

“The Nigeria Solution”

Creative Destruction and the Making of a Media Capital

“To ignore the phenomenon of the United States’ influence upon Nigeria and the Nigerian media is to take flight from reality.”

—NOSA OWENS-IBIE, “PROGRAMMED FOR DOMINATION: U.S. TELEVISION BROADCASTING AND ITS EFFECTS ON NIGERIAN CULTURE,” 141

“I got a job waiting for me in Lagos.”

—ENTERTAINER MAISIE RAVIER (ANN SOTHERN) IN MGM’S *CONGO MAISIE* (H.C. POTTER, 1940)

There is a moment in the Fox film *Ambassador Bill* (Sam Taylor, 1931) when the eponymous diplomat, played by Will Rogers as a folksy former “cattle king” from Oklahoma, confronts a United States senator in a fictional Balkan country beset by revolution. As the ambassador to said country, Rogers’s Bill must quell the unrest by promising robust American investments in infrastructure. But the blustering Republican senator, intent on preventing undue “intervention,” protests Bill’s plans. “No meddling in foreign politics!” he bellows. The plainspoken Bill responds with a calm defense of the “commercial treaty” that he has painstakingly devised: “It gives America the contract to build the railroads, put in the telephones, sell ‘em all their farm machinery and everything!” The corpulent senator, who is prone to pontificating, counters: “Yes, but this country isn’t in a happy enough state to warrant the investment of American capital.” Bill can only laugh. “American capital,” he declares, “ain’t been in a very happy state even at home, has it?” The senator remains unmoved. “It’s absolutely contrary to the spirit of American government to mix or meddle in the affairs of any other country!” he shouts. Again, Bill must chuckle. “Yeah?” he replies. “Tell that to the Marines!”

Rogers’s seemingly casual joke is, in fact, an apt description of the use of military intervention to secure US capital gains. It invokes the very twinning of public and private interests that, Nick Turse reveals, has long centered on the African

continent.¹ Fittingly, *Ambassador Bill* gives the US armed forces the final word on the capitalist penetration of foreign countries: the Balkans might not wish to fill American coffers, but the Marines will open their markets anyway. The later Fox film *The Big Gamble* (Richard Fleischer, 1961), which depicts European neocolonialist incursions into Central Africa, puts the matter just as crudely. It begins with Stephen Boyd's Irish protagonist announcing his plan to move "to Africa"—to "live there, to work, go into business." "Exploit the natives, you mean," retorts a sharp-tongued relative. "Till they wake up one morning and cut your throat. Come on now, be practical—come out of the eighteenth century." Asked to explain "why Africa," Boyd's character answers bluntly, "It's a gold mine," adding: "With a little capital, a man can make a killing."

Unlike the fictional Sylvania of *Ambassador Bill* and the factual but broadly conceived Central Africa of *The Big Gamble*, Nigeria served as an explicit and carefully historicized reference point in American films produced in the 1950s and 1960s—which is to say, in the period of Nigeria's transition to independence. Today, Hollywood's permanent investments in Nigeria, complemented by cross-border short-term expenditures by private equity firms (from The Carlyle Group to Bain Capital), increasingly accommodate local partners.² These joint ventures serve as significant reminders that the globalization of Hollywood has necessarily entailed considerable local economic and political support. As François Chesnais points out, "Corporations from countries still listed by the UN as 'developing countries' are now part of many global oligopolies."³ In Nigeria, FilmHouse, Silverbird, and other firms serve as foreign contract vendors for Hollywood studios and soft-drink companies alike, performing numerous high-value functions, particularly as sites of audience research, data collection, and various experiments in "synergy" and product placement. It is not so much that these offshore locations are cost reducers for Hollywood corporations but that they function as increasingly important testing grounds for advertising and marketing strategies. Indeed, IMAX is hardly saving money by investing in a planned community—Eko Atlantic—that may never come to pass. It is, however, acquiring greater knowledge about a market that it already exploits via a number of Nigerian "partners." Such knowledge is prized precisely because it is not, in the parlance of multinational corporations, "in-house knowledge" but rather "organizationally and geographically distant knowledge," the valuation of which represents one of the intangible assets—one of the "new forms of investment"—distinct from foreign direct investment.⁴

What H.F. Iskander, the general manager of Chevron's Kuwait office, called "the Nigeria solution"—a formula for "business success" devised and developed in Nigeria and later exported to other markets—has been embraced by Hollywood since at least the 1950s. Employed by Iskander in the late 1990s, such rhetoric—the language of Nigerian exceptionalism—is familiar from Hollywood's efforts to exploit Nigeria as a site of experimentation and a source of what Iskander called "corporate memory": "The key to our business," Iskander said, "is to tap that memory, and bring out the solution that we used to solve a problem in Nigeria



FIGURE 3. Independence on film: an American director records footage of Nigerian diplomats in Washington, DC, on October 1, 1960.

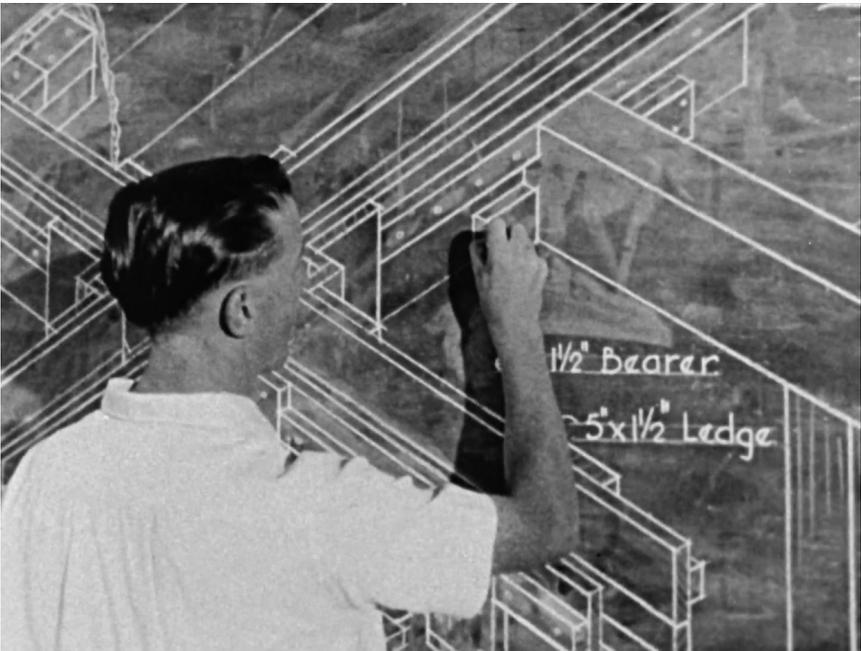


FIGURE 4. “Nigeria is becoming more and more a world of plans and machines.” The documentary *Nigeria: Giant in Africa* (1960), a production of the National Film Board of Canada, focuses on the exportation to Nigeria of Western corporate “know-how.”

in order to solve the same problem in China or Kuwait.”⁵ This chapter considers the careful application and elaboration of “the Nigeria solution” in the realm of theatrical film. When, for instance, Hollywood participates in the planning of a “cutting-edge” project like Eko Atlantic, it does so partly in the hope of one day translating what it learns from Nigeria into new ways of doing business elsewhere in the world, including in the United States. But to focus exclusively on Hollywood’s involvement in the “futuristic” aspects of Eko Atlantic, highlighting the planned function of multiplexes therein, is to ignore the industry’s longstanding role in shaping the built environment of Lagos and other Nigerian cities. Eko, a prime example of “geoengineering” as a neoliberal response to biosphere degradation, is merely the techno-utopian, allegedly climate-change-resistant (but already environmentally damaging) culmination of efforts that have been underway since the colonial period.

EXCAVATIONS AND OTHER EXCHANGES

Nigeria’s environmental affordances, so essential to the development of global capitalism, have also been liabilities for big-screen cinema. They include weather that encourages mildew, particularly in film projectors. Throughout the colonial era and beyond, film breakages were common, and costly. Yet the problem proved motivating, with Kodak and DuPont pursuing the development of more durable film stock, which would be far less likely to tear at the sprocket-holes, for use throughout Nigeria.⁶ After 1953, a byproduct of tin mining—the mineral columbite, a rare heat-resistant steel alloy—became increasingly valuable to the United States. “Virtually all of it,” noted W. Alphaeus Hunton in 1960, “comes from one place, Nigeria.”⁷ This was hardly a one-way process limited to imperialist extraction, however. Coincident with the appropriation of Nigerian tin and columbite was the exploitation of another natural resource: Nigerians themselves. Touted throughout the 1950s as likely purchasers of American commodities, Nigerians were, by the end of that decade, given a steady supply of Hollywood films that had rather cannily been recycled as television broadcasts and packaged with countless commercial advertisements for imported products. This was all part of a new kind of public-private partnership known as Nigerian state television, one whose remit unavoidably recalled fundamental aspects of the establishment of broadcasting as a sponsor-supported system in the United States.

Television advertising in Nigeria was, from its inception, firmly tied to the needs of American capital, with a growing number of Nigerian organizations pursuing legitimacy through their own, reciprocal appeals to Hollywood. In the fall of 1959, the newly established Nigerian Advertising Service (NAS), touted as “Nigeria’s first indigenous advertising agency” and located in Yaba, a suburb of Lagos, began promoting the needs of those Nigerian government agencies and private firms that were desperately seeking American capital participation and technical



FIGURE 5. American film expert John Tyo, appointed Audio-Visual Advisor to the Nigerian Ministry of Information in 1962.

assistance. NAS and its many clients thus moderated the rise of ethno-regionalist politics with an emphasis on capitalism as a unifying national force, and on “foreign aid” as a common requirement.⁸ In fact, NAS was so successful in its strategic appeals to American interests (which, at the time, hardly needed to be pressured



FIGURE 6. In 1960, the Audio-Visual Society at Indiana University set up a special “Nigerian Project” in preparation for the country’s independence.

into paying attention to Nigeria) that, just two years after its establishment, the International Cooperation Administration (ICA), a US government agency, began dispatching American businessmen to Nigeria to serve as salaried agents of “international expansion” for American media companies.

Founded in 1955, the ICA, a precursor of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), was responsible for devising and executing “foreign assistance” and “nonmilitary security” programs. Shortly before its responsibilities were absorbed by USAID in the fall of 1961, the ICA invited applications for three positions (each carrying the title of “Visiting Professor”) for American “business experts” who would pursue “AV work” in Nigeria.⁹ In 1962, the head of motion-picture production for the California-based System Development Corporation, Dr. John H. Tyo, relocated to Ibadan, a sprawling city some eighty miles northeast of Lagos, where, working under the auspices of USAID, he “advised” the Nigerian Ministry of Information. While headquartered in Ibadan between 1963 and 1965, Tyo, an expert on educational motion pictures, oversaw the production of a number of industrial films.¹⁰ Tyo’s erstwhile employer, Indiana University, had set up its own “Nigerian Project” in preparation for independence in 1960. By the spring of 1961, the university’s celebrated Audio-Visual Society was firmly committed to “establish[ing] such a society in Nigeria,” a country whose newly acquired independence made it seemingly ideal for “the formation of . . . professional fraternities.”¹¹

The ICA’s stated mission was “development”: “doing” audiovisual work in post-colonial Nigeria would entail the introduction of new technologies and the careful inculcation of “proper media uses” in a diverse national population.¹² From the perspective of the ICA and of the business interests that it so nakedly represented in this particular instance, “proper” uses of media were not merely technical but also—and equally importantly—consumerist. American “experts” would teach Nigerians how to “handle” the mechanics of media (especially television as a specific electronic device) while simultaneously promoting an understanding of

broadcast technologies as incitements to consumption of the products that they invariably represented.

THE DRAMATIC APPEAL OF INDEPENDENCE

There is a moment in the Bob Hope comedy *A Global Affair* (Jack Arnold, 1964) in which independent Nigeria emerges as a political bellwether—a guide to “global democracy” and its challenges. Set (and partly shot) at the United Nations, where one day an abandoned infant is found, the film focuses on the competing efforts of member nations to claim guardianship of the child. Prominent among the countries vying for custody is Nigeria, whose delegate crafts a compelling analogy between the “dawn” of the “new Lagos” and the birth of the baby. Both neonates are thus symbolic of “promise” and require “protection.” Should Nigeria be awarded guardianship of the infant, the country will, its delegate maintains, be well equipped to provide “a safe environment” and effective child care. He says of “the new and independent states” of Africa, “We’re among the most progressive democracies in the world, where this child may be raised without fear or prejudice.” Reminiscent of Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa’s speech on the occasion of Nigeria’s admission into the United Nations, the delegate’s disquisition on “African independence”—on the continental achievement of democracy—gives *A Global Affair* a fleeting documentary quality. In fact, by featuring Nigeria so prominently, the film calls to mind the ordoliberal Wilhelm Röpke’s bitter denunciation of the United Nations as an organization that “Western state wisdom had constructed such that Europe’s voice could barely be heard in comparison to the developing countries.”¹³

Cinema was on hand to record and further disseminate what *A Global Affair* celebrates as “Nigerian political speech.” “When Nigerian embassy officials in Washington first raised the country’s flag of independence, they called on a group of Washington film specialists to capture the historic moment on film,” noted one trade paper. Paragon Productions, a so-called “Embassy Row” studio based in Washington, was among the companies that recorded and distributed footage of independence celebrations in the US capital. “They have been especially busy in recent weeks on films about the fascinating but often bewildered representatives of brand new African republics,” the paper continued.¹⁴ Companies like Paragon were prepared not merely to circulate their “Nigerian films” throughout the United States (including via the sale of these 16mm shorts to television stations), but also to ship them to Nigeria, where those newly released from colonial rule might desire images of the global impact of such seismic change.¹⁵

Nigeria had previously been the subject of experiments designed to gauge and shape the visual literacy of its population. In the early 1920s, William Sellers, a medical officer working for the Nigerian government, began studying Nigerian cinema spectators, eventually producing his own films for local distribution.

Sellers's experiments were of interest to more than just the Crown; they also attracted the attention of a number of American individuals and organizations interested in breaking into the Nigerian market.¹⁶ The Carnegie Corporation, one of the most prominent philanthropic organizations in the United States, had been firmly focused on "developing" media literacy in Nigeria since the 1930s, and its commitment to the country—or, at least, to the funding of educational shorts and features to be produced and exhibited therein—only grew during the Cold War, often in ways that directly benefited private companies willing to make their own forays into nontheatrical nonfiction film.¹⁷ Private individuals got into the potentially remunerative act, as well: in 1961, the American attorney Leonard N. Cohen, inspired by the Nigerian magazine *Drum*, requested access to shorts produced by the successors to the Colonial Film Unit, which he hoped to distribute "in the United States for both theatrical and non-theatrical use."¹⁸

Like Nigerian classrooms, churches, factories, clubs, and other nontheatrical locations, Nigerian cinema halls were regular recipients of American largesse as early as the interwar period. By 1940, the Rex Cinema in Lagos was consistently screening American educational films for schoolchildren at discounted rates and with an average attendance of between four and five hundred young spectators.¹⁹ Many of them produced and distributed by major corporations, the films were meant to promote "the American way of life" (and, in particular, those business norms associated with American-style capitalism). Moreover, their audiences constituted key objects of study—groups to be observed by visiting corporate representatives or by "cooperative" colonial officials.²⁰ Such surveillance was increasingly common, and considered commercially as well as politically expedient. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, for instance, the US Department of Defense selected Nigeria for "behavioral research," with the aim of "increasing [America's] capacity to anticipate social breakdown and to suggest remedies," and as part of its contribution to facilitating "the transition from the colonial era to the American Century."²¹

Such a "transition" was premised, in part, on the belief that the British had not done enough to cultivate Nigerian markets, particularly for motion pictures, and that American-style capitalism would have to "step in." In 1965, Kwame Nkrumah would go so far as to assert, in attempting to account for the country's "economic maladjustment," the "total disregard under colonialism of Nigeria's potentialities," though he would reserve even sterner words for colonialism's American successors, inveighing against "the brazen onslaught of international capitalists": "Here is 'empire,' the empire of finance capital, in fact if not in name, a vast sprawling network of inter-continental activity on a highly diversified scale that controls the lives of millions of people in the most widely separated parts of the world, manipulating whole industries and exploiting the labor and riches of nations for the greedy satisfaction of a few."²²

By the late 1950s, a growing number of American films, made in anticipation of Nigerian independence, were depicting the country's readiness to "open up"



FIGURE 7. Cory Devlin as a Nigerian astronomer in Hollywood's *12 to the Moon* (1960).

to capitalism—a term taken from US Department of Commerce “pix specialist” Nathan D. Golden, who had used it to describe Nigeria’s “maturity” as early as 1944.²³ A case in point is the eleven-minute documentary *Moslem People of Nigeria* (Raphael G. Wolff, 1960), produced by Photographics International in collaboration with the Hollywood-based Raphael G. Wolff Studios, Inc., which distributed the film to American audiences.²⁴ An example of sales promotion presented as ethnography, *Moslem People of Nigeria* offered a glimpse of the potential popularity of American products—including Hollywood films—“even among” Muslim populations.

For its part, the sci-fi film *12 to the Moon* (David Bradley, 1960), distributed by Columbia just months before Nigerian independence, depicted Nigeria as a source not just of promise but also of genius: a Nigerian PhD—introduced by the film’s narrator (Francis X. Bushman) as “the great astronomer Asmara Markonen” (Cory Devlin)—is among the dozen astronauts, each representing a different “major country,” selected to make the first trip to the moon, a journey intended to proclaim the celestial body international territory. That Nigeria is central to this vision of internationalism is made clear during the film’s opening credits, which are superimposed over a table on which the word “Nigeria” appears on a place card next to those for the United States, Germany, Israel, and eight other “important” countries. Nigeria is here capable of making “world-shattering history,” having produced one of the globe’s leading scientists, a man who serves as the chief navigator of a rocket ship bound for the moon, and who, in that capacity, helps steer the spacecraft away from threatening meteors and toward its destination. In *12 to the Moon*, distributed by a studio with permanent offices in Lagos, Nigeria has earned a seat at the world’s most illustrious table—a development literalized in the film’s opening-credit sequence.

FROM CINERAMA TO "SHELLARAMA"

The dawn of Nigeria's political independence saw Hollywood studios like Columbia aggressively pursuing expansion in the country. Trade fairs helped to promote Hollywood films as well as associated American technologies, with Cinerama exhibits proving particularly popular in Lagos and other cities.²⁵ Cinerama was a widescreen process involving three synchronized projectors and a curved screen, patented by the Cinerama Corporation in the early 1950s. Promoted as an entirely "new technique" that involved "motion pictures breaking away from their old, narrow restrictions," Cinerama was an ideal ambassador of American corporate ingenuity. It was also a powerful imperialist agent in its own right, as the widely distributed and immensely popular promotional film *This Is Cinerama* (Merian C. Cooper, 1952) attests: "We have taken our new technique abroad for a look at the world overseas through our new medium," announces the film's narrator, well-known newsreel commentator Lowell Thomas. Cinerama's capacity to "revolutionize the technique of motion-picture storytelling" was thus firmly tied to its sheer export power—to, in the case of *This Is Cinerama*, a (mostly) dialogue-free, (arguably) non-narrative spectacle sure to be widely appreciated, including by illiterate and otherwise "untutored" African audiences.

The narrator of *This Is Cinerama* is quick to point to the global palatability of filmic spectacles, suggesting the titular technology's utility in "infiltrating" foreign markets and cultivating a popular appetite for (more) Hollywood products. *This Is Cinerama* thus evokes the legacies of magic lantern shows and other proto- and early-cinematic displays designed to capture and colonize the African imagination. "The pictures you are about to see have no plot," proclaims Thomas. "They have no stars. This is not a stage play, nor is it a feature picture nor a travelogue nor a symphonic concert nor an opera. But it is a combination of all of them." The Cinerama system, which used three adjacent 27mm wide-angle lenses, boasted seven channels of discrete stereo sound, and projected at twenty-six frames per second on a wide, curved, 146-degree screen, was introduced in Nigeria via a series of temporary "promotional theaters" erected by the Cinerama Corporation and Cinestar International Inc. for the purpose of marketing the technology. Like a number of American firms before it, the Cinerama Corporation expected to be so welcomed in Nigeria as to be able to construct permanent facilities on the government's dime—to "invest in the country at the country's expense."²⁶

Perfected independently of Hollywood in the late 1940s, the Cinerama camera and projection system—the brainchild of Fred Waller, whose previous inventions included water skis—was first demonstrated to studio executives on a converted tennis court on Long Island, precisely the sort of makeshift exhibition space that would later be constructed for the system's unveiling in Nigeria. John Belton argues that the social phenomenon of Cinerama, a system that cost from \$75,000 to \$140,000 to install, "serves as a remarkable index of postwar leisure-time



FIGURE 8. Cinematography and oil extraction in *Shellarama* (1965).

activities.” The system’s popular travelogue format “not only [took] advantage of the increased interest by Americans in domestic sightseeing and travel abroad but function[ed] itself to stimulate tourism.” Designed by the McCann-Erickson agency, the advertising campaign for *This is Cinerama* stressed the novelty of the experience. Cinerama’s “incomparable” effects thus resonated with ahistorical celebrations of political independence as an unprecedented phenomenon on the African continent. But they were also a way of promoting travel—including by Americans to the continent of Africa. Indeed, the first five Cinerama features were travelogues. Back in the United States, however, the Cinerama theater chain collapsed by the early 1970s, making the full realization of the company’s Nigerian dreams unfeasible.²⁷

For a time, however, the Cinerama Corporation exploited Nigeria in numerous ways, including as a shooting location. Sponsored by the Shell International Petroleum Company, the short film *Shellarama* (Richard Cawston, 1965) opens with a team of cameramen, guided by prospectors, making their way through the muddy waters of the oil-rich Niger Delta, their elaborate equipment—instruments of image recording associated with the large-format Technirama process—complementing some equally intricate mechanisms of resource extraction. Featuring pre- and post-title sequences set in Nigeria, *Shellarama* suggests the country’s significance not merely for the titular company but also, by extension, for the world economy of which its chief product—petroleum—is a driving force. Through the motif of automobility, the film demonstrates that Nigeria powers the world, as passenger cars and other vehicles are “awakened” by gas derived from the Niger Delta. In New York, Paris, Rome, and other capitals of finance, automobiles come to glamorous

life. Lest Nigeria seem “pre-modern” by comparison—a producer but not a user of oil and gas—two Nigerian businessmen are later shown commuting via mopeds to their shiny, state-of-the-art offices in Lagos. *Shellarama* thus visualizes Nigeria’s centrality to global capitalism, setting up the country as a fount of crude oil and, as such, a source of global activity—the veritable engine of the world.

The nineteenth of twenty-one films exhibited in the Super Technirama-70 format, and one of the few to be presented in 70mm Cinerama at select venues, *Shellarama* vividly illustrates how Nigeria—typically assumed to have always been beyond Hollywood’s ambit—has, in fact, and at various stages of its incorporation into the capitalist world-system, been exploited cinematically to serve a range of Euro-American interests. For *Shellarama* was designed not only to promote the eponymous petroleum company, which spent one million dollars producing and distributing the film, but also to sell a certain idea of Hollywood innovation. Five years after independence, Nigeria continued to seem sufficiently promising for Shell to turn to the country in the hope that some of its postcolonial shine would rub off on the corporation. Nigeria was used not merely for realism’s sake (the Niger Delta really *did* provide much of Shell’s oil) but also to give Shell a “progressive image,” in the words of one of the corporation’s production managers, who estimated that by the end of 1965 *Shellarama* would be seen by over twenty million people around the world. It was, he proclaimed, more than “just an advertising film.”²⁸ A newly independent nation and a freshly perfected set of filmmaking strategies had come together to give Shell a new and specifically cinematic status. Through its associations with state-of-the-art technologies of recording, processing, and playback—from Technicolor and 6-track magnetic sound to Super Technirama-70 and Cinerama—*Shellarama* functioned to advertise inventiveness in the fields of film production and exhibition.²⁹ At the same time, it served as a celebration of postcolonial Nigeria, presenting the country as having “the confidence of a ‘progressive’ industrial society.” The source of a “stereophonic chorus” of multilingual go-getters, Nigeria was optimistic, energetic, and even “exuberant”—a “major capital of the world,” readily signifying “speed and power.”³⁰

Such associations survived *Shellarama*’s reduction to more manageable dimensions, as the promotional short was transformed from large-format exclusivity to small-gauge ubiquity. Initially released in over fifty ultramodern cinemas in twenty countries, *Shellarama* later became something far less rare—something that could be shown in classrooms, factories, offices, church basements, and town squares, as well as on television. The short’s growing accessibility as a “nontheatrical” film did not diminish its promotional potential—its capacity to advertise Shell while simultaneously advancing certain convictions regarding Hollywood capital and what it could achieve worldwide, even in the alluvium of the Niger Delta.³¹

Shell’s growth in the 1960s was due, in part, to Nigeria, and so, for related reasons, was Hollywood’s. Both entities—one a multinational corporation, the other a broadening set of private yet state-aided interests associated with the production,



FIGURE 9. Shell strikes black gold in *Shellarama*.



FIGURE 10. Powered by Shell: the modern Nigerian in *Shellarama*.

distribution, and exhibition of screen media—had exploited Nigeria long before the making of *Shellarama*, and they would continue to do so long after the film’s completion. Capitalist, colonialist, invasive, and extractive, both have been able to benefit from Nigeria in ways unrecognized by neoclassical economics, maintaining interest in the country despite the occasional absence of profits and surpluses, and aggrandizing their commitment to this “giant of Africa” even in the face of local resistance and scornful warnings from the international business community.

Since the early 1960s, Shell has maintained two film libraries in Nigeria—one in Lagos and another (shared with BP) in Port Harcourt—from which it distributes its own productions as well as the occasional “old” Hollywood film either licensed to the corporation or available in the public domain. Both cinematic categories have served similar interests, the former functioning in an overtly promotional capacity, and the latter as entertainment for Shell employees and others who, it is hoped, will recognize and appreciate the corporation’s role in circulating Hollywood divertissements.³²

Especially attractive to the Cinerama Corporation were the “untapped” lands of Nigeria’s Eastern Region—precisely those plots in and around Enugu that the newly established Cinema Corporation of Nigeria had, in the previous decade, identified as ripe for the establishment of a “movie colony” modeled on Hollywood (understood as a discrete geographic location consisting of so many studio facilities). All-important Lagos could hardly be ignored by the Cinerama Corporation, but the Eastern Region offered, in addition to ample spaces on which to erect the vast apparatus of the Cinerama exhibition system, a well-entrenched television sector—a “semi-commercial” broadcasting system, the product of the kind of public-private partnership that the Cinerama Corporation hoped to enjoy in Nigeria. While several London financiers were able to partner with the Enugu-based Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation by the fall of 1960 (just in time for independence), the Cinerama Corporation arrived in Nigeria arguably too late to secure the substantial investment of the by-then floundering national economy, despite—or perhaps because of—the latter’s commitment to attracting foreign capital.

Post-independence Nigeria may, in other words, have succeeded in tempting the Cinerama Corporation to begin paying close, committed attention to the country, but the American firm’s interest was belated at best—the product of its desperate efforts to secure additional foreign markets a decade after Cinerama’s domestic unveiling, and in the wake of the success of competitors like VistaVision, the Todd-AO system, and other large-screen and widescreen processes. Nevertheless, the Cinerama Corporation’s sometime partner, Cinestar, was able to secure funding from public as well as private Nigerian sources in order to further its infiltration of the national market, including with plastic-and-nylon “CineDomes” that could be used to screen Cinerama films, but that stood in stark (and sometimes pitiable, as when the fabric was nicked and the domes deflated) contrast to the far more durable lattice-shell structure of, say, the famous Cinerama Dome on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood.³³

While no permanent Cinerama theaters were actually constructed in Nigeria, the promotion of Cinerama as a specifically American technology and “exciting” system of exhibition was intended to further cultivate local interest in Hollywood exports. Throughout the 1960s, much as Shell was using films like *Shellarama* to signal its beneficence in Nigeria, American publications were endeavoring to

disentangle the international trade in Hollywood films from any suggestion of imperialism, as in articles that explicitly celebrated African independence and the ongoing anti-imperialist cause while simultaneously promoting Hollywood’s domination of African markets. “Africa has set itself against all external imperialisms,” announced a 1960 article that praised Hollywood’s expansionist efforts through recourse to the Cold War rhetoric of “containment” of communism. American films could be counted as part of the “big [Western] diplomatic offensive in Africa against Russian plans to capture the confidence and sympathy of the millions of inhabitants of an entire continent,” and thus could not be considered imperialist in any meaningful sense, given that the only imperialism that truly “threatened” post-independence African countries, with their “natural” affection for capitalism, was that exercised by the Soviet Union.³⁴

Anticipating Stuart Hall’s conception of the “legitimate materialism” of subaltern populations (a materialism whose “legitimacy” derives solely, or mostly, from its belatedness), the article went on to address the allegedly expansive African appetite for cinema as not simply an object of consumption in its own right but also a stimulus to other, equally avid engagements with American-style capitalism. Such an inducement was rooted as much in narrative devices as in various extracinematic appeals, including in the form of commercial advertisements and concession sales. These, the article was quick to point out, “provide[d] important revenue” to local exhibitors forced to share the bulk of box-office proceeds with American distributors.

Even this article, however, was attuned to the patently anticompetitive practices of the major Hollywood studios, to the point of contradicting its claim that American internationalism could never be properly imperialist. “In the Union of South Africa,” it went on, “American film distributors are running a monopoly which they would never be permitted by law to operate in the States.” Predicting that “the South African film public” would eventually “arouse the local government into passing bills designed to control the film industry and curb unfair film practices,” the article held out no such hope for “dark” Nigeria, where there appeared to be no appetite—governmental or otherwise—for any “anti-monopolistic” bill.³⁵ What the article did not mention were the signal differences between South Africa’s status as a settler colony, wherein film distribution and exhibition were dominated by white capital and further characterized by the racial segregation of consumption, and Nigeria’s status as a newly formed independent federation whose coalition of conservative parties had no interest in establishing protectionist measures for a national film industry that, at the time, simply did not exist. The South African “film public” envisioned in the article was thus a distinctly white public with all the advantages of the white settler class.

As “the most advanced state” on the continent, South Africa was allegedly equipped to resist Hollywood hegemony, in marked contrast to Nigeria. But South Africa was a site where Hollywood’s domination was all too evident—where, in

fact, only two studios, Twentieth Century-Fox and MGM, enjoyed a monopoly on film distribution. The apartheid government's decision to abolish import duties on films was explicitly designed to inspire the formation of white-owned independent distribution companies, which, by the early 1960s, were integrated with local (and also, of course, white-owned) exhibitors, including at the expense of Hollywood interests.³⁶ Hollywood studios were hardly left uncompensated by the sudden expansion of independent distribution in South Africa, however: the new companies quickly began distributing American reissues, providing ample revenue from the rental of these "old" films.³⁷

Nigeria, by contrast, remained dominated by a Lebanese merchant class whose arrangements with Hollywood studios were established through numerous circuits of exchange that spanned Africa and the Middle East. These diffuse arrangements were powerfully enforced, beginning in 1961, by the Lagos-based American Motion Picture Export Company, Africa (AMPECA), an offshoot of the Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) that, despite its expansive name, focused solely on Anglophone markets in the region of West Africa. AMPECA, which had two offices—one in New York, at 522 Fifth Ave., and one in Apapa, Nigeria, headed by Abe Gotfried—was never meant to be permanent; indeed, its announcement in the Hollywood trade press was accompanied by the promise that it would not be.³⁸ Dubbed "the little State Department," the associated MPEA was a legal cartel founded in 1945 under the protections afforded by the Webb-Pomerene Export Trade Act (1918), headed by Eric Johnston of the US Chamber of Commerce (and, later, president of the MPAA).³⁹ Designed to ensure that American exporters would be exempt from the nation's antitrust laws—that they would be free to "fight monopoly with monopoly" overseas—the MPEA successfully removed and precluded unfavorable trade barriers in Nigeria, among them import duties and remittance taxes.⁴⁰

In contrast to the situation in South Africa, where the apartheid government endeavored to cultivate and protect the interests of the white merchant class in the latter's confrontations with the Fox-MGM duopoly, the abolishment of import duties in Nigeria was directly engineered by Hollywood studios via the MPEA. While the latter was initially committed to the equal distribution of opportunities and profits among all member studios, its emphasis on collective action was merely a temporary measure, a means of establishing an effective overseas presence while simultaneously preparing for increased competition.⁴¹ It was Johnston who proposed that the West African Development Company (as AMPECA was initially known) be organized under the Webb-Pomerene Act to enable Hollywood capital to pursue any and all means of securing its interests in the subregion, with its newly independent countries like "English-speaking Nigeria" (as Johnston happily called it).⁴² Based in Lagos, AMPECA was designed to transform Nigeria into the pivot of a market that also encompassed, among other countries, Ghana and Liberia.⁴³ Johnston's goals were clear and quickly realized by 1961: "Nigeria,

with its 172 cinemas all privately and mostly Lebanese-owned, serves as a distribution point for American films in anglophone West Africa.⁴⁴ At the time, AMPECA's competition in the field of film distribution was minimal; it included such small- and medium-size distributors as the Indian-owned Nankani Company and the Lebanese-owned Captan Brothers, both of which relied rather heavily on Hollywood films.⁴⁵

In Nigeria, United Artists (UA) proved most competitive. It was the first major Hollywood company to substantially expand its material presence in the country, where it established permanent offices just a few months after Nigerian independence. Since UA had no production sites to support and was primarily in the business of distribution, it enjoyed a pronounced global mobility and was, throughout the 1960s, the single most aggressive American film company operating in foreign theatrical markets. UA's steady expansionism even extended into several Soviet bloc countries, where, beginning in 1958, it managed to sell many of its films—a kind of Cold War victory that no other American distributor experienced (or even pursued) at the time.⁴⁶ Functioning solely as a distributor of independent productions, UA was, in Tino Balio's words, “an ideal example of a modern, that is, post-1950 motion picture company.”⁴⁷ The crux of UA's modernity can be seen in its powerful presence in postcolonial Nigeria. The country was hardly beyond the radar of Hollywood's increasingly internationalized political economy, but UA, in particular, did much to promote itself as a vanguard outfit by exploiting its ties to Lagos. Trade papers routinely touted UA's “Nigerian operations” throughout the 1960s, when there were well over one hundred licensed commercial movie houses in the country.⁴⁸

Entrenched in post-independence Nigeria, UA enjoyed the powerful backing of AMPECA and the MPEA, sister agencies that, by the early 1960s, amid the globalization of financial markets and the rapid growth of private international financial activity, were firmly focused on the “new” Nigeria, seen as a potential source of major profits.⁴⁹ When it was established at the dawn of Nigerian independence, the Lagos-based AMPECA was headed by men from the MPAA. Johnston was its first chairman of the board, while Ralph Hetzel, an executive vice president of the MPAA, was its first president. Other leaders, such as its vice president, George C. Vietheer, came directly from the US Department of Commerce; still others, such as its secretary, Herbert J. Erlanger, had close ties to the State Department (via the MPEA), thus recalling Will Hays's description of the MPAA's precursor as “almost an adjunct of our State Department.”⁵⁰ General manager Jack L. Labow, who had an office in Lagos beginning in 1961, was a Canadian-born executive in RKO's international sales department before Johnston appointed him to AMPECA. In addition, Labow ran, out of his Lagos headquarters, one of thirty-eight foreign branches of United Artists, and his close association with UA enabled that company to thrive in Nigeria, including at the expense of American competitors.⁵¹ In the early 1960s, Lagos was one of only seven MPEA outposts abroad.⁵² (The others

were London, Paris, Frankfurt, Rome, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, and Jakarta.) That Nigeria was assigned such significance among foreign markets has much to do with its population size and the rapid rate of urbanization, but it was also premised on the assumption, however essentialist, that Nigerians were uniquely film-literate and even “movie-hungry.”

A 1960 article in the American trade press outlined this appetite, along with the “expansion pains” that had led the MPEA to focus, eventually, on Nigeria, pinning its “African hopes” on this one, “exceptional” country. The account, composed as it is of primitivist, neocolonialist rhetoric intended to position Africa and Africans as ripe for the plucking, is well worth quoting at length:

Swept by raging fires of nationalism, Africa burst into the New World for American films as the Dark Continent exploded to independence, splintering its freed colonies into opposing shards of self-sovereignty. Safaris of MPAA-MPEA executives roamed Africa, south of the Sahara, blazing trails to exploit the area, one of the last underdeveloped markets. Long a dumping ground for films, Africa loomed as a future source of profits for the film industry, confronted with increasing competition abroad.⁵³

Its sheer primitivism notwithstanding, the prose is notable for its insistence on the exploratory acumen and (literally) path-breaking power of executives from the MPAA and MPEA. Yet rather than “blazing trails to exploit the area,” these men merely confirmed the circuits of exchange that were already very much in place, thanks in large part to the entrenched Lebanese merchant class and to avenues of trade that long predated colonialism. AMPECA would, for instance, merely come to control Lebanese-owned distribution circuits, including NDO and CINE Films.⁵⁴ The derogation of African markets as representing a collective “dumping ground for films” is similarly misleading, of course, suggesting as it does that MPAA member studios would, via the MPEA and AMPECA, eventually engage in something other than cultural dumping. Indeed, the article’s seemingly unashamed use of the word “exploit” speaks volumes in this respect—as it does in more recent IMAX press releases, which, with a similar tendentiousness, insist that Nigeria is a “new” market in need of “penetration” and “exploitation.”

Perhaps most patently absurd, however, is the suggestion that decolonization, in creating a series of independent states, successfully differentiated African markets for motion pictures for the very first time. According to the logic of the article, it was only by “splintering . . . into opposing shards of self-sovereignty” that “Africa burst into the New World for American films,” constituting itself as a series of markets of differential sizes and values. What such language obscures is the heterogeneous power of colonial rule to shape the nature and boundaries of trade on the African continent. Prior to Nigerian independence, the MPEA well understood that political, economic, infrastructural, and linguistic conditions in the British colony differed from those in, say, Senegal, and its member studios responded accordingly, importing films in Nigeria from the dollar area (including Liberia,

where import permits were not required, and where there were no restrictions on the transfer of foreign exchange) under open general license.⁵⁵ In Senegal, by contrast, import licenses were required, and American films were typically imported from France, with payments made in francs; buyers were forced to travel to Paris in order to purchase prints for flat fees on five-year contracts.⁵⁶ What was truly new about the so-called “New World for American films [on] the Dark Continent” was AMPECA itself, and its initial plans to construct new theaters in Nigeria; to provide direct distribution of films to said theaters from American studios (rather than from British agents, Ghanaian exhibitors, Lebanese merchants, or Liberian intermediaries); and to aggressively promote and protect American film interests throughout Anglophone West Africa.⁵⁷

Recognizing the popularity of Hollywood films among “French Equatorial African audiences,” the MPEA sought to strategically blur some of the distinctions between Anglophone and francophone markets, citing rural-urban migration as a shared characteristic of these countries and a clear justification for the heightened targeting of the entire West African subregion. In August 1960, Johnston and Hetzel estimated that, despite “heavy competition” from other countries, American films accounted for over half of all features screened theatrically in Mali, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria. Emphasizing migration “from the hills and the countryside to towns and cities where earnings are higher,” these representatives of the MPEA positioned “the need for new theaters” as a function not of Hollywood’s own economic imperatives—of the industry’s plainly imperialist doggedness—but rather of the pronounced consumer desires of newly urbanized (and, by implication, newly solvent) populations. Thus the “new opportunities for U.S. films” that Johnston and Hetzel hailed were inclusive not merely of theatrical exhibition but also of habits of consumption that extended well beyond, but remained firmly tied to, film spectatorship. “High-earning” urban Africans, with their “abundant” disposable income, could “prove” the value of product placement for Hollywood studios that, as Patrick Vonderau has argued, were renewing and extending their commitment to the practice in the 1950s and 1960s, amid considerable competition from television, a medium with its own, pronounced imperatives to advertise.⁵⁸

Individual experts were essential to this transnational enterprise. In 1961, Syracuse University sponsored Emmanuel Fadaka, a service manager at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, on a summer-long tour of US broadcasting operations. While in the United States, Fadaka met with executives at Meredith Corporation, an American media conglomerate based in Des Moines, Iowa (and currently the largest magazine company in the world, following its buyout of Time Inc.). Subsidized by Syracuse, Fadaka’s trip to Meredith was one manifestation of the university’s commitment not simply to cultural exchange but also, more specifically, to the further normalization of the privately owned, competitive commercial broadcasting system associated with the United States. At the time, this particular system was widely considered a useful weapon in the cultural Cold War, a tool of

containment in its own right, given its putative reflection and promotion of consumer “freedoms.”⁵⁹ “Americans supported private ownership of broadcasting and news services abroad,” notes Emily S. Rosenberg of the period, “and they championed the spread of the same advertiser-shaped mass culture developed at home.”⁶⁰ Fadaka’s tour of the United States was an instance of what Michelle Hilmes has called “the aggressive recruitment of other nations into the commercial system.” It was not a unidirectional process but a true system of exchange, in that the Nigerian broadcaster, by learning how to better serve private interests (even under cover of a state-chartered, public-service monopoly like the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation), provided useful fodder for American media interests (including film producers and distributors) eager to invest in the growing solvency of urbanized Nigerians.⁶¹ Fadaka, in other words, was expected to—and did—provide evidence of the expanding Nigerian middle class whose needs, as a service manager, he himself was required to meet.⁶²

Fadaka’s trip to the United States serves as an important reminder that, while representatives of Hollywood frequently visited Nigeria in the early 1960s, numerous Nigerians followed a reverse path as part of a multipronged effort to yoke their newly independent country to the interests of a rapidly diversifying American media system. As early as 1959, the US State Department’s international-exchange service sponsored a four-month study of American broadcasting operations by a delegation from Nigeria.⁶³ Two years later, the State Department subsidized the Nigerian Minister of Education’s trip to New York to inspect radio and television facilities there. Rather than pursue quotas or other forms of protectionism, the education minister merely requested that distributors provide “better U.S. films” for use on Nigerian television. In language that echoed that of the colonial administrators who had so concerned themselves with the capacity of Hollywood products (particularly gangster films) to besmirch the white race, he warned that filmed images of “crime and cowboys” were threatening, via their saturation of Nigerian screens, to undermine “our image of America.” In order to persuade producers and distributors to provide “good broadcast material” (rather than “antiquated and inferior American filmed shows”), the education minister emphasized the elite nature of television viewing in Nigeria in the early 1960s. Since “set ownership [was] limited largely among the political and economic leaders,” and given the influence and purchase power of these particular television watchers, he commented, “the broadcast message has an influence far out of proportion to the actual number of sets.”⁶⁴ His words also aptly describe Hollywood’s longtime stance on film distribution and exhibition in Nigeria, practices whose importance has always been seen as far out of proportion to the actual number of movie theaters in the country. For his part, Christian Scott-Emuakpor, a program assistant at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, traveled to Washington, DC, in the summer of 1961 in order to meet with FCC Commissioner Robert E. Lee. Scott-Emuakpor’s

four-month stay in the United States was meant to forge additional links between the American and Nigerian commercial broadcasting systems.⁶⁵

Discernable in these exchanges are the origins of the present-day attention to the “Afropolitan” consumer eminently capable of investing not merely in moviegoing at the multiplexes, but also in the consumption of concessions and all manner of commodity tie-ins, from music to clothes to cars. Hollywood’s periodic attempts to ascertain the consumer power of Nigerians have therefore spanned several decades, starting in the colonial era and extending to today. Such genealogical connections to the present suggest that Hollywood’s interest in Nigeria was not generated by the twenty-first-century discourse of “Africa Rising.” Rather, this interest accompanied and even predated the excitement of independence.

In 1960, the US Department of Commerce estimated that 50 percent of Hollywood’s revenue was “accounted for by foreign distribution,” including in newly independent Nigeria.⁶⁶ “As the world spotlight turns on Africa [as a result of decolonization], there will be more and more attention focused on the image of Americans that is created in the African mind,” announced Eric Johnston in August 1960. “There is, of course, no more important medium of communication or no more important way of reaching the African people than through motion pictures.”⁶⁷ Johnston’s second trip to Nigeria, which took place in the summer of 1960, was hardly without precedent, of course. It came in the wake of a June 1960 visit by a five-man delegation from the US State Department, whose mission was to identify new arenas for “economic cooperation” between the two countries. The department announced that “the primary interest of the U.S. in Nigeria is to see it grow and prosper, within the Free World, as a leader and good example for other African countries.”⁶⁸ As a result of this particular state-sponsored visit, the United States pledged \$225 million in “development aid,” to be disbursed over a five-year period—a major statement of faith in Nigeria’s “growth potential.”⁶⁹

When Johnston first visited Nigeria on the eve of independence he discovered, much to his surprise and chagrin, that only two American films were being screened in commercial cinemas in Lagos, and that these were tattered prints of old westerns that he did not even recognize—B movies from minor studios like Monogram and PRC. Of the eight other films being exhibited commercially during Johnston’s visit, no fewer than five were Indian (“subtitled and . . . primarily action fantasies in color”), while the remaining three came from Britain. “Two needs must be filled in Nigeria if there is to be a massive and loyal following for U.S. product,” Johnston announced. “The first is more better-quality American films, and the second is more and better theatres. The U.S. industry can, and should, be doing something about both.”

Johnston claimed that, in his conversations with Nigerians (including cabinet ministers and other politicians), “most agreed” that enclosed theaters would be profitable in the country—air-conditioned alternatives to the “open-air affairs”



FIGURE 11. Nigeria's theatrical promise often made headlines in the United States.

susceptible to rainy weather—and that American interests should immediately engage in a comprehensive theater-construction program. Such a program would be good not merely for the major studios, whose films—both new releases and reissues—would “undoubtedly” be welcome in roofed venues in Nigeria, but also for enterprises like the Auriema Group (AG), a New York consulting and export company that already had multiple contracts with Nigerian Electronics Ltd., which, with AG’s assistance, established Nigeria’s first air-conditioner factory in Apapa in 1962.⁷⁰ For Johnston and other observers, that factory was further evidence of Nigeria’s “readiness” for more and better movie theaters, precisely the kinds of establishments that would require air conditioners. “What a four-walled, air-conditioned theatre, with multiple showings daily, couldn’t do in Ibadan!” Johnston exclaimed.⁷¹

On those rare occasions when he acknowledged the possibility of variation in “audience taste” across national and cultural contexts, Johnston simply assumed that Hollywood, and not an indigenous film industry, would be able to meet the unique spectatorial needs of Nigerians—would, in fact, be interested in producing films for them and them alone. The chauvinism of these remarks should not distract from what they indicate about the size and value of the Nigerian market as constituted in the Hollywood imaginary. Johnston claimed that Hollywood studios would find sufficient profit in the production and distribution of “Nigerian” films; the only question was whether they *should*. “Should the U.S. make a few pictures not for universal appeal but geared especially to African audiences?” he asked, before citing Nigeria specifically—a slippage common in accounts of the continent (then as now), in which “Africa,” associated with vastness, becomes metonymic of the scale of Nigeria itself. Stressing Hollywood’s “responsibility to Nigeria,” Johnston sought to couch exploitation as camaraderie: “Nigeria is a

growing, dynamic country; its people have the indomitable pride and spirit of Texas, Florida, and California combined. If we are alert to our responsibilities, we can make lasting friends and do welcome business here—good business.”⁷²

“NOW NIGERIA”

Nearly every major distributor of Hollywood films and television programs was active in Nigeria by 1962, including ABC Films, Twentieth Century-Fox, MGM-TV, Warner Bros. TV, Official Films, United Artists, Desilu Film Sales, Four Star Television, Seven Arts, Freemantle International, the National Telefilm Association, the William Morris Agency, and Danny Thomas Enterprises, Inc. These companies sold American feature films along with news and public affairs programs, competing with Britain (US producer-distributors often complained of the “built-in” advantage enjoyed in Nigeria by their British counterparts, including the state-subsidized BBC, which did not need to show a profit and could thus sell programs at low prices) but clearly dominating the market.⁷³ Hollywood’s competition for that market in fact predated independence (a reality that I examine more fully in chapter 2), thereby redressing the familiar, almost axiomatic notion that the United States, in the late colonial period, “had few interests in Africa and tried to remain aloof from European rivalries there.”⁷⁴

Respect for “European rivalries” hardly prevented the United States from aggressively pursuing the breakup of the British monopoly of cables in the Western Hemisphere, or establishing preeminence in radio, film, newspaper wire services, and commercial aviation, and it is equally unconvincing as an alibi for those seeking to avoid considerations of Nigeria’s longstanding relevance to US interests. In 1960, the Stanford Research Institute’s Ministry of Economic Development identified Nigeria’s “tremendous potential and prospects” in various sectors, including commercial theatrical exhibition; it nominated “forward-looking American industries”—Hollywood chief among them—to serve as ideal participants in the shaping of Nigeria’s “bright future.”⁷⁵ The Stanford team was seemingly unaware of the fact that Hollywood was already well-entrenched in Nigeria and that the industry, in a variety of guises, had long been attempting to accomplish what the team prescribed in 1960.

On February 11, 1961, a “special documentary about Nigeria,” *Now . . . Nigeria*, was broadcast in prime time on WABC-TV in New York, preempting a popular variety show.⁷⁶ Hosted by Hollywood actor Alexander Scourby, the episode—the first of the *Schaefer Circle of Special Programs* sponsored by the F & M Schaefer Brewing Company—was filmed in Nigeria by independent producer William Alexander (“himself a Negro”). Hoping that all its clients would eventually follow F & M Schaefer’s lead in conducting business in the country, the advertising agency Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO) had hired Alexander to show Nigeria’s post-independence progress. In an indication of its avowed commitment



FIGURE 12. A Nigerian school is seen in the BBDO-sponsored television program *Now . . . Nigeria* (1961).

to “Nigeria’s promise”—to touting the country’s “peaceful emergence as one of the free nations of Africa”—BBDO was heavily involved in the production of *Now . . . Nigeria*, “contributing some writing, structuring and basic editing.” Designed to appeal to “beer-drinking males,” the program depicted Nigeria, not inaccurately, as a brewery capital—and Nigerian men as “much like” their American counterparts. Beer, then, was a symbol of independent Nigeria’s capitalist connectedness to the United States—the common thread (or beverage) of “freedom.” The program’s reception and ratings performance were “sources of satisfaction for advertiser and agency,” both of which cited “warm letters from viewers.” “Additional mileage from the show, brought in for minimal production costs,” was “potentially endless since expectations” were that it would “develop into a perennial presentation”—including in Nigeria, where theatrical and nontheatrical distribution via 16mm film (the program’s originating format) was made possible by BBDO, which believed in Nigeria’s promise as a “media center.”⁷⁷

Whatever their past practices, Hollywood filmmakers, supported by BBDO and other steadily expanding advertising agencies, were among the “American

businessmen drawn by this growing half-billion-dollar export market,” as one trade paper described Nigeria in early 1961.⁷⁸ Established in the aftermath of independence, the Arthur D. Little Industrial Development Program in Nigeria—the latest branch of a Massachusetts-based international management consulting firm committed to the privatization and deregulation of media around the world—repeatedly arranged for Hollywood representatives to visit Nigeria as part of the program’s efforts to “expand [the country’s] economy, create new industries, and stimulate private investment,” as vice president William A.W. Krebs told the Nigerian-American Chamber of Commerce in 1962.⁷⁹ Calling Nigeria the “marketing prize of Africa,” the trade paper *Printers’ Ink* suggested that the country’s “will for self-improvement” would enable it to become, by the mid-1960s, a veritable “cinema strip”—a major site “for mass consumption” of American movies and other commercial goods.⁸⁰ Even *Mademoiselle*, in the early 1960s, addressed Nigeria’s potential as a site of film production and exhibition, identifying Ibadan—a place “charged with great expectations,” where “old and new exist side by side,” against a “skyline . . . punctuated with occasional handsome skyscrapers and . . . several beautiful buildings in contemporary style”—as a future “film capital.”⁸¹

Hollywood companies and individual American entrepreneurs had carefully prepared for this post-independence explosion of interest in Nigeria. Concurrent with the country’s emergence as an effective source of state and private funding for American media firms was the latter’s (hardly selfless) commitment to “development”—a trope widely promoted in the American trade press as early as the 1920s, when an American film exhibitor by the name of E.O. Gabriel relocated to Nigeria, where he began managing the Empire Theater in Lagos.⁸² The American exhibitor B. Frank Newell quickly followed suit, moving to Nigeria to manage the nearby Coliseum Theatre as part of what many observers termed an exhibitor’s gold rush—a rapid relocation of “courageous” American businessmen to what was still, among other things, an outpost of the British Empire.⁸³

Both Gabriel and Newell would later join the Managers’ Round Table Club, an American organization committed to “fostering . . . competition among [theater] managers and exploiters,” including those savvy enough to insert themselves into a colonial economy on the cusp of major changes (such as the introduction of wired broadcasting and the establishment of the Colonial Film Unit) in the arena of mediation. The amenability of the British colonial government to inflows (and outflows) of American businessmen and American capital was strategic, part of the goal of legitimating empire as a conduit of technological progress. That such progress could scarcely occur in the complete absence of American agents (from the human to the financial) speaks to the increasingly hegemonic position of the United States in a system of economic globalization premised on the spread of media forms and practices.

Based in New York, the Managers’ Round Table Club advertised in a special section of the *Motion Picture Herald*, where it offered “exploitation suggestions” that, in a number of instances, centered on Nigeria as a market well worth infiltrating

(as the personal experiences of Gabriel and Newell purportedly “proved”). Embracing the vocabulary of capitalist penetration, the organization, and the publication in which it advertised, relied heavily on the motif of exploitation, which, far from an anti-imperialist gesture—an honest and self-critical reckoning with abuse and oppression—was in this instance proudly deployed as an accurate index of American efforts to capitalize on Nigeria as a “ripe” exhibition site. Such content often assumed a somewhat anxious tone, as when American corporations and individual entrepreneurs were deemed at risk of “missing the boat” on media development in Nigeria, or when Nigeria was positioned as being very much in danger of “falling through the cracks” of economic globalization. A 1934 issue of *The Film Daily*, for instance, featured the following, alarmist “fact about films”: “Nigeria, with 20 million inhabitants, has no theater wired for sound films.” Intrepid representatives of American capital were thus implored to fill this particular gap, using their own ingenuity and commitment to personal enrichment and the global spread of market fundamentalism in order to bring Nigeria “up to speed” in the realm of sound cinema. If Nigerian theaters were to be rendered capable of showing sound films, it would have to be with American equipment. American industry would thus meet the “unsatisfied needs” of the Nigerian people.⁸⁴

The language employed to describe Nigeria in such accounts is almost always contradictory. Touting Gabriel’s work in Lagos, the Managers’ Round Table Club positioned Nigeria as simultaneously exotic (“If that isn’t a far-off country, we don’t know what is!”) and smoothly contiguous with American exhibition practices. The club was thus committed to identifying and facilitating connections between domestic operations and “how things are done in faraway lands.”⁸⁵ To many observers, Lagos, in its capacity as a space of exhibition, resembled a mid-size American city, offering as it did a couple of well-appointed movie houses (the Empire, the Coliseum) in addition to a smattering of smaller venues at the urban margins. In 1944, a study sponsored by the US Departments of State and Commerce determined that Nigeria had just thirteen commercial film theaters, representing a total of 8,200 seats. Alarming “sparse,” this particular “African market” was nevertheless positioned as a major “growth area” for American studios because it “favored Hollywood films.” The evidence for this assertion was not ethnographic—not culled from conversations with Nigerian moviegoers—but, rather, restricted to the simple fact that American films enjoyed far more showtimes than their British and Indian counterparts.⁸⁶

That Hollywood was “favored” was not, then, a matter of taste; it was, instead, a function of the industry’s output and export power. If, following the state-mandated restructuring of the classical studio system in the late 1940s, the productivity of the major studios declined (at least in terms of the number of films made per year), their export power only grew—including, of course, as a direct (even panicked) response to this restructuring. In many cases, what was illegal at home was fair game abroad, particularly in a decolonizing Nigeria that remained strategically

amenable to American interests. These interests included the Chicago-based Radiant Manufacturing Corp., which tested its patented Magniglow Astrolite Screens in Nigeria in the 1950s, including through showings of John Ford’s *Mogambo* (1953), which had been shot on location in East and Central Africa. Boasting a reflection surface made with pure silver (itself derived from Nigeria), Astrolite was designed to ensure “perfectly controlled illumination” and was extremely attractive to Twentieth Century-Fox, whose CinemaScope process demanded new projection surfaces, enhanced reflectivity, and greater light distribution.⁸⁷

The promise of independence was also the ongoing challenge of amalgamation. Because it retained the political borders arbitrarily imposed by empire, post-colonial Nigeria preserved a potentially volatile ethnolinguistic admixture. Enter Cinestar International, a Hollywood-based company that developed its patented Multitrax projection system in and for newly independent Nigeria.⁸⁸ Announced as a low-cost alternative to the multilingual system of production pioneered (and quickly abandoned) by Paramount, MGM, UFA, and others in the late 1920s, Multitrax incorporated five separate magnetic soundtracks—each in a different language—on the edges of 16mm film prints, enabling “the audience [to] hear only the sound version appropriate to them as selected by the projectionist. Simultaneous playback of all tracks [was] also possible via earphones for mixed groups of various nationalities or with different educational backgrounds.”⁸⁹ Dedicated projectors were available to Nigerian exhibitors at \$100 apiece, but they were not necessary; as Cinestar pointed out, “many models of conventional projectors [could] be easily modified for Multitrax projection.”⁹⁰

Conceived for Nigerian audiences, Multitrax illustrates Alan Williams’s argument that “the shape of [film] sound in the rest of the world seems to have been rather different from what happened in the United States.”⁹¹ Multitrax underscores, as well, Nataša Đurovičová’s observation that, in the history of sound cinema, “the crude terms of economic competition . . . were occasionally recast—and translated—into other social discourses.”⁹² Indeed, the pursuit of product differentiation sometimes acquired “exotic” reverberations. In the absence of indirect rule and other forms of colonial mediation, Multitrax was meant to serve a useful social function. With empire’s oversight ostensibly a thing of the past, Cinestar could, the company cannily surmised, step in to fill the void and, through Multitrax, manage the “chaos” left in colonialism’s wake. Of course, Cinestar’s efforts cannot be understood in isolation from Hollywood’s broader, ongoing public relations campaigns. An example of capitalist rationalization masquerading as “cultural sensitivity,” Multitrax—a technological means of mastering the problem of language—was engineered to benefit from association with Nigeria’s polyphonic postcoloniality.

The case of Multitrax also demonstrates that the postwar revolution in magnetic recording was not limited to the United States but extended, via Hollywood companies like Cinestar, all the way to Nigeria. Cinestar targeted the country



FIGURE 13. Hollywood-based Cinestar International developed its patented Multitrax projection system in and for newly independent Nigeria. Courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center.

in part because of its multilingual character, and in response to rapidly proliferating Pan-Africanist discourses that insisted on the need to respect more than just the colonizer's tongue. What the first wave of postcolonial thinkers viewed as a means of preserving African traditions, Cinestar saw as a way of earning profits. Recognizing the "requirements of vernacular language audiences" in the country, the company promptly "created a marketing plan for processing, dubbing, distributing, and exhibiting 16mm motion picture films" for multilingual Nigerians, as well as for those demonstrating "different intellectual levels of the same language" (like English).⁹³

Cinestar's development of Multitrax offers one indication of how American cinema was, in Miriam Hansen's terms, "translated and reconfigured" in and for Nigeria even as early as the immediate post-independence period.⁹⁴ Rather than dogmatically (and, of course, inexpensively) adhering to Standard English, Cinestar

made costly interlingual and even intralingual efforts in order to reach a broader Nigerian audience, offering a fantasy of national unity through film technology. Exercising a certain control over language, Multitrax promised to contribute to an ongoing project of national unification made newly urgent by independence and the controversial preservation of political borders so haphazardly imposed by European imperialism. More than just a quest for interethnic “harmony,” this project of national unification was also believed to be a precondition for comprehensive capitalist penetration—a way of easing the entry, and facilitating the uptake, of American companies, products, and practices. Cinestar pursued such penetration, quite literally, in the idiom of ethnic minorities and others not served by hegemonic English. In the absence of a national consensus, Multitrax could, its engineers hoped, speak across the divides. If interlingual labor led to the translation of American films from English into Igbo, Yorùbá, and Ibíbio (among other tongues), intralingual undertakings entailed the preparation of Pidgin versions of the very same films. It is unclear who, exactly, was responsible for these individual translations. The archival record offers no clues in this regard, though it is certainly possible that Cinestar employed actual Nigerians in its attempts to render American cinema (more) intelligible to African moviegoers.

Cinestar’s efforts were neither entirely altruistic nor strictly commercial. They combined the profit motive of a Hollywood company with a pronounced ideological investment in telegraphing the industry’s responsiveness to foreign audiences. With its marketable attention to African languages, Multitrax was meant, in part, to assuage growing concerns about the Americanization of the world’s movie screens. Cinestar was thus participating in a particular public relations strategy that Abé Mark Nornes has identified with Hollywood’s various modes of translation, including the industry’s storied yet cost-prohibitive production of multiple-language versions. Multitrax, as adapted for Nigeria, was simply the latest language-based “way to combat the charge that Hollywood was invading the world.”⁹⁵ It was, at the very least, a way of making that invasion seem less a top-down process of cultural homogenization than a sympathetic reaction to audience needs, a means of “bring[ing] the foreign text to the spectators on their own domestic terms.”⁹⁶

Yet the aggressive promotion of the technology itself served as a reminder to Nigerians of its emphatically American character. Multitrax was a product of capitalist ingenuity and thus, like many of the innovations of its era, a geopolitical tool, a weapon in the ongoing cultural Cold War. Thus even when Hollywood’s fantasy of a uniformly English-speaking national audience began to erode with the advent of Nigerian independence and the intensification of long-nurtured discourses of decolonization and Pan-Africanism, individual companies like Cinestar cultivated their own fantasies of translation as a source of comfort, entertainment, and profits. These latter fantasies pivoted around Cinestar’s expectation of a welcome reception for its Multitrax technology in multilingual Nigeria. The company does

not appear to have conceded the potentially innumerable challenges associated with translation. Contracts and various memoranda omit mention not only of individual translators (thus evoking Nornes's claims about the historical sidelining of such figures and the careful effacing of their labor), but also of the possibility of controversy—of a Nigerian reception context marked by hostility to perceived distortions caused by poor translation. By “respecting” Nigeria’s linguistic diversity, Cinestar sought to manage (if not eliminate) the impression that African sites of cinema exhibition were “becoming increasingly compromised by American-style modernization and capitalism.”⁹⁷

A savvy response to Nigeria’s linguistic diversity, Multitrax was also an architectural provocation, a challenge for theater design and construction. Projection sites would need to be equipped for the reproduction not simply of standard monaural sound but also of the stereo associated with Multitrax (and, for that matter, Cinerama). If Nigeria’s climatic variations called for the construction of permanent four-walled movie theaters, particularly in the south, the country’s *linguistic* diversity demanded equally unprecedented efforts. Hollywood had long sought to capture linguistically differentiated world markets, but Nigeria was *internally* differentiated, and dramatically so. Cinestar’s strategy rested on a paradox, representing as it did an attempt to respect—and capture—Nigeria as a discrete nation-state precisely by “honoring” the very diversity that threatened to tear the country apart.

Multitrax, one of many technologies that Cinestar developed, serves as further evidence that Nigeria, far from a backwater or an afterthought, was in fact at the forefront of developments in film technology. For Nigeria was not simply a site of experimentation but also a source of funding for many of Hollywood’s riskiest ventures. Cinestar’s records, some of which are housed in the Rockefeller Archive Center, indicate that it sought and even received “Nigerian investment as a franchised corporation.” Nigerian private and public expenditures covered “local purchases, local labor and construction, lease or rental of land and facilities, minor alterations to existing facilities for a small recording studio, costs of incorporation-registration, other local legal fees . . . etc.”⁹⁸ As this list suggests, Cinestar was committed to more than just the adoption of its Multitrax system. In establishing the Nigerian Cinestar Franchised Corporation, which enjoyed “the licensed and *exclusive* privilege to use the revolutionary and patented MULTITRAX language conversion system and to distribute films dubbed by it,” the Hollywood firm also pursued the uptake in Nigeria of its “economy cinemas.”⁹⁹ Known as CineDomes, these exhibition centers consisted of plastic-and-nylon “aero-tents” that, “in eight minutes flat,” could be “blown up like balloons with air pumps,” serving, in the punning language of Cinestar publicity, as “theaters in the mound.” “Plain and fancy, solid and flexible, domes are bulging out all over,” the company boasted, “bringing surprising methods to the construction business and surprising shapes to the landscape. Modern demands have found a variety of



FIGURE 14. The Nigerian Cinestar Franchised Corporation puts up a CineDome, a plastic-and-nylon “aero-tent” for film exhibition, in 1963. Courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center.

odd uses for domes, from keeping concertgoers dry to protecting a fragile radar antenna from rough weather.”

Nigeria was not the only country in which these “balloon cinemas” went up—Cinestar marketed them throughout Europe, touring various towns—but, with its dusty Harmattan winds and its monsoon rains, it served as an ideal test of the CineDome’s capacity to withstand extreme weather.¹⁰⁰ If Nigeria’s exceptionality as a multilingual country led Cinestar to pioneer Multitrax as a means of meeting the needs of the market (the running banner at the top of the company’s letterhead was “FILMS IN YOUR LANGUAGE AT A PRICE YOU CAN AFFORD”),

its tropical monsoon climate, with especially rainy wet seasons and pronounced and dust-laden dry seasons, motivated major experiments with the architecture of film exhibition.¹⁰¹

“WINNING” NIGERIA

As the case of Cinestar suggests, Hollywood’s diverse presence in Nigeria requires a rethinking of what qualifies as interesting and consequential in film-historical scholarship—a moving away from the sort of binarism arguably inherent in economic studies of Hollywood, in which box-office receipts serve as the most (or even the only) admissible evidence, and in which “business failure” (conventionally defined) is used to justify inattention.¹⁰² According to such accounts, there is no reason to take seriously the industry’s varied pursuits in parts of the world where commercial theaters are relatively scarce and “corruption” allegedly abundant. But to exclude Nigeria from histories of Hollywood imperialism—to proceed as if the country were, given its want of auditoria, altogether irrelevant to American film companies—is to discount the fact that those companies, far from focused on theatrical exhibition alone, were for decades committed to selling Nigerians 35mm filmstrips, 8mm reduction prints, and soundtrack recordings, all of which could be used in classrooms and other nontheatrical locations.¹⁰³ Hollywood’s vast “technological systems,” to borrow a term from Thomas Hughes, involved more than mere software. Even in Nigeria, and even as early as the 1960s, they encompassed “hardware, devices, machines, and processes,” as well as the “transportation, communication, and information networks that interconnect them.”¹⁰⁴

Nigeria was a “tough market,” conceded Richard G. Lurie, the vice president of *American Exporter Publications*, in 1962: “Some American potential investors have come, looked and then gone away. But some have stayed.”¹⁰⁵ The latter included Nigerian Electronics, a joint venture between American and Nigerian capital, which, based in Apapa, powered and cooled the Roxy Cinema and also assembled television sets and three-band transistorized portable radios. Eluchie Electrical Works, another firm buoyed by Hollywood investors, also powered and cooled cinemas, and its American overseers stayed in Nigeria despite the “toughness” of conditions there.¹⁰⁶

Like Black Africa in general, and as the 1961 collaboration of BBDO and William Alexander attests, Nigeria inspired creative attempts to leverage race to further the penetration of American capital. These attempts often hinged on the hiring of African American intermediaries (like Alexander) on the assumption that such figures would be welcomed—and trusted—in a Black-majority country like Nigeria. Here, the philosophy of negritude, a term coined by Aimé Césaire in the 1930s, was strategically transformed to include commerce. The “cultural values of the black world,” as Léopold Sédar Senghor, the leading theorist of negritude, famously called them, were now seen as encompassing economic ones.¹⁰⁷

Co-opted by big business, negritude lubricated many of the deals made in Nigeria. In the late 1950s, Ayerst Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company based in New York, hired its first Black executive, Dr. Maurice Maximilien. Ayerst immediately tasked Maximilien with appealing to Nigerians concerned about the company’s presence in the country, where it began manufacturing products on the eve of independence. Maximilien declared of Nigerians, “I believe they have a brilliant opportunity to forward the cause of the Negro race. I do hope they will take up the matter of assisting Negroes seriously.” Summarizing the executive’s position, the *West African Pilot* pointed to the widely shared conviction “that Nigeria will benefit immensely by having commercial contacts with the USA.”¹⁰⁸

In the spring of 1960, the US Department of Commerce announced that Nigeria exhibited “‘more than average’ promise for [the] expansion of American exports,” including cinematic ones.¹⁰⁹ Hollywood, which has always enjoyed considerable diplomatic backing, proved especially responsive to the discourses of Nigerian exceptionalism circulating in and through the international diplomatic community. Consider, for instance, Arnold Rivkin’s 1962 description of Nigeria as “an oasis of democratic development in an arid desert of authoritarian-inclined African states.”¹¹⁰ The director of MIT’s Project on African Economic and Political Development, Rivkin considered Nigeria a “unique nation”—exceptional both on its own sociocultural (and certainly mineral) terms and as a potentially “economically strong and politically stable ally of the West, integrated into the global capitalist order.”¹¹¹ In 1961, Rivkin would inform the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that Nigeria was “a society very responsive to economic incentives,” and his confidence was borne out by the decision of Hollywood studios to set up permanent offices there. Nigeria—what Rivkin, extending his exceptionalist rhetoric, called “an oasis of rationality in a sea of unreason”—was considered a “natural” home for Hollywood interests committed to expansion after the collapse of the studio system.¹¹²

Notwithstanding the industry’s active interest in South Africa and Zimbabwe, Hollywood embraced Lagos in the 1960s in ways that echoed the US State Department’s view of Nigeria as “the most important country in Africa.”¹¹³ Particularizing—and, indeed, praising—Nigeria in the wake of independence was the State Department’s way of building on its earlier, pre-independence articulation of the African continent’s significance “as a geographical area four times the size of the U.S. producing minerals and primary agricultural products of great importance to America.”¹¹⁴ Outside of the State Department (but hardly untethered to it), the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations were committed to demonstrating the cultural and economic value of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, bolstering US-backed economic planning units, including at the University of Ife.¹¹⁵

The foundations’ efforts may have been mired in “superficial generalizations, prejudice, and blind faith in the ‘rational’ methods of the social sciences,” but they were remarkably effective, exerting a pull on Hollywood studios already

drawn to Nigeria—and all too happy to accept and even trumpet social-scientific justifications for their collective commercial interest in Lagos.¹¹⁶ “Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller were,” writes David H. Price, “selectively predisposed to nurture ideas aligned with their founders’ political-economic interests.”¹¹⁷ Such foundations were thus, as Joan Roelofs has argued, “examples of mortmain, the dead hand of past wealth controlling the future.”¹¹⁸ In the case of Nigeria, this was, of course, a specifically postcolonial future. Endeavoring to determine the course of independence, Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller were among the architects of neocolonialism; the ill-gotten gains that made them possible were also preserved and reproduced in the guise of decolonization. The revolving door between such wealthy private foundations and government positions meant that state power often fueled corporate schemes that masqueraded as “neutral” modernization studies. Simply put, private foundations shaped how Hollywood saw Nigeria, facilitating conceptual as well as literal constructions of theatrical film in and “for” the country.

Nigeria has only rarely witnessed the form of settler capitalism familiar from, say, South Africa, where, in 1954, MGM renovated one of its first-run cinemas (the Plaza in Cape Town) to make it resemble New York’s Radio City Music Hall. Until the twenty-first century, Nigeria had no such spectacularly imitative facilities. The dazzling venues constructed in the 1960s by the Cinerama Corporation for the marketing of its own widescreen process were merely temporary. Akin to fairground exhibits, they were strictly promotional and provisional. For their part, the commercial theaters run by Americans (such as the Empire and the Coliseum, both in Lagos) were hardly architectural marvels. But however modest they may have seemed to observers accustomed to the pomp of first-run movie palaces, these spaces were shaped by and in the interests of foreign capital.

If the outbreak of the Biafran Civil War surprised US policymakers and other political experts, so too did it surprise Hollywood. Peter Hopkinson, director of the Unilever-sponsored 1962 short *African Awakening*, which celebrates economic development in Nigeria, later said that “such a bloody failure of high hope was not to be anticipated, let alone envisaged, in my [film].”¹¹⁹ Mere months before the outbreak of war, the Hollywood company Seven Arts Productions launched a special committee—part of Variety Clubs International, a children’s charity—in Lagos.¹²⁰ Seven Arts eventually acquired a controlling interest in Warner Bros. Pictures in 1967.¹²¹ Along with the other major studios, however, Warner Bros.–Seven Arts abandoned Nigeria by decade’s end. But whatever challenges Nigeria posed in the aftermath of Biafra’s secession, Hollywood would return to the country again and again, exhibiting an all-but-unshakeable faith in the country’s exceptionality. In the late 1950s, Rupert Emerson, a Carnegie-funded member of the newly established African Studies Association, had written of the importance of perpetually “‘discovering’ and rediscovering” Nigeria in particular, and that is precisely what Hollywood has done since at least the late colonial period.¹²²

Hollywood’s efforts to infiltrate Nigeria have never been exclusively about selling tickets to theatrical films. They have also been about moving any number of other products, even apart from the usual suspects (such as official tie-ins and other merchandise associated with particular motion pictures). Markets for movies are also markets for other, even seemingly unrelated goods and services, some of which may be sold by the parent companies of individual film studios.¹²³ Ashcraft Suprex Arcs and Kaplan Projectors were in use in Nigeria by 1940, having been marketed there by a number of American companies.¹²⁴ In the early 1960s, Western Electric began selling 16mm Bell & Howell automatic-exposure cameras in Nigeria, while the company made monthly film reports from the country for NASA, in the process importing 35mm Eastmancolor film, to which its 16mm footage was “blown up” and with which it was carefully color-matched.¹²⁵

Cinema’s association with a wide-ranging consumerism was undoubtedly deeply familiar to many Nigerians by independence.¹²⁶ Indeed, during and after British colonial rule, mobile cinema units were exploited by major commercial organizations, including Unilever and Procter & Gamble, in order to move various products.¹²⁷ By the 1960s, numerous pharmaceutical companies had co-opted the immensely popular cinema vans in order to advertise and sell their manufactures, employing hawkers (often dubbed “interpreters”) to describe these goods in detail (and, of course, to identify their prices for cinema audiences).¹²⁸ For its part, Cinestar International marketed its patented Cinego mobile cinemas in Nigeria beginning in 1963. Cinego units included folding screens; film shipping cases “constructed of heavy-duty, reinforced rust-resistant steel . . . equipped with steel runners on the bottom, [and] 3 . . . handles for one or two men carrying” that were “moisture-proof, dust-proof,” and “perfect for tropical areas” like Nigeria; projectors; and 16mm films, including those produced by Cinestar itself, which the company leased in blocks of 10, 20, 40, or 50.¹²⁹ In Nigeria as elsewhere, Cinego “packages” were meant, through both their state-of-the-art design and the films that they brought to rural audiences, to promote the wonders of American capitalism. Such efforts were, in part, products of the Cold War conception of Nigeria as imperiled by Soviet communism, and they were not limited to Cinestar, whose “prospects in Nigeria” seemed healthy by 1963.¹³⁰

Sponsored by Unilever and distributed by the New York-based Contemporary Films, Inc., the 28-minute 16mm documentary *Twilight Forest* (Sydney Latter, 1957), which was later included in Cinego packages, depicts the “changing technological and economic growth” in Nigeria as a result of harvesting timber. As this example suggests, Hollywood majors have never been the sole representatives of American cinema in Nigeria; they have always enjoyed the expansive—indeed, globe-spanning—support of smaller enterprises. Cinestar, for its part, remained committed, through its patented Multitrax language-conversion system, to the “economical dubbing” of Hollywood studio films “even into minority languages and dialects.”¹³¹ The efforts of small-scale producers and distributors

of nontheatrical nonfiction film were not, then, necessarily antithetical to those of their Hollywood counterparts. As Victoria Cain points out in her work on the Rockefeller Foundation, which was active in Nigeria—including cinematically—by the 1950s, the makers of educational films like *Twilight Forest* “attempted to collaborate, rather than compete, with Hollywood studios.”¹³²

Independent American exhibitors, such as the Lagos-based Stanley Jones, were active in Nigeria as early as 1903; they joined European missionaries operating on a largely non-commercial basis—as, that is, “benevolent” bringers of “civilization” through cinema.¹³³ Esther Green Humphrey, owner and general manager of the Omaha-based, exhibitor-focused marketing firm FEPCO Theatre Advertising, began doing business in Lagos in 1962, at the behest of Benjamin Mabadeje of West African Pictures Co., a Nigerian distributor. While in Lagos, Humphrey helped to market not merely motion pictures produced by the Hollywood majors but also many of the consumer items that those films depicted, some of which could be sold in and around the city’s movie theaters.¹³⁴ This was the same year that Nigerian Electronics Ltd. established its air-conditioner factory, with substantial backing from Auriema Group and the Rockefeller Bros. Fund, both of which were actively committed to assisting Hollywood’s efforts to establish more hard-top, climate-controlled cinemas in Nigeria.¹³⁵ As MGM’s publicity department had put it in 1940, “air conditioning properly controlled . . . is so important in the . . . climate of the [African] city.”¹³⁶ Along with Eluchie Electrical Works, Nigerian Electronics powered and cooled cinemas throughout southern Nigeria, thus helping to realize some of MGM’s longstanding ambitions in and for the country. The studio wanted Lagos, like Cairo (site of the opulent Cinema Metro, which opened in 1940), to have “a theater worthy of [it],” one with the “most comfortable chairs, perfect projection, unexcelled sound, [and] air conditioning, . . . all combined in one magnificent edifice, which cannot fail to be a source of great civic pride.”¹³⁷ The question of what films would be screened in Nigeria’s permanent four-walled motion-picture theaters was one that MGM was eager to answer. The studio recommended, among other works, the latest entries in its Tarzan series—“African” films for African audiences.¹³⁸

“FAITH IN NIGERIA”

Even after Eric Johnston was able to concede that the common factor of “global television” was, if anything, reliance on Hollywood films, he chose to focus on theatrical exhibition as a more feasible sphere of expansion for Hollywood interests in Nigeria. “The hazards to [Nigerian television’s] growth, mostly economic, are likely to keep it stunted for a good while yet,” he wrote. Such “stunting” was thus an invitation to Hollywood to invest in extensive theater construction.¹³⁹ The big screen, increasingly under siege in the United States, had not yet been vanquished in Nigeria, where television was still too nascent to properly compete with it. In

the fall of 1960, Johnston issued a formal recommendation to MPA member companies, urging them to take “a more active role in Africa exhibition,” particularly in Nigeria. Johnston’s “confidence in the growing market that is Africa” often pivoted around Nigeria as a country of “immense potential.” “With TV coming into Europe,” Johnston wrote, “we ought to look for new markets, and the new market that is waiting for us is in Africa.” In Johnston’s view, the importance of expanding global distribution centers beyond London and Paris could not be overstated. Hollywood companies needed to “embed themselves” in African countries—including and especially Nigeria—in order to circulate their films there.

That the rate of construction of cinemas did not accelerate following Johnston’s 1960 statement of faith in Nigeria has everything to do with the lack of participation of the Nigerian federal government, whose capital investment was deemed “a necessary prerequisite” by AMPECA, which seemed unaware of (or simply strategically unwilling to concede) the regionalist character of the country.¹⁴⁰ After all, the American production company Lloyd Young & Associates had, just a few years earlier, recognized the entrenchment of regionalism in Nigeria, cannily appealing to the Eastern Region government for assistance, which Enugu readily supplied, resulting in the globally distributed *The Mark of the Hawk*, if not in any local material gains. Though the boom in theater construction that Johnston predicted did not come to pass, at the end of 1960 Nigeria still reported a significant increase in the number of film theaters in the country—“sizeable gains” that stemmed directly from Hollywood investment.¹⁴¹

Whatever its material effects, AMPECA’s plan for a public-private partnership in the arena of theater construction was finalized—instructively, without the involvement of the Nigerian state—by a four-man committee consisting of Eric Johnston, Barney Balaban (president of Paramount Pictures and co-founder of the American exhibition company Balaban & Katz, whose opulent “picture palaces” included the world’s first mechanically cooled movie theater), Wolfe Cohen (president of Warner Bros. International), and Arnold Picker (vice president in charge of foreign distribution at United Artists). It is unclear exactly why, in the minds of these men, public investment was required where federal involvement in AMPECA’s planning was not. The Nigerian government was simply expected to accede to demands made by Hollywood strategists seeking to establish (but not themselves subsidize) venues for the direct distribution of the industry’s films, just as exhibitors in Nigeria were expected to accept strikingly asymmetrical arrangements.

A clearer indication of what AMPECA had in mind for Nigeria was provided a few years later by the construction of an expansive (and expensive) new theater on Burke Street in Melbourne, Australia. Subsidized by the Australian government under the “guidance” of Warner Bros., the new venue was “specially built” to accommodate the requirements of the studio’s *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), which utilized the Todd-AO process, a patented high-resolution widescreen film format designed to compete with Cinerama.¹⁴² Thousands of miles from

Melbourne, Nigeria would, for the time being, have to make do with the sort of makeshift structures—including CineDomes—that were intended not merely to appeal to the curiosity of Nigerian consumers but also to stimulate government expenditure. Ultramodern movie houses would have to wait.