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Creative Hustling

Women Making and Distributing Films from Nairobi

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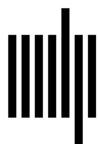

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3

ENTREPRENEURIALISM AND STYLISTIC INTERNATIONALIZATION ON SCREEN

In autumn 2013, I chaired a Q&A with Judy Kibinge after a screening of her film *Something Necessary*, at the London Film School, held as part of the festival Film Africa. I asked Kibinge a standard question to wrap up the evening: What are your influences as a filmmaker? Ever the gracious interviewee, she took my question seriously. She described her first experience answering that question and how it made her "start to feel really hot and bothered" because she would "have to give a really deep answer, and preferably African," and that now she is "just honest." She then went on to describe her love of *Lost in Translation* and films by Paul Haggis and Quentin Tarantino.[1] Her response reveals a fundamental tension: She felt expected to state African filmmakers as her guiding influences while actually being influenced by auteur cinema from Hollywood. Her response is perhaps even more revealing of the pressure African filmmakers are sometimes under to conform to what is deemed appropriate for them—by festival curators and attendees, members of the press, and scholars. Hollywood and European cinema has often been seen as the hegemon that African filmmakers must deconstruct in the search for their own authentic film language.[2] Nairobi-based female filmmakers operate in a web of cinematic influences that come from all over the world. Is it not their right to draw on these traditions as they see fit?

Kibinge's astute response reminds us of the politics of transnational film circulation and the tightrope African female filmmakers must walk in this space. Understanding the politics of their circulation requires a close reading of the films themselves, because, as Kibinge's response shows, African filmmakers are expected to make films that look a certain way and are about certain things. In this chapter, we will zoom in on a selection of films to understand both their styles and themes. We will see that the films that have traveled widely and been the most discussed outside Kenya—the ones that have been lauded and conform to expectations of world cinema as defined in the last chapter—are only a selection of what these filmmakers work

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on. If we are interested in understanding the circulation of their films, we need to look at all the work they actually do—and not just samples that are stylistically internationalized. Making many diverse kinds of films is central to their work as hustlers.

STYLISTIC INTERNATIONALIZATION

As we saw in the previous chapter, some films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers gain international recognition in prestigious circuits such as international film festivals. What characteristics do "well-traveled" Kenyan films share? As we shall see, the winning formula seems to be global standard production values matched with extroverted content—that is, content thematically and politically relevant to audiences beyond the home context.[3] In describing a film project that was initially developed for a Kenyan audience but then transitioned during production to also trying to attract an international audience, media scholar Joshua McNamara wrote that this shift in audience was not "a move from national Kenyan to international distribution, but rather . . . the stylistic 'internationalisation' of content for a Kenyan audience."[4] His phrase aptly captures how a film can be for African *and* international audiences simultaneously and how we can read this from the film text itself. Extroversion is not a function of distribution necessarily but rather a style that can be read from the text.[5] A key component of extroversion is "explicit engagement with—or a capacity to be read as engaging—broad critical debates."[6] Films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers certainly engage in broad critical debates, including many of the films we have encountered thus far, for example, *Scarred: The Anatomy of a Massacre* on human rights, *Saikati* on female empowerment, and *Pumzi* on climate change. These films are also aesthetically beautiful with correspondingly high production values.

Through its global standard aesthetics and universal cautionary theme, *Pumzi* displays stylistic internationalization. *Pumzi* depicts a dystopian future and a postwar apocalyptic landscape where humankind lives underground. Asha, the protagonist, works in the virtual natural history museum, and when she receives a mysterious soil sample containing water (a supposed impossibility since the outside is *supposed* to be dead), she escapes the colony and ultimately sacrifices her life to plant a seed in the source of the hydrated soil. The message of human-perpetrated environmental destruction is clear,

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and the film participates in a long history of cautionary science fiction, as we saw in chapter 2. Yet the film gives equal weight to the pleasure of the viewing experience as it does to its ecopolitical message because of Kahiu's intentional strategy of precisely composing each frame of the film to look like a photograph.[7] *Pumzi* is thus part of a long-standing film tradition, going back to the earliest African films, where pleasure and politics are inextricably intertwined.[8]

Stylistic internationalization is also on display in Kahiu's film *From a Whisper*. The film tells the story of two people differently impacted by the bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi in 1998. The first is a young woman (Tamani) who lost her mother in the attack and the second is a police officer (Abu) who was unable to prevent a close friend (Fareed) from carrying out the bombing. Kahiu's motive in writing the film was to engage in serious social commentary on a topic of direct relevance to a Kenyan audience: preventing and responding to political violence in Kenya:

> I was dealing with the idea of forgiveness when I was writing that film. . . . The idea of: How do you forgive yourself, your nation, or people who are exactly like you for such an atrocity, or such a heinous act on human kind? . . . Unless you actually start to forgive people, you have no idea how to understand them. Or how to understand their capacity for committing such violence. . . . We need to take responsibility for raising the children that are creating such atrocities, or are creating such violence, and how violence in the only language that they can use to be heard. . . . We have to recognize . . . that we are part of the creation of that world. . . . [If we do not,] then we are dooming ourselves to continue the same action and to continue that same violence, and continue the same reactions.[9]

From a Whisper has a neat cause and effect narrative structure and Hollywood-style production values. The film speaks its political message through the conventions of narrative (commercial) cinema. Here we see stylistic internationalization at work—in its theme it speaks directly to a local audience, but its form ensures that it is legible to an audience far beyond this demographic.

Her most recent film, *Rafiki*, is also stylistically internationalized. Alongside other recent films from Nairobi such as *I Am Samuel* (dir. Peter Murimi, 2020) and *Stories of Our Lives* (dir. Jim Chuchu, 2014), the film explicitly engages with broad critical debates on LGBTQ rights. *Rafiki* tells the story of two young women in love in Nairobi. It has a bold, distinct aesthetic of cool music and bright pastels, and the production values are extremely

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high. The quietly unfolding love story is intercut with stories of the bigotry the young lovers face in Nairobi and how they work to assert control over their own destinies, both as a couple and as individuals in the process of coming of age. In describing how she chose the project, Kahiu said:

> My first and foremost concern was to find a love story. This is what I wanted to do. When I came across "Jambula Tree"—because of the texture and nuances, the profound love that the main characters had for each other—I wanted to tell this story. Even though it's a hard subject because it's taboo—two girls falling in love with each other in a country where this is outlawed—it was very important for me to tell a love story because that's what it is: how true love can triumph above everything.[10]

The subject matter of *Rafiki* strongly influenced its circulation. The film was internationally recognized through its selection within the Un Certain Regard selection at Cannes—an extremely prestigious curated showcase of innovative auteur films. Barlet reminds us that "the Cannes Film Festival has often selected African films for their sociological or realist content rather than for their cinematic originality," and in his view that is what happened with *Rafiki*.[11] The film gained infamy when the Kenya Film Classification Board banned it—continuing their history of homophobia (which we will explore more in chapter 4). However, while the film undoubtedly traveled because of the importance of its subject matter, its "feminine aesthetic," including its use of soft pastel colors, is distinctly original.[12] Much like the queer anthology film *Stories of Our Lives* that told the stories of queer Kenyans, *Rafiki* should be recognized for both its style and substance, and to fail to do so would be to fail to recognize Kahiu's artistry.

Wanuri Kahiu's films are stylistically internationalized, but she is not the only Nairobi-based female filmmaker to make films of this type. Hawa Essuman's urban fairy tale *Soul Boy* also fits within this category. It has a sunny and colorful aesthetic, and with its polished production values, it conforms to global standards. The film has a cause-and-effect narrative where a young boy named Abila must complete a series of tasks to save his father's soul. The film is set in the informal settlement of Kibera and drew on crew and actors from Kibera. Rather than focusing on this context of obvious material scarcity and fetishizing poverty (as is very common for films set in "slums" and for journalistic representations of Kibera),[13] *Soul Boy* treats its setting simply as home, making a bold political statement in the process.

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However, to my eye, the most revealing scene of the film is set not in Kibera but in the upmarket suburb of Karen, in the home of the wealthy white family where Abila's aunt works. Abila's quest takes him to the house, and when an accident leaves the owner's young daughter choking, Abila saves her life. In a subsequent scene the father sits with Abila in his spacious living room surrounded by fine objects and thanks Abila, in the process handing him several thousand Kenyan shillings. The act of gratitude is genuine from a man who suspects Abila's family could use the money (Abila's family is at risk of eviction and the money is ultimately used to pay their debt to their landlord, but there is no suggestion that the father knows the details of this situation). Admittedly, the film never dwells on Abila's poverty, presenting him as a happy and precocious child. Nevertheless, the context of a wealthy expatriate handing money to a poor African child is deeply uncomfortable, and this scene suggests the wider social context in which Abila lives, and its stark inequality.

In a similar way, *Saikati* also makes a powerful critique about racial and material inequality alongside its more dominant presentation of female empowerment. Saikati goes to Nairobi at the insistence of her Nairobi-based cousin Monica. Once there, Monica transforms Saikati into a fashionable urban woman through a montage makeover sequence, and the two go to a fancy hotel to meet two white British tourists for dinner. Unbeknownst to Saikati, Monica is working as a sex worker and intends for Saikati to do the same. When Saikati realizes what is expected from her, she flees from the hotel room, and subsequently receives an impassioned speech by Monica that her sex work results from her dire economic circumstances and need to provide for her baby. The film thus critiques the wealthy men who come to Kenya to take advantage of women whose material circumstances leave them few other options. Following this incident Saikati decides to return home. African film and literature scholar Mbye Cham critiques *Saikati* on the grounds that its second half, where Saikati, Monica, and the two British tourists all go to the Mara (the final three for a holiday and Saikati to go home), "turns into a promotional tourist piece."[14] However, while the Mara is shown as beautiful and wildlife-filled, and the resorts within it as luxurious, *Saikati* does more than promote tourism.[15] Rather, the film as a whole suggests the darker side of affluent tourism where rich foreigners come to Kenya, but remove themselves completely from the social realities of the places they are visiting.

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The films discussed so far here both aspire to a "global standard" and achieve it. Furthermore, they all display stylistic internationalization by being for local and international audiences at the same time. Aspiring to international, or even global, success is the goal of many filmmakers, but, as my next section will show, Nairobi-based female filmmakers also entrepreneurially experiment in a range of other styles as they hustle to build and sustain their careers.

ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIMENTS IN STYLE

The potential ideological and didactic role of African cinema is well known, and films can certainly be valuable tools for identity formation and for societal transformation. Making *Saikati* was a form of political and artistic expression for Anne Mungai, for example, as we saw in chapter 1. However, a tradition of scholarship has overemphasized the political and didactic dimensions of African cinema at the expense of understanding the entertainment value of these films.[16]

Understanding the importance of the works of Nairobi-based female filmmakers requires examining the seriousness as well as the entertainment value of their films. One director whose work exemplifies this tendency is Wanjiru Kinyanjui. Her 1995 film *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* tells the story of a woman named Mumbi who leaves her abusive husband in Nairobi and returns to her rural hometown to rebuild her life. Attempting to join a Christian women's association to benefit from their employment activities, she is rebuffed by them for having chosen to leave her husband. Instead, she takes a job in a bar—ignoring detractors who question the morality of her work—and builds a new life for herself and her daughter, in the process finding a loving partner and witnessing the downfall of the bigoted members of the women's group as their campaign to cut down the town's sacred mugumo tree fails. Rachael Diang'a argues that the film can be classified in the "return to source" category (from Diawara's typology) because it lets "Mumbi find solution[s] to her predicament at the foot of the sacred tree after stern rejection by the Christian mothers. . . . The film portrays the African traditional religion as a more reliable solace to the dejected than Christianity, whose principles are still not well understood by the African converts. Here, the African is free to explore alternative ways of solving socio-cultural problems that face him/her. One of these possibilities

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is looking back to his pre-colonial traditions."[17] Yet what this criticism neglects is that the film is also funny. It is, to use Kinyanjui's description, "a comedy about culture."[18] Rather than a film about recuperating precolonial traditions and a conflict between Christianity and an African religion, the film can also be read as a comedy that sets up intolerant women as the butt of the joke. In a final scene, the women's group sets out to chop down the tree at night (after failing to win the support of the town to remove the tree) only to be attacked by fire ants as they go to raise their axes. To escape the ants, they strip off much of their clothing and run away screaming. Mumbi is there as witness to this ridiculous spectacle and laughs from the bushes, and the audience is aligned with her narrative perspective. The film invites the audience to laugh at the downfall of these women not because they are Christian, and not in order to exult precolonial traditions, but because they are narrow-minded, prudish, and uppity. The film exults in the irony of the buttoned-up Christian women being nigh on butt-naked.

The Battle of the Sacred Tree is not only the serious "art film" it was once thought to be, but also one geared toward entertaining an audience through comedy. Yet it seems likely that *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* has received academic attention where Kinyanjui's later films have not, precisely because it is stylistically internationalized with an appropriately "serious" theme.[19] When we consider her entire oeuvre—rather than pigeonholing her as an "art" filmmaker—it becomes clear that Kinyanjui, like all Nairobi-based female filmmakers, is *both* a filmmaker *and* an entrepreneur.

In addition to making stylistically internationalized films, Kinyanjui has also experimented with ultra-low-budget Riverwood filmmaking. She made *Bahati* and *Manga in America* as part of a filmmaking experiment to see what a collaboration between Riverwood and a filmmaker with her training and experience would look like. She said that Riverwood filmmakers "have no film education at all [and] they've never been near a serious professional crew" to see how they film. Furthermore, "They don't consider sound. They don't have a director. They just have a photographer, cameraman. . . . But what was good about it is you have to begin somewhere, with or without education, with or without money."[20]

The (Kenyan) producer of *Manga in America* "came from America and was very ambitious and said: 'I'm going to do a Riverwood.'"[21] He was then referred to Kinyanjui to help realize the project because she had been researching the Riverwood phenomenon.[22] Riverwood's hasty production

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process is reflected in the films' aesthetics. *Manga in America* has a washed-out color palette and *Bahati* has a dull gray tint and uneven sound quality (loud background noise is often picked up, and sometimes to the extent that it obscures the dialogue). The acting is clearly improvised, as can be seen from a scene when Bahati meets a mysterious woman, perhaps a witch, in Nairobi's central Uhuru Park who demands 3,000 KES ($26) and in exchange promises him a job. When they meet the following day to make the exchange, the scene unfolds as they sit awkwardly next to each other on a small bench, both almost directly facing the camera. He seems to believe the woman is cheating him, and logically following this he should be outraged, but he protests only half-heartedly. This weak protest is not driven by narrative necessity, but rather seems to result from an untrained actor receiving little direction and working within the confines of a script whose narrative gaps had not yet been filled in. After all, some of the most famous film movements—such as postwar Italian Neorealism—use nonprofessional actors. What distinguishes *Bahati* from this tradition (and contemporary films from, for instance, Latin America, such as *Cidade de Deus* [dir. Fernando Meirelles, 2002]) is the level of attention paid to *directing* these actors and integrating their performances into an overall directorial vision for the film. In the case of *Bahati*, the scenes instead appear unrehearsed.

These two films lack the consistency of vision that was apparent in Kinyanjui's feature *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*, as well as its stylistic polish. However, Kinyanjui *chose* to work in both forms—stylistically internationalized and ultra-low-budget Riverwood filmmaking—which demonstrates that she is a filmmaking entrepreneur willing to experiment in many visual forms and not one wedded to a conception of film as high art or herself as an art film auteur.

Nairobi-based female filmmakers are highly entrepreneurial, and Judy Kibinge's films further demonstrate this fact. Her first feature film, *Dangerous Affair*, as we saw in chapter 1, is a romantic comedy about the loves, marriages, and affairs of young urban professionals. Kibinge's subsequent film, *Project Daddy*, is a romantic comedy where a vivacious heroine named Mumbi breaks up with her fiancée Fred and decides she does not need him in order to have a baby. She subsequently sets up "project daddy" to find the ideal sperm donor. Of course, following the conventions of the genre, Mumbi and Fred reunite in the end because their separation has been based

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on a series of misunderstandings. The aesthetic style of *Project Daddy* is identical to that of *Dangerous Affair*.

Films like *Dangerous Affair* and *Project Daddy* are not concerned with creating an African film language in opposition to Hollywood or European dominance—unlike the first generation of African filmmakers who were explicitly responding to the problematic and racist depiction of Africa and Africans in colonial cinema[23]—but rather telling entertaining stories about urban life in Africa. *Dangerous Affair* is revolutionary, after all, not for being a rom-com about hip, urban, black characters (indeed, this has been the subject of much North American media) but for showing this lifestyle *in Nairobi* for the first time. In an argument about Nigerian video films, Larkin suggests these videos have "fashioned aesthetic forms and modes of cultural address based on the experiences of the societies they address rather than those of the West—a prime concern of third cinema—but this fashioning has emerged not so much in opposition to Hollywood and Western cultural values, but *through* and *out* of the history of that engagement."[24] The style of *Dangerous Affair* and *Project Daddy* may not be oppositional, but through showing urban life and city dwellers as unconflictedly African, the films have the same function as the video films Larkin describes. While the films certainly draw on American popular film forms, they use those elements on their own terms. The appeal of highly popular Ghanaian video movies "is linked to their enormous capacity to recontextualize and localize forms and styles associated with global mass culture."[25] *Project Daddy* and *Dangerous Affair* can be read in a similar way.

Dangerous Affair is a seminal film in the history of filmmaking in Kenya and marked the beginning of a new era of film production, yet it has received remarkably little academic attention. Perhaps it has been excluded for lacking a political position in the eyes of scholars focused on engagé cinema and oppositional film language, or because it lacks the stylistically international production values that would see it travel widely on the international film festival circuit. Only Kibinge's most recent fiction film, *Something Necessary*, has been subject to in-depth textual analysis in scholarly fora.[26] Not coincidentally, this was her first film to gain significant and prestigious attention at international film festivals. Film festivals "play a key, if often underacknowledged, role in the writing of film history. Festival screenings determine which movies are distributed in distinct cultural arenas, and hence

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which movies critics and academics are likely to gain access to."[27] Thus, it comes as no surprise that Kibinge would begin to receive academic attention from scholars outside Kenya only once she had a film travel on the international film festival circuit.

Something Necessary tells the stories of Anne—a survivor of rape and a gang attack on her farm that left it in ruins, her husband dead, and her son comatose—and Joseph, a member of that gang. In one of Joseph's final scenes, we see him attempting to atone for his actions against Anne. It is dusk and we see Joseph framed in the center of the screen in silhouette against a dusky blue, cloudy sky carrying a fence post and then thrusting it into the ground. He works in silence installing fence posts and attaching strings of barbed wire between them. A pensive and dreamy instrumental track dominated by a simple xylophone beat plays. Through montage editing we see him progressing and the fence growing. In one cut he is shown with Anne's farmhouse in the background, lights on, showing their proximity as he works—firmly establishing the link between his actions and his motivation. He silently works, perhaps through the night, and when his fence is complete he silently leaves. The scene has a quietly beautiful quality, projecting a deep pensiveness about what it takes to seek and deserve forgiveness. This scene, and the film as a whole, is poetic and thoughtful. Alongside this, through the intertwining character arcs of Anne and Joseph, where the film carefully explores the theme of reconciliation after violence, it engages in social commentary. *Something Necessary* is thus identifiable, in a way *Project Daddy* and *Dangerous Affair* are not, as a stylistically internationalized film.

Her favorite film and the one most emblematic of her as a filmmaker is *Killer Necklace* (2008). In her words:

> *Dangerous Affair* "was fun to do, but . . . if I had my choice that's not the film I'd make. *Project Daddy* was really fun, but it's not the film I'd make. But *Killer Necklace*? It just had darkness in it. And then everybody was cheating everybody. . . . That's the kind of film that I'd like to make again. Yeah, so it's my favorite film. Definitely.[28]

The film is based on a graphic novel, and these roots are immediately apparent in its moody blue coloring and the stylized female body on display in its opening scene. The opening establishing shots are of the outside of a mansion in a leafy Nairobi suburb. The only sound is birds chirping until

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we hear a female voice say: "Hi baby, of course we're still meeting." We do not yet see her on screen, but the camera tilts to a top-floor window, and when it cuts to the inside of the room we see a bathtub faucet in close up, covered in bubbles, and the camera pans across the tub revealing a woman bathing. We see only a portion of her leg at the knee—the bubbles tastefully obscure the rest of her body. The camera cuts to a close-up of her face holding a phone, and the scene ends with the words "I can't wait either, my love." At first we are led to believe this young woman, Noni, is the wealthy occupant of the mansion, but the film soon reveals she is a maid there and is thus deceiving her boyfriend, Mbugua, who in turn is deceiving her by not revealing that while he is a student, he is not affluent and lives precariously in an informal settlement. The central tension of the film is structured around the woman's desire for an elegant golden necklace and Mbugua's attempt to acquire it for her; this desire eventually destroys them both.

Kibinge is thus capable of making entertaining films geared toward a local market as well as stylistically internationalized films. Her choice to work in these various forms is highly entrepreneurial. Importantly, making the stylistically internationalized *Something Necessary* is also a demonstration of her entrepreneurialism. As we saw in the previous chapter, she participated in the One Fine Day project in an attempt to reach a larger platform and strategically grow her career. *Something Necessary* has received the most prestigious attention of all her films, but focusing only on this type of filmmaking obscures a deeper understanding of her career not only as an "auteur" filmmaker but also as a screen media entrepreneur willing and able to work in many different modes, from popular to auteurist cinema.

Examining the entrepreneurial ambition that underpins each film is vital, rather than focusing exclusively on the finished film. In making her film *Leo* (2011), Jinna Mutune aspired to global success. As she says, "I didn't make this film so it can be watched by my family; I made it so it can be enjoyed globally." She wants to make films where "the story is universally understood but it's culturally rich."[29] Yet, arguably, the film does not reach this standard. It has a convoluted plot and lacks the cause-and-effect narrative structure conventional to Hollywood-style films. For example, the defining marker of the eponymous protagonist Leo is that he thinks he is a superhero, yet his powers are never demonstrated and his journey to figure out what they might be fades inexplicably out of the plot as the film progresses.

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She wanted to use *Leo* as a stepping-stone in her long-term strategy of building a global brand. She screened the film internationally (e.g., on tour between Houston, Dallas, Massachusetts, Berlin, and Copenhagen) with the idea of "introducing an African hero brand globally" in the run-up to another planned film, then titled *Leo 3D*.

> I'm creating a brand, like Spider Man brand. . . . I hope from there to set a standard in terms of fictional superhero making with all the special effects and great stories. The type you see in global super hero films. That's my attempt. Everything I didn't do in *Leo* because of budget constraints I'm going to do it in that one.[30]

Making this attempt requires hustling. As she elaborated,

> To build a brand like *Leo* it must take a huge chunk of your time. For the last six years, since I started writing *Leo*, every day I do something about it. Every day, every day. It's an email, it's a contact it's a network, it's a strategy. Every day. So it's not built over night. You must dedicate a chunk of time to it.[31]

Rather than a failed film, we can see *Leo* as part of a long-term entrepreneurial experiment.

UNTHINKING WOMEN'S CINEMA

Women taking space on screen is a radically political act, and all the more so in postcolonial circumstances. Bisschoff and Van de Peer make the vital point that "as long as the agency of representation remains imbalanced, i.e. if many more men make films than women; or if much more attention is paid to the work of male filmmakers in research than to the work of female filmmakers; or if the canon remains overwhelmingly male, there is a problem."[32] Celebrating the telling of stories by and about women is thus absolutely necessary. In the uplifting celebration of female filmmakers from around the world *Celluloid Ceiling: Women Film Directors Breaking Through*, communications scholar Maria Williams-Hawkins makes the following declaration about African female filmmakers:

> From small, dusty villages to sprawling big cities, these women tell African women's, all women's, stories. They do not focus on their experiences exclusively but write scripts with other women from other countries whose experiences bind them emotionally. Their stories come from Northern Africa down

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> to the tip of Cape Town. These stories tell of the trials that women face across the diaspora, rich or poor, pearlescent or onyx, in trials or triumphs, African. African women filmmakers are telling stories their way."[33]

While the kind of celebration written by Williams-Hawkins is necessary, this celebratory description does not go far enough. This narrative of African women triumphantly telling their stories and "breaking through" the "celluloid ceiling" suggests a unified subject (African women) telling a unified set of stories (women's stories). The films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers suggest we need to expand what we see as the purview of women's cinema and female filmmakers.

Reflecting on the representational power of cinema, Wanuri Kahiu described a friend's approach to filmmaking and how she has integrated it into her own filmmaking practice:

> When he makes films, he likes to think of them as his portrayal of heaven. So that he can say, "Here's my heaven" whenever he screens his film. And I really think that's a version of what I want to do. I really think that it's important to portray Kenya and Africa in such positive, beautiful, loving light. Because we are positive, beautiful, loving people. And there is very little of that on a global scale. . . . First, there's not enough love stories across the world; second, there's even less from Africa. So I always want to make beautiful portrayals of ourselves.[34]

Kahiu's description of what she aims to do with her movies shows that we need to be more expansive in defining what counts as one's own story, what counts as a portrayal of "ourselves." Making films that represent "ourselves" and having them distributed and exhibited at home matters. Hawa Essuman spoke eloquently and passionately on the importance of this kind of representation and distribution:

> It's really important that art needs to be consumed where it's made. I firmly believe that because when you interact with it you can see who you are more, and you can either accept, or reject, or contemplate, or whatever. . . . I so vehemently disagree with this idea that art is a luxury. It's not. It's a need. . . . We need to be able to express ourselves, and have ourselves be represented by ourselves. I think that exemplifies human beings. . . . That's why I love film so much.[35]

There are strong expectations about what women are supposed to create and the areas where they supposedly shine as creators, and this usually

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means emotionally driven films.[36] It is precisely this idea we must problematize and nuance, for "there are simply too many films by women in the world, all over the world, for female authorship alone to have any predictable effects."[37] The filmmaking careers of Nairobi's female filmmakers have been defined not simply by telling personal stories or "women's stories" but rather by a diverse range of narratives, as is true of African female filmmakers from across the continent.[38] For every hagiographic celebration of accomplished women (*African Is a Woman's Name*, *For Our Land*),[39] there is a suspenseful thriller about betrayal and male criminality (*Killer Necklace*) or an urban fairy-tale with a male protagonist (*Soul Boy*). For every story focused on a female protagonist (*Project Daddy*, *Pumzi*, *Saikati*, *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*), there is another that interweaves stories of men and women (*Something Necessary*, *Dangerous Affair*, *From a Whisper*, *Killer Necklace*). For every documentary about female bodies (*Yellow Fever*), there is another about truth and justice after atrocity (*Scarred: The Anatomy of a Massacre*). These filmmakers boldly tackle a huge variety of subjects.

They also have a wide variety of perspectives. While the majority have a feminist worldview, this perspective is not universal. As feminist film scholar E. Ann Kaplan contends, "being 'female' or 'male' does not signify any *necessary* social stance vis-à-vis dominant cultural attitudes" and therefore films by women are not "necessarily more progressive or forward looking" than those by men.[40] As an example, consider Anne Mungai's film *Tough Choices* (1998), a film that would certainly militate against any essentialist equation of female filmmakers with feminist visions. *Tough Choices* tells the story of a schoolgirl named Rebecca who accidentally gets pregnant after succumbing to pressure from her boyfriend Peter to have sex. The tough choice referenced in the title is whether or not Rebecca should have an abortion, though within the moral economy of the film, abortion is not a choice at all but tantamount to murder. Furthermore, responsibility for the pregnancy is attributed solely to Rebecca. When Peter learns of her pregnancy, he refuses to marry her, accuses her of being promiscuous, and tells her to get an abortion. Meanwhile, her best friend, who chose to remain chaste when given an ultimatum by her boyfriend, discovers that her boyfriend has seen the error of his ways, become a Christian, and now is also choosing abstinence. The film thus presents and aligns itself with a deeply conservative Christian worldview. Yet, at the same time, Anne Mungai's first film, *Saikati*, makes a powerful feminist statement about

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young women controlling their own destinies, as we have seen. We need to study the problematic films as well as the feminist ones in order to have a complete picture of the actions of women in film.

CONCLUSION

Nairobi-based female filmmakers have made many lauded stylistically internationalized films—from *Saikati* in the early 1990s to the Cannes premiere of Wanuri Kahiu's film *Rafiki* in 2018. These films have global standard production values and extroverted content: In the case of both *Saikati* and *Rafiki*, the broad critical debate they engage with concerns the capacity young women have to forge their own futures, whether that is pursuing an education or choosing whom to love. Nairobi-based female filmmakers also engage in a wide range of other critical debates—be they about climate change or justice after atrocity. While gender and the representation of women is a clear concern, their films go far beyond what is stereotypically classified as women's cinema.

The well-traveled films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers are all stylistically internationalized, but this style is not representative of their filmmaking work as a whole. Rather, as creative hustlers they entrepreneurially work across different filmmaking modes and experiment with multiple styles. This stylistic experimentation must be accounted for. Just as the history of female participation in African filmmaking is hidden when filmmaking is narrowly defined by the technology of production (e.g., celluloid vs. video), so too the participation of women is obscured when one style is singled out for the majority of analysis.

Examining the full oeuvres of Nairobi-based female filmmakers is essential to combating the stubbornly persistent marginalization of female filmmakers in African film studies scholarship. Feminist film scholar Beti Ellerson's *Sisters of the Screen* (2000) concretely demonstrated already twenty years ago that there *are* women working in African film industries through its thirty-six interviews with African and diasporan African female film practitioners, yet major works of scholarship still exclude them. Manthia Diawara, for instance, apologizes in his book *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* for ignoring African female filmmakers, noting that every reason he could come up with for this lack of attention "seemed too easy and sounded like excuses."[41] Likewise, in their work *Postcolonial*

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African Cinema: Ten Directors, David Murphy and Patrick Williams state that "the most regrettable omission" of their book is that they included only one female filmmaker.[42] I have shown that narrowly focusing on auteur filmmaking leads to these problems. As such it is no longer justifiable to apologize for ignoring female filmmakers; instead, a new methodology is necessary to write the complete history of filmmaking by Africans of all genders.

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