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Creative Hustling

Women Making and Distributing Films from Nairobi

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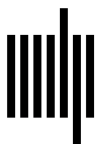

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MAKING TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA

Nairobi-based female filmmakers frequently make use of transnational funding schemes with capital drawn from Europe and North America and distribute their films internationally within the circuit of international film festivals, and to a smaller extent using online platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. This chapter sets out to explore the transnationally connected modes of production and circulation that these filmmakers use as well as the strategies and processes of negotiation they employ when working with "foreign" partners to make and distribute their films.

When I met Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann, she was deep into production of her documentary *New Moon* and carefully evaluating the sacrifices she would need to make to complete the film given her time and financial constraints. She had received funding from several international sources, as we will discuss later, but it was still a struggle to finish the film. She had recently received her funding from Docubox and knew she needed to seize the opportunity that funding gave her because financing the film in other ways—for example, through working on commissioned projects and investing her income from them—would be very difficult because she would not have the space to adequately concentrate on the project:

> It's been a financial sacrifice for me concentrating on less projects, but the thing is I realized at one point: I studied as a director and scriptwriter and I want to be a director. That's ultimately my goal. I want to be known as a director and have the respect and stature and all that comes with it. And if I do other things . . . —because I do lots of other things—if I do all that stuff to get money I may end up [with] years passing by and actually supporting other people's projects in a way and not actually getting the name that I want for myself. So, it's been financially difficult, but you have to . . . concentrate and focus.

She has to make financial sacrifices to be a director and try to build her reputation, so getting the right attention is extremely important. Furthering her career requires strategizing on showing the film in the most prestigious and

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beneficial outlets, a process of negotiation that inevitably involves the politics of geographic difference and "foreign-ness," as we shall see throughout this chapter.

She hoped the film would screen in prestigious documentary outlets such as the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), but also said, "I wouldn't want it to only be at documentary film festivals." Likewise, she wanted it to travel through the African film festival circuit, but did not want to be limited to that.

> But to be honest, I wouldn't like it to be only limited to film festivals that are about Africa. Because I feel strongly that the film that I will create, or am creating, is a film that could be accessible to a lot of people. . . . It is about Africa, and it is about Lamu, but predominantly it is very heart-centered film. And that will draw people more, and the images will draw people more, and the tempo, and the stillness will draw people more, than it actually being African.[1]

She recognized that these forums could provide a valuable outlet for African filmmakers and felt that her first experimental short film, *Gubi: The Birth of Fruit*, received a good amount of attention because it went to African film festivals and it "wouldn't have got that attention in other film festivals, so in a way I owe a lot to that. And I'm grateful for that."[2] We can see that she wanted the film to travel based not on her identity (African, female, Kenyan) or on the film's category (African, documentary), but rather based on its particular artistry and qualities, while at the same time recognizing that the film was likely to gain the needed attention at least in part *because* of her identity. How her identity is perceived by others matters for the circulation of her film.

The current global media landscape is one where filmmakers from outside Euro-America frequently make use of Euro-American funding to finance different aspects of their projects. This model has been challenged on the grounds that it compromises the artistic independence of non-Euro-American filmmakers by forcing them to comply with genres and styles of filmmaking that the Euro-American funding bodies wish to see.[3] For instance, German film scholar Randall Halle argues that contemporary European co-productions with filmmakers in Africa and Asia are a form of Neo-Orientalism because they support "the production of stories about other peoples and places that it, the funding source, wants to hear" and that the resulting "films must offer stories that appeal to European and North American audiences."[4] These

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arguments, rather implausibly, position funders as all-powerful, but more importantly they do not account for shared tastes that cross borders and the fact that Euro-American audiences and filmmakers from elsewhere might share a common taste in stories. The balancing act of satisfying funders and maintaining one's artistic integrity may be, in the words of Nigerian-South African filmmaker Akin Omotoso, "the devil you choose to dance with,"[5] but filmmakers do have a choice in these encounters and that choice is influenced by their individual profiles and competencies. Working with transnational funders and distribution outlets is inherently a process of negotiation, and unpacking the nuances, tensions, and particularities of these negotiations is essential to understanding any process of co-production.[6]

Our contemporary world is globalized, but "global networks are maintained, adjusted, guarded, and configured in the local."[7] Putting the creative productions of Africans in conversation with artists from elsewhere (as is necessary in an interconnected world) "will require more—not less—'local' knowledge of these multiple places."[8] As we saw in the last chapter, a national framework of analysis offers little insight into the work patterns of Nairobi-based filmmakers because the state provides little support for them; rather, it is through local networks in Nairobi and transnational connections that these filmmakers are enabled to make their films. According to film scholars Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, the term "transnational cinema" "risks celebrating the supranational flow or transnational exchange of peoples, images and cultures at the expense of the specific cultural, historical or ideological context in which these exchanges take place."[9] Thus, in order to avoid the perils identified by Higbee and Lim and to ground my study of transnational connections in the concrete spaces where filmmakers work, I undertook eight months of field research in the place where Nairobi-based female filmmakers live and work most: Nairobi. By embedding myself within Nairobi for an extended period, I was able to contextualize the work of Nairobi-based female filmmakers within the broader context of both screen media industries in the city and the business and policy context much more broadly. Through observing the film exhibition and distribution circuit in Nairobi I learned that internationally popular Kenyan films had not lost "local" resonance, as critics often assume; rather, audiences in Nairobi share a taste in films with audiences abroad but they have difficulty gaining *access* to them because a large-scale distribution infrastructure does

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not yet exist in the local market. Empirical and field-based research showed that there is no essential or insurmountable difference in taste between Nairobian and international audiences. Thus, fieldwork in Nairobi was an essential first step in challenging binary thinking about taste.

WORLD CINEMA AND AFRICAN CINEMA IN THE WORLD

Unlike industries such as Nollywood and Bollywood that circulate globally in large part due to demand from diaspora audiences,[10] the international circulation of the films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers is not fueled by a Kenyan diaspora eager to watch films from home. Instead, these films tend to circulate within film festivals and in other artistic spaces. Europe and North America "have been, historically and until recently, the main regions in which films by Africans have circulated through festivals,"[11] so assessing the politics of their circulation—and discourses about that circulation—in these places is essential. African films are pigeonholed "within genres such as 'world cinema'" largely because of "the sporadic and isolated programming of these films within 'A-list' festivals."[12] African films from vastly different contexts displaying widely divergent styles and themes are grouped together—as world cinema—based on the shared similarity of Otherness. The expression of each filmmaker's individual creativity is undermined in this homogenizing approach, but filmmakers still can and do assert their agency in these encounters and influence the transnational circulation and interpretation of their films.

World cinema, in the mainstream sense, essentially began in the 1950s when Japanese film was "discovered" by Euro-American audiences.[13] Film scholar Lucia Nagib suggests a definition of world cinema where it encompasses all the cinema of the world,[14] but film scholar Kaushik Bhaumik argues instead that "far from being exhaustive world cinema is a category constructed through a process of cultural translation that picks up only that which is familiar or made familiar through particular prisms of interpretation employed in mainstream Western cultural discourses."[15] To be considered "world cinema" in the mainstream sense, a film must have "crossed over," which means gaining a viewership in "the West" beyond diasporic audiences.[16] Within world cinema what is valuable or derivative and therefore discardable depends on the terms of cultural exchange, which are unequal and, because world cinema is a Euro-American classification,

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slanted in favor of Euro-America. To put it plainly, world cinema is what is simultaneously Other, and rendered familiar, when viewed from the perspective of the Euro-American mainstream.

Film festivals have played an essential role in developing the canon of world cinema since *Rashomon* (dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1951) was screened at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. Film scholar Julian Stringer importantly notes that film festivals tend to provide the first moment of contact between non-Western cinema and Euro-America, and as such "scholars tend to approach them through the nostalgic invocation of those moments when non-Western industries were 'discovered'—that is, discovered by Westerners—at major international competitions."[17] The implicit assumption in this mode of thinking is film movements from outside "the West" do not count until they have been consecrated by prestige festivals.[18] Because Nairobi-based female filmmakers' films have shown in international film festivals, they have "crossed over" and can now be considered under the rubric of "world cinema."

Crossing over means being seen by audiences in different locations than where the film was made or the filmmaker's home context. Crossover audiences are often treated polemically because of an assumed difference between "local" and "foreign" spectators and how filmmakers are assumed to manipulate their work to accommodate foreign tastes. For instance, it has been suggested that Chinese Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou's films are essentially made *for* "Western" spectators rather than Chinese viewers, and this involves selling out the "real" China for a manufactured spectacle of "enchanting, exotic stories about the other country 'China' through stunning visual images."[19] Returning to the context of African film, "calabash cinema" has been used as a derogatory term "called upon the moment Africans feel an African film is in any way 'pandering' to an 'external' and 'exotic' view of Africa."[20] These various examples show the pervasiveness of this kind of nativist discourse within world cinema. A commonality across all these discourses is that the artist is not free to create; rather, they must create for an essentialized national or continental audience and present the national "properly." Within the African film context, filmmakers and scholars have for a long time committed themselves to an "oppositional criticism" explicitly aimed at defining African film against "Western film,"[21] but this criticism has always suppressed recognitions of the true diversity of African cinemas. As film scholar David Murphy so forcefully argues, "the reductive opposition between Africa and the West merely produces a sterile stand-off

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between the different cultural influences which are so clearly present in African films."[22] Arguments rooted in authenticity cannot account for contemporary production. As film scholar Alexie Tcheuyap suggests:

> By incorporating new visions, genres, representations and aesthetic expressions, today's filmmakers are not only interrogating sub-Saharan African identities, but are furthermore staking out a place for African cultures in global flows where identity oscillates between "global and local, nation and (non)nation" (Petty, 2008, 1). In a context of transnational, hybrid, shifting and multiple identities, it is difficult to imagine that African productions have remained immune to outside influence.[23]

Nativist criticism both fails to see films as acts of representation, not sociological documents, and suggests a binary division between spectators local and foreign—a division that is too simple to account for transnationally shared tastes, as I will now go on to elaborate.

FILMMAKING AND NAIROBI'S TRANSNATIONALLY CONNECTED MIDDLE CLASS

Understanding transnationally shared taste requires grappling with the complexities of class position, and particularly middle-class identity in Nairobi. Several studies note that class-based inequality has been underexamined in creative and cultural industries research and find that it has significant influence in shaping patterns of work in these industries in the United Kingdom.[24] In her study of gender and creative work in Europe, media scholar Angela McRobbie notes that even if the freelance market is insecure for all workers, middle-class women retain a significant advantage over working-class women,[25] thus highlighting class as an important analytical variable in addition to gender when studying female creatives. In an African context, African film scholar Jonathan Haynes' recent work on market segmentation in Nollywood also points to the growing need to explore the impact of class on shaping patterns of creative work.[26]

Literature focusing on the middle class in Kenya, and in Nairobi specifically, has proliferated in recent years. Kenya is an important site for the study of middle classes in Africa because, according to economic definitions, it possesses an unusually large middle class: 44.9 percent of the population.[27] Yet the notion of an African middle class—and who is or is not part of it—remains fraught.[28] A Marxist or Weberian understanding of

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class where class position is stable across generations is not directly applicable.[29] Yet defining the middle class as a group with the resources, social and financial, to mitigate periods of uncertainty and avoid sliding into poverty does not capture a sense of belonging or identification with the idea of class.[30] While it is true that people do not always identify with the class that most directly matches their economic conditions, how they identify *is important*.[31] Being middle-class is important to the filmmakers in this book, and I take that self-identification seriously.

A helpful concept for understanding these identifications is offered by anthropologist Rachel Spronk, who argues that being middle-class is not easily measurable or quantifiable but rather "the (imagined) goal and result of people's ambition to climb the social ladder."[32] Spronk importantly identifies class-based self-perception as a crucial variable to study, alongside other indicators of material positioning within Kenyan society such as education, profession, and lifestyle choices.[33] The Nairobi-based young professionals of her study enact their middle-class position in relation to global frameworks: "Their self-perceptions as 'modern' or 'sophisticated' are important for their pursuit of upward mobility, which directs them beyond the borders of Kenya. . . . They are very conscious about their cosmopolitan tastes and practices and are proud to be a part of a larger world beyond Kenya, orienting themselves toward South Africa and the African diaspora."[34] Accounting for class-based self-perception, as a perception that identifies itself with middle classes beyond the national border, is particularly important because it suggests a way of thinking about middle-classness in Nairobi that is not geographically bounded.

When Toni Kamau described producing the documentary *I Am Samuel* (dir. Peter Murimi, 2020), it became clear that liberal social views were part of a middle-class self-perception. The film is about a gay man from a low-income group and she described it as follows:

> It was a story about sexual minority inequality, but it's also a story about economic inequality because if you are gay in a middle class—like if I was to tell my family "Oh, I'm a lesbian," they would be like, "Oh seriously?" and then they would get over it at some point. But you see, in lower income groups the level of acceptance and tolerance—and I think that cuts across most cultures—it's not as high.[35]

Nairobi-based female filmmakers can be defined as middle-class based on easily quantifiable characteristics of class such as house location, job, car

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ownership, education, and English-language skills,[36] but it is their self-perception in addition to these material markers that allows for seeing them as part of a transnational middle class.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that "to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts . . . corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes taste to function as markers of 'class.'"[37] This same function can be seen in Nairobi. The transnational orientation of middle-class filmmakers can be seen, for instance, in their media choices. Barbara Karuana expressed a middle-class self-identification in our discussions. While formulating a critique of local television programming, Karuana told me:

> I ask myself, why is our TV terrible? And then I realize that it is because they don't tell the kind of stories I'm interested in hearing about. And that's not necessarily reflective of the Kenyan society as a whole. . . . I can tell you for a fact that I live a very different life from someone who lives across the road in Kibera. . . . My thought process, and my interests, and my concerns are exactly the same as someone who lives in the States, or in the UK, or whatever.[38]

What Karuana demonstrates here is a very clear sense of her position in a distinct Kenyan subgroup with a cosmopolitan orientation and very different material circumstances from those of lower-income groups.[39] In a corresponding statement critiquing television, she expressed class issues even more plainly through the rhetorical question: "Why would me, a middle-class Kenyan, choose to watch something on NTV [a local free-to-air network] and not watch something on Netflix?"[40] Like Karuana, filmmaker Jennifer Gatero also described herself as middle-class and articulated her class standing through modes of her screen media viewing: "I, myself, am middle-class. . . . I watch DVDs, I have cable TV, or I have Netflix. A lot of people I know have Netflix, so we've moved out of local TV."[41] Scholars have argued that watching "quality" television is a new form of distinction,[42] meaning watching "quality" television—as Karuana and Gatero see themselves as doing—can be status giving. This link between class position and taste in art (in this case, television) is in line with a Bourdieusian understanding of taste. Karuana's and Gatero's statements reflect the fact that they see themselves as part of a global network of similarly minded people who share interests and tastes regardless of where they live—a self-perception that Spronk would characterize as modern and middle-class.[43]

It is remarkably commonplace for Nairobi-based female filmmakers to have lived, worked, or studied abroad. Wanjiru Kinyanjui's training in Germany

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marked the beginning of an important trend of filmmakers receiving foreign training abroad before coming back to Nairobi to make their films and pursue their careers. Prior to starting in filmmaking, Kinyanjui studied abroad at the United World College of the Pacific in Canada on a scholarship. She also completed a master's in English and German literature at the Technical University Berlin, and seeing African films while in Germany "is what actually motivated" her to go to film school, she said. Kinyanjui made *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* while training in screenwriting and directing at the German Academy for Film and Television Berlin (DFFB).[44] The contemporary era is filled with similar examples. Zippy Kimundu, for instance, studied for an MFA at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts Asia; Wanuri Kahiu completed a master's in film directing at UCLA; and Ng'endo Mukii studied at the Rhode Island School of Design and at the Royal College of Art in London.

Accounting for filmmakers' transnational middle-class position is necessary in order to understand how they approach working with international funding bodies. When I asked Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann about how she secures funding for her films, she replied:

> I think it's a combination of (a) having an idea that keeps returning and (b) also checking what calls there are. So often you'll read about a call and it will be for a fiction film, or for this or for that, and you think okay, actually, I wonder if I could think of something for that. Or you have an idea and you think, how can I apply for that? But usually I always think predominantly about how I can get funding.[45]

She has been quite successful using this approach, considering her film *New Moon* (2018) received funding from the East African documentary film fund Docubox, Göteborg Film Festival, the IDFA Bertha Fund, and through a crowdfunding campaign. As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, her strategies would commonly be read by critics as "selling out," but more accurately her strategy can be read as a highly pragmatic approach to funding. She "spins" her ideas and projects so that they appear in alignment with the intentions of funding sources. As is common among Nairobi-based female filmmakers, her ideas are also shaped by her personal experiences outside Kenya, including living and studying in France, the Netherlands, and South Africa.[46] Pioneering African directors may have focused on making postcolonial critiques in their films, but "the new cadre of directors is looking beyond nationalism and situating its discourses in the turbulent

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cross-flows of globalization,"[47] where they are also situating their production and distribution processes. When we see Nairobi-based female filmmakers as part of a transnational middle class, it becomes more tenuous to interpret their filmmaking careers as "less authentic" when they involve collaborations with non-Kenyans in either production or distribution phases.

THE CROSS-BORDER CIRCULATION OF FILMS BY NAIROBI-BASED FEMALE FILMMAKERS

Importantly, the filmmakers discussed so far in this chapter are not the only ones operating in Nairobi today. There is another industry, named Riverwood, that exists quite separately from the one populated by the middle-class filmmakers who are the subject of this book. Comprehending how the films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers circulate internationally requires that we understand the difference between the work they do and the production and distribution models used in Riverwood. Riverwood films are ultra-low-budget, made in a time span of days or weeks, and are designed to be released on DVD. They are predominantly shot in Kikuyu (and sometimes other vernacular languages) and then target consumers of those ethnolinguistic groups. Scholars have described Riverwood as the Kenyan counterpart of Nollywood,[48] and while Riverwood films are akin to Nollywood-style filmmaking in the production process, they are less so in their distribution. A crucial distinction between these industries is that, unlike Nollywood, Riverwood films struggle to find popularity with audiences and to become profitable. Circulating around the downtown Nairobi street called River Road, Riverwood films can be bought alongside a wide range of international media, but with the exception of films by star comedians, most films sell only 3,000–6,000 copies. They do not have an international market (though they desire wider distribution) and do not receive funding from the sources that Nairobi-based middle-class filmmakers use to finance their films.[49]

Nairobi-based middle-class filmmakers do not consider themselves to be part of Riverwood. Even veteran filmmaker Wanjiru Kinyanjui—who worked with Riverwood filmmakers to create *Bahati* (2007) and *Manga in America* (2007)—draws a clear distinction between herself and Riverwood filmmakers. She describes herself as a "professional" director and those working in Riverwood as "amateurs."[50] Veteran producer Appie Matere

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articulated a key difference between her work making films for South African pay-TV company M-Net and Riverwood. She gave a workshop for Riverwood filmmakers and realized in that context that she is not one of them when she mentioned that she was working with a budget of 800,000 KES ($7,000) per film and it "was little money":

> And everybody pinched each other—what is she talking about? Eight hundred thousand! That's a lot of money. Then I explained to them and I told them it's not . . . you think it's a lot of money because where you come from, but look at it as we have to use eight hundred thousand to [maintain the] M-Net standard. Their standard cannot go low.[51]

She also said that her making a film for 800,000 KES for M-Net was the equivalent to a 20,000 KES ($174) Riverwood film in the sense that she has to be incredibly frugal in order to "maintain the standard" M-Net requires—essentially, 800,000 KES is a small amount of money to make a show of the required quality. It is important to note that Nairobi-based female filmmakers have the cultural and social capital (to use Bourdieu's terminology) to attract funding and market themselves in the festival circuit that Riverwood filmmakers so far lack. Gaining access to international projects (such as making films for M-Net) or international distribution circuits such as film festivals requires particular competencies in self-promotion that, so far, middle-class filmmakers have been shown to have but Riverwood filmmakers lack.

Nairobi-based female filmmakers work hard to navigate the complicated terrain of crossing over to reach global audiences and continually assert their agency in this process, as I will demonstrate through the case study of Wanuri Kahiu and her short film *Pumzi* (2010). *Pumzi* is one of her most high-profile films and one of the most celebrated recent films from Kenya.[52] It is frequently invoked in critical discourses because of its original use of genre.[53] *Pumzi* can be easily read through the lens of science fiction—it is set in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic landscape where human society lives underground in a tightly policed community governed by a council that carefully controls their movements (through granting or denying exit passes) and even their thoughts (through compelling inhabitants to take dream suppressants). The science fiction genre is not new, of course, but the hype surrounding *Pumzi* seems to emanate from the fact that this is *African* science fiction. As discussed already, scholarship has tended to interpret

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African film within certain parameters—essentially of speaking back to Western discourses about Africa and "correctly" representing Africa.[54] In the circuit of prestigious film festivals, "African film and filmmakers tend to be treated . . . as an *exception*" and outside the purview of mainstream film criticism and discourse.[55] Within this terrain of criticism and reception Kahiu resists the tokenistic praise of her film (as new *for an African* and thus worthy of praise) and insists on situating it firmly within a transnationally shared film canon.

In a 2013 interview, Kahiu describes the creation of *Pumzi* and says she "didn't choose science fiction"; rather, "because the story is about a girl in the future it became a science fiction film."[56] The film's transformation into science fiction came at the behest of her producer, who asked her to choose between science fiction and fantasy. She said that "so I made a decision at that point to go more science fiction than fantasy. But it wasn't an active choice that I'm going to make a science fiction film to deal with issues. I was just writing a story about something that I felt strongly about."[57] *Pumzi*'s genre was only secondary to its story, and while the producer had a role to play in shaping the final version of the film (as producers typically do), the creative heart of the film remained with Kahiu. While *Pumzi* is continually invoked as "new," Kahiu persistently connects the film and its science-fiction genre back to older storytelling traditions, and thus resists tokenistic praise of her work. In a TEDxEuston talk, Kahiu "expresses the concern that science fiction in African cultural contexts is not a new phenomenon and is inherent in African storytelling. . . . To insist that *Pumzi* is the first science fiction film from Kenya downplays the presence of futurist discourses in the country, and the African continent more broadly."[58] Kahiu argues that "way before any terms were coined that defined Afrofuturists there were storytellers who composed narratives populated with science, fantasy, mythology and speculative storylines" and that "Afrofuturism and speculative fiction have always existed in Africa. Indeed, they pre-date western images of science fiction."[59] Because science fiction is not actually new in Africa, the laurels bestowed on Kahiu are not as laudatory as they first appear. In this respect, her critical stance is one that actively resists being shallowly categorized. She has similarly expressed ambivalence about being labeled as Afrofuturist and an "African filmmaker."[60] She resists being labeled as *only* Afrofuturist, African, or new. She calls herself "a global African working in science fiction" and stakes a claim that "while

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African theories of cyclical time may influence my work, I am equally affected in the idea of multiverses being explored in the [Large Hadron Collider]."[61] She is attempting to move herself and her artwork away from the possibility of easy categorization and into a space where she can be recognized as an artist without caveats.

Kahiu resists attempts by others to pigeonhole her work and markets herself as a "global African" artist making films that fit squarely within a transnationally shared canon of global cinema. Marijke de Valck argues that it is through using words such as "auteur, talent, and personal voice" that "festivals position filmmakers in the art historical lineage of other great masters in the fine arts, literature, theatre, dance and music" and thus reinforce their own legitimacy as artistic showcases.[62] Kahiu can thus be seen as speaking in the "language" of film festivals when she asserts her creativity and innovation and positions herself as an auteur. Marketing is instrumental for priming spectators and critics to interpret films—for instance, to see a film like *Pumzi* as new, as science fiction, or rather as part of long-standing transnational storytelling traditions. Literature scholar Graham Huggan argues that "for every aspiring writer at the 'periphery,' there is a publisher at the 'center,' eager to seize upon their work as a source of marketable 'otherness,'"[63] and the same may be true that film festivals and critics seize upon the films of African filmmakers for their Otherness. Yet to focus only on the gatekeepers—be they publishers, festivals, or critics—neglects the agency of the cultural producers to also shape the reception and circulation of their products. Yet, as my discussion of Riverwood has shown, the ability to speak the right language and to market one's self is also a class-based competency, and thus the middle-class position of Nairobi-based female filmmakers must be accounted for.

"TARZANISM" AND AFRICAN FILMMAKING: THE CASE OF ONE FINE DAY FILMS

Historically, former colonizers, and particularly France, have been the dominant funders of African films, and a substantial body of literature has been published discussing the power dynamics underpinning these filmmaking relationships.[64] In *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (2010), African film scholar Manthia Diawara outlines a history of engagements between "the West" and Africa that he regards as deeply problematic.

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He states: "The West always thinks it can solve Africa's problems just by landing there, hand-picking some people and organizing them to fight against ignorance, disease and corruption."[65] He goes on to term this type of engagement "humanitarian 'Tarzanism.'" Throughout his book he remains deeply suspicious of any non-African (and particularly French) involvement in the domain of African filmmaking and life more generally, arguing that "we all know by now that 'partnership' has become a buzzword for appropriating the concerns of Africans for the purposes of European and American aid workers."[66] Yet examining the tensions, compromises, and negotiations in specific partnerships is necessary when evaluating commercial and artistic relationships. Thus, while remaining aware of the history of unequal power relations between Euro-America and Africa that Diawara highlights forcefully, it is nonetheless necessary to test these assumptions against contemporary case studies. The production project One Fine Day Films provides a useful example.

One Fine Day is a philanthropic production and training venture that has successfully generated a series of critically acclaimed feature films since its first project, *Soul Boy* (dir. Hawa Essuman, 2010). In addition to *Soul Boy*, One Fine Day has produced *Nairobi Half Life* (dir. David "Tosh" Gitonga, 2012), *Something Necessary* (dir. Judy Kibinge, 2013), *Veve* (dir. Simon Mukali, 2014), *Kati Kati* (dir. Mbithi Masya, 2016), *Supa Modo* (dir. Likarion Wainaina, 2018), and *Lusala* (dir. Mugambi Nthiga, 2019). The project was started by the renowned German film director Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*) and his wife Marie Steinmann, and is supported by a number of different organizations, including Deutsche Welle (DW) Akademie, a German development organization focused on media capacity building, and Ginger Ink Films, a British-funded production and service company based in Nairobi.[67] During the production of *Soul Boy*, Essuman was mentored by Tykwer. For subsequent projects, One Fine Day expanded its activities to run an intensive two-week-long filmmakers' workshop with participants drawn from across the African continent, before producing a film that would ideally include a crew chosen from workshop participants.

When Judy Kibinge made *Something Necessary* for One Fine Day, she had already been working as a filmmaker in Nairobi for more than a decade after having a successful career in advertising. Kibinge approached the workshop as a competition where it "became let the first man or woman win because everyone needs to make that film that will then put you on a certain international platform."[68] For Kibinge, the experience of participating in One Fine

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Day was worthwhile because she knows "what it is to be in the trenches" looking for money and making films, yet never having "enough to make a film that has the technical qualities you need to hit the big festivals globally," while at the same time wanting to reach that "larger platform."[69] The need for technical quality to make it into film festivals is forcefully demonstrated by the longtime systematic exclusion of Nollywood films from festivals.[70] In Kibinge's assessment, the value of working with One Fine Day (and other transnational film projects) stems from the fact that "if you make a film that is good enough, [it] will quickly put you on a global platform—the same one that you've been trying to get to for various years."[71] The possibility that working with One Fine Day could lead to a larger platform was aptly demonstrated by *Soul Boy*, as we saw in chapter 1. Kibinge wanted to reach larger audiences (particularly, international ones) and saw participating in One Fine Day as a way to achieve that goal.

Yet attempting to reach this larger platform through One Fine Day meant engaging in a process of negotiation. Kibinge participated in the One Fine Day workshop because she wanted to direct the film, but the screenplay was not revealed until after she was chosen, and she was deeply disappointed that she would be making a film about the Kenyan post-election violence of 2007–2008, stating: "It's not the film that . . . I would have chosen to make."[72] While she could not choose the film's subject, she still attempted to shape the film according to her own agenda and vision, and she was credited with adapting the screenplay by Mungai Kiroga in addition to directing the film. A serious issue she had to negotiate in working with One Fine Day was potential challenges to her authorship through being seen as sharing credit with One Fine Day. Having the authorship of a film questioned simultaneously challenges its status and potential value because "auteurism has always been about cultural capital, staking a claim for cinema's status as art."[73]

Auteurist discourse is alive and well at film festivals. Kibinge displayed a keen awareness of exactly this dynamic when she described the questioning of her authorial voice, presumably by critics and curators, as "the big minus about being part of an initiative" like One Fine Day.[74] It is "really dangerous" for a filmmaker to look like "the figurehead on a workshop piece," she said, and it was this risk that Kibinge weighed up when deciding whether or not to be part of One Fine Day. She suspects that the reason why the film did not travel to the highest-profile festivals beyond the Toronto International Film Festival is "the cynicism that comes back when the caption

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comes up at the end" saying that the film was part of the One Fine Day development program. Of course, it is also possible that the curators of those festivals simply did not consider the film "good" enough to show in their programs. However, given the pervasiveness of a discourse that values authenticity, creativity, and auteur cinema in the operation of film festivals and among world cinema critics, it is likely that even the possibility of impure authorship had a role to play in eliminating it from consideration. Hence there is a double standard at work: "Auteurs" are valued for their creativity, but Nairobi-based female filmmakers, because they are African, are judged and valued for the authenticity of their films.

The same issues facing Kibinge in regard to *Something Necessary* also faced Gitonga and Essuman in regard to their One Fine Day films (*Nairobi Half Life* and *Soul Boy*, respectively). According to one critic, "pinning down the particularly Kenyan contribution" to *Nairobi Half Life* is "difficult" because of Tykwer's participation.[75] This framing leaves open the question of whether the film is really Tom Tykwer's instead of Tosh Gitonga's while simultaneously questioning the national authenticity of the film. It thus participates in a discourse that defines African films based on the conceptually nebulous quality of "Africanness." In a discussion of *Soul Boy*, Berlinale film curator Dorothee Wenner wrote: "It was wonderful to watch this Kenyan success story unfolding. But the joy was not shared by all—some people in Nairobi were highly critical of the project and asked, on the occasion of the [African Movie Academy Award] nominations, whether *Soul Boy* was really an African film, given the strong German involvement."[76] Here we find ourselves on familiar, if tired, critical terrain where the question of authenticity and Africanness in film is paramount. A key limitation of the One Fine Day project, then, is not that it is Tarzanist, but rather that it is *perceived* to be.

Barbara Karuana worked with One Fine Day on the production of the film *Kati Kati* and spoke very highly of the initiative, describing it as "extremely bold." She had no time for nativist critiques of the initiative:

> I've heard a lot of opinions on how it's not really a Kenyan film, it's a German film because it's funded by Germans and mainly done by Germans. But I completely disagree with that, because as long as you have the effort of Kenyans in it, the handprint of Kenyans, you can tell that this is a Kenyan story, you can see the Kenyan-ness of it. What does it matter who held the boom mic? What does it really matter? And I really, really acknowledge that and appreciate it so

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> much. Maybe it's because I've worked with them. But maybe it's *because* I've worked with them that I have authority to say that it's one of the best things to ever happen to filmmakers here.[77]

The critics of African films that critique the involvement of foreign funds are also importantly ignoring the fact that co-production is often a necessity for independent filmmaking today, due to the difficulty of securing full financing from one individual funder. Adopting a staunch critique on the grounds of African-ness is thus a refusal to see that cinema is underpinned by commercial relationships. When Nairobi-based female filmmakers recognize the value of One Fine Day in their media ecosystem, they are demonstrating an explicit awareness of these relationships and a desire to be integrated into a wider economy of filmmaking.

One aspect of projects like One Fine Day is bringing in experienced filmmakers from outside Africa and giving local creatives a hands-on opportunity to learn from them. Producer Emily Wanja, herself an alumna of One Fine Day, found this particularly valuable:

> When you get a chance to interact with these people, always it's an added advantage. Because they are coming from industries that are more developed. They have loads of experience. . . . It's always just good to know that this is how it's done on a bigger scale and on a higher level. Then you have something to work towards.[78]

These initiatives offer a needed "injection of knowledge and know-how" that can help not just individual participants but the whole industry move to the next level, according to Judy Kibinge.[79] Indeed, after participating in a One Fine Day workshop, veteran filmmaker Appie Matere now encourages others—both her employees and anyone who wants to get into production—to attend the workshops as a way of acquiring knowledge "because the things you learn there, it's amazing."[80] The main thing she learned at the workshop was how to pitch her films and capitalize on her current films:

> When we did the festivals with *Killer Necklace* we should have had another project ready . . . because you've got a lot of people asking. And we're like, "Ah, we're writing the script, we're getting ready with it." So that's when I think really, oops, wasted festival. A whole year wasted going to festivals without the next project. . . . I realized as a producer you need to always have the next project ready, if anybody asks you. You actually carry it ready. And I'm looking for this amount of money. And you pitch immediately.[81]

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She was already very experienced in the industry and still felt she had something valuable to gain from participating. As we will see in chapter 6, Kenya is not currently home to a major, well-equipped film school, and there are few opportunities for aspiring filmmakers to train locally (both employers and recent film school graduates made the same complaints about the inadequacy of the film training programs that currently exist in Kenya).[82] Intensive master classes like the One Fine Day workshop are thus seen as a vital stopgap measure. On the whole, the Nairobi-based female filmmakers I interviewed perceived One Fine Day not as a "Tarzanist," foreign intrusion in local cinema but rather as a collaborative project of great potential benefit to the local film industry.[83] According to *Soul Boy* director Hawa Essuman, a critical part of these projects is their collaborative dimension because with collaborations "there's a trade of intelligence. Not just expertise, but perspectives," and these resources are "just as important as money is, sometimes more important."[84] For those filmmakers with the necessary cultural and social capital to gain admittance into highly competitive projects, such as One Fine Day, the access to resources and skills can be transformative.

The case of One Fine Day Films suggests that what "we all know" about partnerships across borders (to borrow Diawara's expression) needs to be rethought and, at the very least, rendered more complex and nuanced. A more productive way forward is to recognize that in light of its cross-border collaborative approach to filmmaking, *Soul Boy* "is not an 'African film.' It is simply a film in which many Africans have played key roles."[85] The same of course is true of the other One Fine Day films. Categorizing these films as African or not is to impose a closure on the texts that can easily stray into essentialism. The quest for African "authenticity" is a fantasy that neglects the fact that filmmaking is *both* a commercial and an artistic endeavor. Nairobi-based female filmmakers are alive to these tensions, and, as I have shown, they work to overcome them so that they can maximize the benefit they receive from projects like One Fine Day.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the ways in which Nairobi-based female filmmakers negotiate encounters with transnational distribution circuits and funding bodies and offered a challenge to prevalent interpretations in world cinema studies that see these relationships as inherently problematic. As

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Hesmondhalgh and Saha argue, "we need an account of indigenous, minority and other forms of cultural production that does not see their interaction with commerce as in itself a sign of aesthetic or political vitiation."[86] This chapter has attempted to provide such an account. Nairobi-based female filmmakers are members of a transnational middle class with interests, experiences, and tastes that are not geographically bound to Kenya. When we account for this class position, it becomes ever more tenuous to interpret their filmmaking careers as "less authentic" when they involve collaborations with non-Kenyans in either production or distribution phases.

Filmmakers must strategically negotiate multiple funding possibilities as they hustle to make their films. Ng'endo Mukii, for example, received $10,000 from Focus Features Africa First to make *The Teapot*, and this is a significant amount of money, but the cost of shooting the film (excluding post-production costs) was already $13,000.[87] In the case of *Pumzi*, Kahiu needed funding from Africa First, the Changamoto Arts Fund, and from the Goethe Institut to make the film, and said, after the funding, that "you just put everything else into it yourself."[88] Making films, even with the backing of international partners, still requires hustling to complete them, and for this reason studying transnational connections requires a firm grounding in the milieu of Nairobi.

I have shown how a discourse of authenticity operates within world cinema shaping which films are seen as valuable, and how this discourse is inadequate for explaining the filmmaking practices of contemporary African filmmakers. Much of the criticism has at its core a binary between "Western" and Other audiences, but this structuring of global audiences "hinges on a hypothetical geopolitically monolithic spectator" and ignores the centuries of cross-cultural interaction and interconnectedness that define every local context.[89] The boundaries between producers and spectators are much more fluid than this binary thinking allows. Indeed, popular films often *become* art films when they are shown in prestigious circuits abroad: The process of crossing the right border (into festivals and not, for instance, into diaspora markets) makes a film "art" rather than "popular" cinema.[90] It is noteworthy that *Soul Boy* and *Nairobi Half Life*—to give just two examples—were, in addition to the international popularity already discussed, very popular with spectators in Nairobi across the socioeconomic spectrum, including residents of informal settlements such as Kibera and Mathare.[91] This further suggests the need to rethink critical frames that position African and other audiences as dichotomous.

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