

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14127.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14127.001.0001)

# **Creative Hustling**

## **Women Making and Distributing Films from Nairobi**

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### **Citation:**

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**DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14127.001.0001**

**ISBN (electronic): 9780262372688**

**Publisher: The MIT Press**

**Published: 2023**

### **OA Funding Provided By:**

OA Funding from MIT Press Direct to Open



**The MIT Press**

## WATCHING FILM IN NAIROBI

I am on a bus from Yaya mall to the center of Nairobi (colloquially called “town”) to see a new documentary at the arts center Pawa254. If traffic moves consistently, this journey should take about twenty minutes. The journey starts in the usual way. The bus moves slowly, but continuously, yet, once we reach Valley Road—the stop just before mine—the bus driver makes a sudden and unannounced detour. He loops through a nearby neighborhood before retracing his route back the way we had come. It seems clear that he thought traffic was too bad along our scheduled route and decided a detour would be more effective. Our detour takes us through heavy traffic to Ngong Road, which has perhaps even more traffic than our original Valley Road route. We then crawl slowly along to an entirely new destination as rain starts falling and the bus roof starts leaking. Nearly an hour later our bus stops just before Uhuru Highway and the Railway Station. I must now run down the highway through the rain, jumping over the puddles that form in the holes in the sidewalk pavement, hoping I can make the twenty-five-minute walk before the sun sets and the film starts.

This account of a Nairobi “traffic experience” may seem dramatic, but it would be all too familiar to a Nairobiian. Indeed, I was telling filmmaker Lucille Kahara about a monthly film forum being held at the Alliance Française and she responded: “Why are these things in town? I don’t go to town! It’s always such a headache trying to get to town when the hour is like, what, six o’clock, seven o’clock. I’m not going to sit in traffic for an hour for [a film screening] . . . no.”<sup>1</sup> This is simply the nature of traffic in this congested city. There are too many cars for the available infrastructure and too few transit options to convince car owners they should travel in a different way. When I think about my experience sitting in traffic quagmires waiting to get to film screenings, I am struck by the paradoxical nature of Nairobi’s film culture. On the one hand, there are excellent spaces, events, and creatives that provide the foundation for what could become a world-class film

culture; yet on the other hand, these spaces almost always seem slightly out of reach because of the logistical difficulty of accessing them.

The Goethe Institut and Alliance Française host a roster of free cultural events from their locations in the center of town, but access to these spaces depends on the ability to pay for transport to get to them, which is not always easy and in some cases is impossibly expensive.<sup>2</sup> To turn to another important center of film exhibition in Nairobi, Pawa254 has a regular schedule of film events, yet, despite the center's location near State House and the center of the city, transit connections to the center are inadequate. There are bus stops nearby, providing a convenient and relatively inexpensive way of accessing the center during daylight hours, but options dramatically decline once the sun sets as it is widely considered dangerous to walk outside after sunset. Film screenings at Pawa254 are almost always free, but returning home after a film screening requires a car, motorcycle, or the financial ability to pay for an expensive taxi.<sup>3</sup>

These logistical problems pose a significant obstacle to the development of a public film viewing culture at the places where the films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers are most likely to screen. After all, why would anyone but the most dedicated cinephile lose ninety minutes of their day, walk in the rain down a highway, sit in a cramped bus with a leaky roof, and run through the streets before the dark sets in, all to see a new documentary?

In the previous chapter, I examined conditions of state and market censorship that limit the kinds of local content that audiences can encounter in Nairobi and the innovative strategies Nairobi-based female filmmakers employ to gain wider exposure for their films on television and in online spaces. In this chapter, I aim to emphasize the circumstances of circulation in Nairobi of the films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers. Film distribution scholar Ramon Lobato reminds us that “conditions of distribution are crucial in determining how audiences read films.”<sup>4</sup> Meaning is not fixed in a text; rather, “objects shift in meaning as they move through regimes and circuits of exchange . . . [and] the meaning of texts or objects is enacted through practices of reception.”<sup>5</sup> It is important to talk about *where* films are screened because, in the words of Hawa Essuman, “how you present something informs how you value it.”<sup>6</sup>

My intention in this chapter is not to describe all screen media viewing culture in Nairobi, but rather to focus on the specific locations where screen media productions by Nairobi-based female filmmakers circulate—namely,

the auditoriums of the Goethe Institut and Alliance Française and the art center Pawa254.<sup>7</sup> Traditional commercial outlets for film viewing—namely, devoted movie theaters—are relatively unimportant outlets for the exhibition of films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers, and cinema-going is a relatively expensive pastime.<sup>8</sup> I hope to show how conditions of distribution—or the lack thereof—are crucial to understanding which screen media products audiences in Nairobi are able to encounter in live settings.

#### CULTIVATING AUDIENCES

Nairobi's cinemas mostly screen international movies, so I was thrilled one night to see that Planet Media Cinemas in Prestige Plaza was screening an evening of Riverwood films. It was the first of such events organized by the Riverwood Ensemble (a Riverwood film producers association). I was excited to see these films up on the big screen, but evidently, my enthusiasm was not shared: I was one of only nine people to attend that evening. As I sat there in the near-empty cinema, I thought about why hardly anyone else was there. Riverwood films are dominantly distributed for home use and viewing on television screens, so perhaps their usual audience simply did not expect to find the films in a cinema and thus never looked at the cinema's advertising, or could not afford to attend even if they did see it. Similarly, perhaps the relatively affluent patrons of the cinema had no interest in local movies, instead preferring big-budget Hollywood cinema. Bisschoff and Overbergh suggest that the "key to determining whether a form of African cinema can be deemed 'popular' will be whether it is made by 'the people' and/or targeted at 'the people,' either through its content (topical relevance, cultural proximity) and/or because of an economic fit (appropriate pricing and delivery systems)."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, then, the pricing and delivery system of Planet Media Cinemas was unsuitable for Riverwood films at that time. To test the popularity of a film requires engaging both with the object itself (to assess its content) and with its circumstances of screening. Vitaly, conditions of distribution and exhibition must be accounted for.

An obstacle for building a new film culture is, of course, competing with the existing film culture. Hollywood, Bollywood, and Nollywood almost undoubtedly provide the frame of reference for the majority of film viewers in the city. French scholar Anjali Prabhu argues that "African directors, in decolonizing Western images of Africa presented to Africans, face

the problem of Hollywood-hooked audiences and escapist entertainment-seeking in their own countries.”<sup>10</sup> Prabhu draws on the problematic metaphor of being “hooked,” which calls to mind both addiction and fish caught on the end of a line—and I mention this view here because it is surprisingly pervasive.<sup>11</sup> I spoke with Hawa Essuman about audiences in Nairobi and she said:

I was having this conversation with someone a few years back, [about] the value of production value. They were like, “As long as you make the film.” I’m like, “No.” Because the thing is, our history of having watched films is international. Our fodder has been Latin American telenovelas, and Hollywood films, and English television. So we are used to seeing a very specific standard. . . . Having said that, we also consume an inordinate amount of Nollywood films. So there is that. And whilst we are really pleased to see ourselves sort of represented in some fashion on the big screen, we also wish that it was of better quality. . . . So, production value is important. Regardless of what anyone says. It’s important. And that will determine how [the film] stands.<sup>12</sup>

While foreign films are a major competitor, the metaphor of addiction to foreign films ignores the agency and individualism of audience members, as well as the media context in which they are situated and how past viewing shapes expectations. Film scholar Iain Robert Smith, who suggests that media globalization should be seen as “an interstitial process through which cultures meet and interact,” puts forward a more productive line of thinking.<sup>13</sup> Essuman was clear that production values are essential and that the standard of what makes a quality film is set internationally. This is the context Nairobi-based female filmmakers must contend with as they work to develop the film-viewing culture in Nairobi.

#### EUROPEAN CULTURAL CENTERS AND NAIROBIAN FILM FESTIVALS

The Goethe Institut and the Alliance Française are important spaces for the local exhibition of films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers, particularly through hosting small film festivals, as we shall see. They also host important events that promote and develop the local film industry. For example, the Lola Kenya Film Forum is hosted the first Monday of every month in the Goethe Institut auditorium, and has been running for more than a decade. Passionately run by Ogova Ondego, it screens films and hosts discussions with local filmmakers with an eye to developing local screen media

industries. It attracts a large crowd of industry professionals and aspiring filmmakers who discuss each film screened in minute detail. Ondego moderates a corresponding Facebook group that he diligently updates to foster discussion and share opportunities with filmmakers. Similarly, while I was in Nairobi, the local production company Lightbox began hosting a monthly film viewing and discussion forum at the Alliance Française. Both these initiatives work to build audiences for locally made film as well as to develop the skill of Nairobi-based filmmakers.

The Goethe Institut and the Alliance Française are both major European cultural centers that work globally. They work in a transnational way, but at the same time are intensely national cultural institutions, so these political dynamics must be unpacked. Each has a mission to promote the language of their home country through language classes (German for the Goethe Institut and French for the Alliance Française), to promote German or French culture more broadly, and to support local artistic scenes. The terms of exchange between the cultural centers and their partners (for instance, film festival organizers) are contentious, and the self-presented mission of each institution cannot be taken at face value. They work to promote local culture, but a simultaneous core objective is in promoting their own *national* culture and furthering their influence in Kenya through the exercise of “soft” power.<sup>14</sup>

The cultural institutions deliberately intend to promote their respective languages and cultures beyond their national borders and, through this exercise of soft power, to increase their global standing and power. In interviews literature scholar Raoul Granqvist conducted in 1998 with the directors of the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institut, they “project their institutes as philanthropic venues for local cultural production or ‘intercultural exchange,’” and yet these exchanges “must take place within the parameters of these cultural centres.”<sup>15</sup> Art and cultural studies scholar Will Rea suggests a danger in external funders gravitating only toward what is already familiar to them—“forms of culture that are recognizable within the terms of Western cultural industry”—and therefore “ignoring wider and more loosely constructed forms of cultural entrepreneurship.”<sup>16</sup> This line of critique suggests that because of their financial and institutional power, external organizations unduly influence the kinds of content created locally and, extending this argument, the kinds of events that find exhibition space in locally based foreign cultural institutions. However, Granqvist nuances this argument by noting that the users of and visitors to

the Goethe Institute and Alliance Française “may also have their own agendas, in that they employ their own subjective and collective persuasions for both coming and working there. They do not see themselves necessarily as being submerged or dominated.”<sup>17</sup> It is therefore essential to foreground the agency of each participant in negotiating these encounters.

The Goethe Institut and Alliance Française provide vital exhibition space in Nairobi. They provide a free venue, as well as associated benefits like security and publicity, leaving the event organizer to just “invite people in.”<sup>18</sup> Jackie Lebo described organizing an event with her company Content House where they would show an exhibition of approximately fifty sports photographs during the Olympics. Other venues wanted to charge them 300,000 KES (\$2,600), but the Alliance Française provided them with the venue free of charge.

They have a role. I’m like, people can complain of “foreign, foreign, whatever, whatever,” but where’s the other outlets? . . . So they definitely have a role. If you just need to have a screening, you need to have a discussion, if you need to launch a book—you don’t have to think of “I have to pay for a venue.” . . . So it’s very useful, the role that they play. But we’d like to see that role being supplemented. We don’t want them to go away, because they’ve done it a long time. We want it to be supplemented with local organizations. And I hope people like Pawa[254] are going to start doing something like that.<sup>19</sup>

However, given that the downside of a free venue is that the subsequent screenings must often be noncommercial in nature, the long history of the decommercialization of African film screenings in Africa must be considered here.<sup>20</sup> For instance, most African films that receive funding from France are “rarely visible in francophone Africa.”<sup>21</sup> Historically, French funding for African film came with many “strings attached,” including in the realm of film distribution: The money “was fronted in exchange for the rights to distribute the films in non-commercial venues such as French Cultural Centers; after such screenings, it was unlikely that commercial distributors would be interested in the films.”<sup>22</sup> French technicians were also imposed on African film productions—as a way of ensuring they had work—and it was mandatory that post-production work was carried out in France.<sup>23</sup> Thus, a national imperative is visible in this kind of French funding, where France supported the production of African films, but did so with the central intention of developing their own national film industry, and not with the intention of developing profitable and sustainable industries within Africa.

The current market in Nairobi is one where cultural centers provide a key venue for films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers to meet audiences in the city. At these centers, the most prominent way films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers are screened is in the context of film festivals that use the Goethe Institut and Alliance Française as venues.<sup>24</sup> A particularly important example is the Udada Film Festival, both because it is codirected by Nairobi-based female filmmaker Wanjiru Kinyanjui and because it is a women's film festival devoted to celebrating African female filmmakers. The festival's main venue was the auditorium of the Goethe Institut, but various events also took place at the Alliance Française, the National Museum, and the Michael Joseph Centre.<sup>25</sup> The festival program billed the event as follows:

The first edition of UDADA (UDADA means sisterhood [in Swahili]) Film Festival will be held from the 24th–29th October 2014. This film festival will be the first in the region to feature women's fiction and documentary productions. The Festival will screen short, feature length and documentary films made by, or about women from all over the world. The festival will also feature films made by students. Women filmmakers, especially in Africa, have customarily been relegated to the periphery. We believe that through this initiative we shall provide a platform for established and emerging female talent in this industry to exhibit their work, discuss and exchange ideas. The festival will also be a forum for broad networking.

Udada had a very broad mandate. On the one hand, the festival saw itself as specifically promoting the work of African female filmmakers and providing a platform for female filmmakers to network and share knowledge. Yet, on the other hand, in terms of curation the festival's mandate was simply to show films by and about women. Running a film festival is difficult both logistically and artistically, especially in a context of limited resources. Kinyanjui herself noted several difficulties she had to confront in selecting and programming films. The festival used the online platform Click for Festivals to accept submissions, and Kinyanjui described not always knowing if the filmmaker attached to the film was male or female (although they allowed films by men so long as the films were "women oriented"). She later described how they did not "really have time to go through each film to decide" what would be screened in the festival, "so it's good if you have a synopsis, what it is about. Is the main character a woman or what?"<sup>26</sup> While this curation may appear slapdash, it is also true that festivals that use online submission portals (and particularly ones that do not charge a fee to submit)



can receive an unmanageable deluge of films leading to difficult choices of what to watch and what to skip.

It was also apparent that the festival faced organizational difficulties. The hard copy festival program listed a very different festival schedule from the version made available online: The online version stated that events would run from 2:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. daily, when in fact events started at 9:30 a.m. each morning. Workshops and film screenings were also moved around without prior notice. Audiences thus *already* had to attend the festival to know when events would be held. Due to curatorial and logistical difficulties, the festival had trouble fulfilling the ambitions stated in its mandate.

The idea for the Udada Film Festival originated with Wanjiru Kinyanjui, and it took her significant effort to launch the festival. She describes how the Goethe Institut was interested in the idea of supporting a women's film festival, but initially the idea never amounted to anything: "We could never get it off the ground because of dates, because of money, because of this and that and the other."<sup>27</sup> Eventually, Kinyanjui was able to work with Barbara Reich (an employee of the Goethe Institut in Nairobi) to start the festival. Rather than run the festival as the sole director, Kinyanjui invited her former student Matrid Wanjah Munene to codirect the festival, and eventually the third codirector, Naomi Mwaura, joined the organizational team. Kinyanjui described the festival's organization as "very difficult at first because there was hardly any money."<sup>28</sup> Eventually, they received the promised money from the Goethe Institut, and found other sponsors, including the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Alliance Française (who co-supported the closing ceremony with the Goethe Institut), and other small companies that provided them with materials or discounts.<sup>29</sup> The difficulty of organizing and financing a film festival must not be glossed over, and most film festivals require significant subsidy to operate.<sup>30</sup>

On the penultimate day of Udada, the Spanish Embassy hosted a cocktail party and film screening at the Michael Joseph Centre where they showed *Blancanieves* (dir. Pablo Berger, 2012), a black and white silent film reimaging the Snow White fairy tale where the titular character is a matador. The film was shown without any English translation of the Spanish intertitles. It was an enjoyable evening of food, drinks, and an interesting film (and it gathered a good-sized audience of 50–60 people), but while attending I was struck by how little the event—given that it celebrated the work of a Spanish man—had to do with supporting African female filmmakers, especially since

the tagline of the festival was “celebrating African women in the arts.” While interviewing Wanjiru Kinyanjui, she revealed that it was someone from the Spanish Embassy who selected the film and that the Spanish Embassy “came up with their own thing” for the event. The Spanish Embassy became involved with the festival because, while reviewing submissions, the festival directors realized there was a mass of Spanish films, and thus thought they could “get the Spanish embassy to do something.”<sup>31</sup> Clearly, the Spanish Embassy cared little about the premise of promoting African women in film, and their goal was instead to promote Spanish art and culture in Kenya.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Udada* was the extent to which it was divorced from contemporary film production by women in Nairobi. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the closing ceremony. The *Udada* festival ended with a party and a closing ceremony at the Alliance Française. Prior to the ceremony guests gathered for drinks in the Alliance exhibition space and garden—a space often used for parties and concerts that includes an outdoor stage and devoted catering facilities. After the cocktail mixer, guests gathered in the auditorium to watch the closing ceremony. At the ceremony, representatives of the Goethe Institut and Alliance Française spoke about the need to support women in the arts, and a long list of awards was handed out. Specifically, pioneering Nairobi-based female filmmakers were given certificates and trophies to celebrate their achievements in the arts. Each filmmaker present made a short speech (the CEO of the Kenya Film Commission, Lizzie Chongoti, accepted awards on behalf of those filmmakers not present, which lead to some awkwardness since she was onstage so frequently). Interestingly, the filmmakers honored were all part of the generation trained at KIMC who started make films in the late 1980s and early 1990s—no mention was made of the thriving film production industry currently being led by women in the city. These contemporary filmmakers were a glaring absence at the film festival as, in addition to being ignored in the closing ceremony, not a single one of their films was screened.

As with *Udada*, I was continually struck, in my attendance at local festivals, at how removed these festivals tended to be from local filmmakers. This is particularly unfortunate considering that film festivals are an essential venue for African films to be screened in Africa.<sup>32</sup> The Film Africa Documentary Festival in Nairobi (November 10–15, 2014), directed by Charles Asiba (former director of the now defunct Kenya International Film Festival), was advertised in hard-copy promotional material as “celebrating

Kenya's long and rich history in filmmaking through screening documentaries made by Kenyans, and about Kenya." Yet the festival included only two documentaries by Kenyans and repeatedly screened fiction films. The program also included a "Dutch Night," and the only filmmaker present at the festival was the Dutchman Hans Bosscher. At the "Students Forum" (where the students were grade school students from the local Agha Khan school), Bosscher revealed in the Q&A that he had traveled from the Netherlands with the bulk of the films for the festival. The complete disjuncture between the mission and the happenings of the festival was perplexing.

Other festivals were removed from local filmmakers, but for different purposes, as was apparent with the Out Film Festival. This festival was organized by Gay Kenya Trust, and its purpose was to engage local audiences in debates about sexuality through the medium of film, not to engage with film as a creative and entertaining medium per se. The festival included a lively post-screening panel discussion on its final day, but rather than convene a group of filmmakers, the purpose of the discussion was thematic. Through showing films about LGBTQ communities and having a public discussion, the festival sought to create a space to talk about issues that are taboo in Kenya and thus lay a foundation for positive change in how LGBTQ people are treated in Kenya both socially and before the law. It seems likely that the curators would have shown *Stories of Our Lives* during the festival since it so clearly fulfilled their mandate, but this option was not available because the film had been banned in Kenya.

We must question what each person, venue, and partner involved stands to gain from participating in a film festival. The Slum Film Festival can provide an interesting example. The festival intends to show films made by slum-dwellers, particularly in Nairobi, to audiences of other slum-dwellers in Mathare and Kibera.<sup>33</sup> In writing about the 2012 edition of the Slum Film Festival, McNamara notes that "there were several important departures . . . between the event organisers' stated aims and goals, and what 'actually happened' during the event itself," including large deviations from the scheduled programming, and nepotism in programming and awards.<sup>34</sup> This is shown even more clearly by the fact that no one attending the festival's closing ceremony at the Alliance Française (aside from festival organizers) had actually attended the festival screenings in the informal settlements of Mathare and Kibera.<sup>35</sup> What happened at the festival itself—such as number of audience members attending the festival or less easily

quantifiable factors such as impact on the local community—was not as important as the fact that the festival *happened at all*: “as a project for ‘cultural,’ rather than economic development, the event’s mere existence is sufficient pre-condition for its success.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, looking at the intention of each partner involved becomes essential in analyzing why festivals play out as they do, just as examining curatorial and logistical challenges is important.

#### ACTIVIST FILM SCREENINGS

Pawa254 is an art and activism center that opened in Nairobi in November 2011, and events hosted there often play out very differently from those hosted at the Goethe Institut and Alliance Française. Much like other creative organizations in the city—such as the film fund Docubox, the literary organization Kwani?,<sup>37</sup> and the production collective The Nest—Pawa254 is founded and run by Kenyans, but also receives funding from external development organizations. Each of these organizations has a mandate of being socially and/or artistically transformative, and it would be simplistic to assume that this agenda is undercut by their funding. Arguably, the views of the funders and organizations might closely align. For instance, Pawa254 receives support from the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA)—the Nairobi-based branch of the American Open Society Foundation—and OSIEA’s “strategic priority areas” of “participation of citizens” and “human rights” align with Pawa254’s own goal of creating social change in Kenya through increased citizen participation.<sup>38</sup>

Pawa254 was started by famed local photojournalist and activist Boniface Mwangi, and the organization, according to their website, “espouses the belief that a better Kenya can be realised. Therefore, as a movement of young social conscious artists and activists, we audaciously follow our hearts in the hope of seeing a better country. . . . Our work has resulted in the growth of highly skilled *artists* and the movement of active, free-thinking youth, in and beyond our immediate location.”<sup>39</sup> Pawa254 thus has an intensely national focus in its work, and it intends to shape the future of Kenya through the merging of art and activism as “artivism.” According to its 2015 promotional video (screened before every one of its film screenings), 30,000 people have received training in various capacities since November 2011. Pawa254 focuses specifically on engaging youth and aims to use media to promote progressive social change in Kenya.

Thus, it comes as little surprise that a film festival hosted at this venue, and about human rights, would focus on both art and activism specifically as they relate to the local community. In Pawa254's special Human Rights Watch Film Festival affiliated screening, four films were shown: Zippy Kimundu's short film *Burnt Forest* (2013), which tells the story of two teenagers from different tribes falling in love amid the backdrop of the 2002 general election; Nairobi-based male filmmaker Sam Soko's short film *Ririkana* (2014), which is about a woman learning to move on after the death of her husband in the 2007–2008 postelection violence; *No Humanity Here* (2014) by InformAction,<sup>40</sup> which was about human rights abuses against Somalis and Somali-Kenyans in Eastleigh, Nairobi; and, finally, *Maramaso* (2013), a film made by Americans about the local band Sarabi and their activist work in the run-up to the 2013 Kenyan presidential election. Following the screenings, there was a panel discussion with representatives from each film. The discussion included questions about the themes of each film, but was more focused on their production, and included questions about film budgets and production schedules, as well as questions about why the directors made certain representational choices. This merging of focus on art production and social themes is characteristic of film events at Pawa254.

These screenings took place in a medium-sized, L-shaped room with a small screen on a raised platform in the corner, meaning that not all spectators would be able to sit directly facing the screen. Despite the limitations of the space, Pawa254 was able to attract a large audience, and by the end-of-the-day screening of *Big Men* (dir. Rachel Boynton, 2013), every seat was filled. As part of their regular calendar of events, Pawa254 hosts a weekly film forum where a film (almost always a documentary) is screened and a discussion convened around the issues it raises, almost always with a sizable audience. Pawa254 has a clear agenda with its programming to screen socially conscious documentaries about topics of relevance to the local community, and particularly ones that speak to a youth audience, and speakers are brought in—such as the directors, but also activists on the subjects of the documentaries—to foster discussion around the films. For instance, it screened *In the Shadow of a Gold Mine* (dir. Zahra Moloo, 2014) and brought in the director as well as several activists working on questions of community empowerment in relation to extractive industries in Kenya. In another instance, a local film journalist convened a discussion following

the screening of *Beautiful Tree, Severed Roots* (dir. Kenny Mann, 2014), an autobiographical documentary about a family of Jewish immigrants fleeing Nazi persecution and their subsequent life in Kenya. Through screening films and convening lively discussions on topics of relevance to their constituent community, film screenings were turned into events. These kinds of regularly scheduled live programs are one vital way for films to engage citizens; these programs can “help to facilitate and stimulate important public debates that can impact society.”<sup>41</sup>

A particularly noteworthy event was the premiere of Jackie Lebo’s documentary *The Last Fight* (2015) on April 30, 2015. The film tells the story of two famous Kenyan boxing clubs, each striving to return to the glory days of Kenyan boxing while also fighting to survive. The Nairobi-based boxers must fight through poverty and land-grabbing attempts at their gym space, and a female boxer based at the Nakuru gym must struggle against the limitations of her gender in the masculine world of boxing. Boxing is presented as a “way out” and the film digs deeply into what it is the boxers are attempting to escape without pitying them. Their context is one of working-class struggle and dire material circumstance, but they are fighters and their struggle is shown with dignity.

The evening began on Pawa254’s rooftop event space—an area complete with a lounge, a bar, an outdoor screen, and an empty space that can fit approximately sixty chairs or a large reception tent—and people shared drinks and talk as we waited for the film to start.<sup>42</sup> (Events almost never start according to the posted schedule, and instead begin once a critical mass of people has arrived.) The screening was held in the newly built Mageuzi Theatre. The audience included high-profile Kenyans (such as the chief justice), members from funding bodies, and, crucially, the boxers and coaches featured in the documentary.

After the screening, the boxers and coaches were called onstage to say a few words. Many of them were uncomfortable speaking in English and instead spoke in Swahili.<sup>43</sup> After the boxers had spoken, and following convention, there were several speeches that included thanking sponsors, and one speech Judy Kibinge read on behalf of the film’s funder (the Ford Foundation). Crucially, the Kenyan chief justice was invited to the screening as a guest of honor and made a speech onstage. However, rather than a formal encounter where the audience listened quietly and then clapped at the end, the chief justice engaged in a dialogue with the audience specifically

about the issues raised in the documentary. The coach featured in the documentary said he had written to the chief justice about their legal case but had never received a reply—the two men then engaged in a conversation onstage where the chief justice invited the boxers and coaches to the Supreme Court the following week and said it could be possible to fast-track their case. This encounter could be read as simply the chief justice telling the audience a nice story about helping the boxing club without the intention of ever following up. However, a more positive reading would suggest that the film premiere created the opportunity for this coach to directly and publicly confront a powerful representative of an institution that had been denying him justice.

Pawa254's ability to turn film screenings from solitary viewing experiences into social events is critical to its ability to successfully draw large crowds. Lindiwe Dovey argues that "it is the 'liveness' of festivals—the coming together, in person, of audiences, filmmakers, curators, and festival organizers—that attracts enthusiastic support and participation."<sup>44</sup> Pawa254 runs both a regularly scheduled calendar of film events and one-off festivals (like the Human Rights Watch Film Festival special day), but the atmosphere surrounding each screening is consistent. Audiences looking to watch documentaries, and audiences wanting to discuss pressing social and political issues facing Kenya, can count on finding these events at Pawa254. This sort of regularity and consistency in programming is crucial to building audiences and developing a film-viewing culture around locally made documentaries.

## CONCLUSION

Judy Kibinge's film *Scarred: The Anatomy of a Massacre*, which tells the story of the Wagalla Massacre and its survivors' decades-long fight for truth and justice, premiered to a packed audience at the Louis Leakey Auditorium of the National Museum on February 10, 2015. The audience included Members of Parliament and survivors of the Wagalla Massacre. This fact of a major event drawing attention to the massacre is particularly significant given that the massacre has long been denied by the Kenyan government, and, usually, events commemorating the massacre are scarcely attended by anyone outside the immediate Wagalla community.<sup>45</sup> However, following this successful premiere, the film was almost never screened. It screened for the African Commission in Gambia, and showed in Eastleigh, and "people

have asked for it quite a lot,” but Kibinge, because of her commitments with Docubox, does not have the time to fully promote her film, for example, by undertaking the labor-intensive and expensive work of submitting it to film festivals abroad.<sup>46</sup> Crucially, as the producer and director of the film, she is fully responsible for bearing the burden of distributing the film. The distribution of films in Nairobi relies very heavily on individual filmmakers taking the initiative to promote them, and thus demands filmmakers be both creatives and entrepreneurs responsible for screening and selling their films.

Building a culture around watching locally made films involves careful curatorial work as well as planning to attract audiences to the physical spaces that screen films. This is something that both filmmakers and curators are passionate about. Wanjiru Kinyanjui—famed for *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*—was clearly passionate about developing audience appreciation for women’s films, hence the formation of the festival Udada. As I have shown in this chapter, the event was only partially successful because its curation was haphazard. More deliberate curation was necessary to make sure that the best films that would fulfill its mission would be shown.

Developing physical spaces to attract new audiences is also vital, as we have seen in this chapter. During my time in Nairobi, Pawa254 undertook extensive renovations and built a movie theater (named the Mageuzi Theatre), complete with comfortable, plush chairs. As with the previous viewing space, the room is L-shaped. Additionally, unlike a movie theater with tiered seating, making the screen equally visible to all rows, the screen becomes partially obstructed from view as spectators get farther and farther from the front row. The material spaces of film viewing are important, but equally important is the atmosphere these spaces have, and programming is essential to this atmosphere. The regular programs at Pawa254 were most often completely packed because Pawa254 works to turn their screenings into events. At Pawa254, film viewing is also a social activity, which helps to cultivate audiences for locally made films.

The market for locally produced films is very small in Kenya, making international markets both on the continent and farther afield vitally important. Crucially, the spaces where Nairobi-based female filmmakers’ films are most likely to meet live audiences in Nairobi are noncommercial in nature and thus do not directly generate revenue for the filmmakers. As such, these filmmakers must hustle to finance and build audiences and markets for their films.





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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Steedman, Robin, author.

Title: Creative hustling : women making and distributing films from Nairobi / Robin Steedman.

Other titles: Distribution matters.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2023. | Series: Distribution matters | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022014241 (print) | LCCN 2022014242 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262544832 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262372671 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262372688 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Women motion picture producers and directors—Kenya—Nairobi. | Motion picture producers and directors—Kenya—Nairobi. | Women in the motion picture industry—Kenya—Nairobi. | Motion pictures—Kenya—Nairobi—Distribution.

Classification: LCC PN1995.9.W6 S8 2023 (print) | LCC PN1995.9.W6 (ebook) |

DDC 791.430820967625—dc23/eng/20220329

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022014241>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022014242>