poetics, have contributed to the much-desired impression that Nigeria is coeval with the United States, an occupant of the same order of time, and a beneficiary of an identical (indeed, standardized and sanitized) modernity. This remains the case even when such facilities cease to be functional—when they break down or are abandoned, whether by capital or by human bodies diverted by Pentecostalism, pandemics, and the promise of “safe,” individualized alternatives to the big screen. “Whether they are being built or crumbling, infrastructures simultaneously index the achievements and limits, expectations and failures, of modernity,” write Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta.⁸⁹ As products of itinerant capital and of equally unbounded technical and logistical systems, they connect the global South and the global North both materially and affectively, even as they also register and reproduce profound inequalities.

Nigeria’s specific histories of film exhibition vividly illustrate Doreen Massey’s reminder that “no spaces are stable, given for all time; all spaces are transitory and one of the most crucial things about spatiality . . . is that it is always being made.”⁹⁰ The sheer changeability of theater space is not a uniquely Nigerian characteristic, nor is it a recent development. The notion that American movie theaters are only now beginning to disappear amid the massification of Netflix and other streaming services—memorably illustrated in Paul Schrader’s film *The Canyons* (2013), which repeatedly features still images of the crumbling infrastructures of former exhibition sites, as if to suggest the unprecedented depreciation of moviegoing in the twenty-first century—distorts and obscures a complicated history. Nigeria’s role in that history requires serious consideration.