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On the Matter of Fiction: An Approach to the Marginalization of African Film Studies in the Global Academy

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Abstract

This article adopts a polemical tone to argue that “factual” rather than “fictional” media modes are gradually being privileged globally to the extent that we find ourselves – as academics, but also as citizens – in the grips of a dangerous “regime of truth” (Foucault) that is sequestering the power of the imagination, and specifically the power of fiction. It focuses on this problematic in the hope that an analysis of some of its dimensions might offer clues as to why African film studies is marginalized today within the global academy, but also within the broader field of African (screen) media studies itself, and what we might try to do about that marginalization. It also argues that it is relevant to consider not only the ways in which we – as African film and media studies scholars – have been marginalized within the broader discipline of film and media studies, but also how we might be contributing to our own marginalization. Engaging fully with contemporary film theory and criticism, not treating Africa as an exceptional space to the rest of the globe, participating in the current move towards exploring the complex, transnational currents and relationships through which films are made, bringing African examples to people’s attention within broader studies of narrative, genre, and media institutions – these are all moves that the article argues we need to take more decisively.

“ ... things are too urgent now to be giving up on our imagination ...”

– Meghan Morris¹

Introduction

A conference titled “Media Representation and Africa: Whose Money? Whose Story?” was held at the university where I work – SOAS, University of London – on 20 February 2015. Only one of the panels was devoted to fictional representations in the media, while most of the panellists were news journalists. Despite the conference organizers’ brief calling for a move “beyond the ‘Africa Rising’ vs. the ‘desperate continent’ discussion,” a great proportion of the day’s debate was devoted to the familiar idea that Africa is portrayed negatively in the global media. Dominated by journalists, the conference failed – in my view – to engage with a more specific discussion of the differences between “factual” and fictional modes and genres in media representation, and the implications of working with these. This oversight is not new; as I will argue here, some of our most important thinkers today fail to make this distinction, thereby foreclosing critique of the way that the “factual” modes are gradually being privileged globally to the extent that we are in the grips of a certain and dangerous “regime of truth.”² I hope that a focus on this problematic might offer clues as to why African film studies is marginalized today within the global academy, but also within the broader field of African (screen) media studies itself, and what we might try to do about that marginalization.

One of the panels at the aforementioned conference took its title from a well-known maxim in journalism: “If it bleeds, it leads.” A vast amount of energy has been spent critiquing the negative representation of Africa in the mainstream media with scant attention to considerations of what is required of the mainstream news as a specific genre of cultural and media production. News coverage everywhere in the world about the current state of global affairs is depressing. Excepting those news organizations that are dedicated to telling not only the bad news but also the good news (for example, Pambazuka, Africa is a Country, and Solutions Journalism), the news is usually expected to report recent and unfolding events that are of maximum urgency and priority – which, of course, are almost always tragic catastrophes. We cannot expect the news to tell us the positive stories. At the same time, while the news is filled with important eyewitness accounts of events, we cannot of course expect the news to simply give us facts. As the U.S. journalist Alan Barth so aptly put it, “The news is only the first rough draft of history.”³ We might go further, emphasizing that the news is only *one* rough draft of history – a draft that is, of course, ideologically shaped by the context and people from which it emerges; the news as a genre is often highly formulaic, with a clearly defined audience. As the Bulgarian-French historian Tzvetan Todorov said: “Events never ‘tell themselves’ ...”⁴ and, as Gaudreault emphasized: “Any message by means of which any story whatsoever is communicated can rightfully be considered as a narrative.”⁵ In short, the news is a story, a narrative, although it usually does not frame itself as such.

The problem with the conference, then, was that it frequently naturalized the idea that “the media” *is* “the news,” failing to account for the range of different genres and modes that constitute the media and, therefore, an analysis of their narrative modes and relationship to one another. I adopt here David Trotter’s understanding of

media (elaborated from the work of William Uricchio) as “not ‘mere’ technologies, institutions, or texts, but ‘cultural practices’ that envelop these and other elements in the ‘broader fabric’ of a particular social order or mentality, including the ‘lived experiences’ of those who produce, define, and use them.”⁶ Applying this understanding of media to an analysis of the conference itself, one could argue that the dominance of a news perspective suggests a “particular social order or mentality” in operation – a social order or mentality that I will go on to define via Foucault as a “regime of truth.”

The Power of Fiction

While many mediated modes can be described as narratives, there is a specific and peculiar power to the mode of fiction within (African) media that we ignore at our peril. In relation to diverse African contexts, Manthia Diawara has explored the intimate relationship among fiction, filmmaking, and literature. Diawara says that: “when African films are examined, one sees that all the directors resort in different ways to oral storytelling forms.”⁷ The power of oral storytelling is beautifully expressed here, too, by the visionary Senegalese filmmaker Moussa Sene Absa:

My grandfather was a storyteller ten thousand times more powerful than television. He was ninety-five when he died, still elegant and walking without a stick. He used to say that a storyteller is somebody who can make dirty rags look like clothes fit for a king.⁸

Diawara also cites the literary critic Mahamadou Kane, who says of African novelists: “At night, he/she used to be fed with oral tales, historical or cosmogonical legends ...

very often, he/she grew up in a milieu which had a specific mentality as regards the forms of discourse, a sensibility which expressed itself in particular ways.”⁹ Of course, the nature and forms of storytelling continue to change everywhere and, in many African contexts today, the inspirations and forms of discourse that lead to the creation of fiction are very diverse indeed.¹⁰ I call on these examples above, then, not to establish rigid genealogies but simply to evoke worlds and world-views in which fiction is seen to matter, to have deep value.

But what might this value be, exactly, and why is it of particular importance in our current moment, especially as concerns the future of African film studies within the global academy? To answer this question we need to attempt – however difficult – to elaborate some elements of this current moment, its “milieu,” and the “specific mentality as regards the forms of discourse” of which it is composed, and to which it has given rise. It is a moment that – although of course deeply marked in distinct ways in diverse contexts – can nevertheless be considered to some extent within a global framework because of the time-space compression that is one of the driving goals of neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on the work of other scholars, Trotter makes a convincing argument that:

The reconfiguration of empire was an outcome of the ‘time-space compression’ that has by David Harvey’s account driven the ‘evolution of the geographical landscape of capitalist activity. ...’ According to Barney Warf, time-space compression constitutes a mechanism for the production of places as ‘nodes within increasingly wider networks of mobility and power.’¹¹

These “wider networks of mobility and power” also, somewhat paradoxically, create a kind of time-space radiation, as Arjun Appadurai has suggested in *Modernity at Large* (1996) when he speaks about the progression from Benedict Anderson’s idea of the “imagined communities” initiated by print culture to the “imagined worlds” facilitated by electronic mass media.¹² Appadurai’s work is particularly useful to me here, in my interest in fiction, because he places special significance on the imagination, and the enabling of time-space radiation through the *cultural* dimensions of globalization. He makes an important distinction between imagination and fantasy, arguing that: “It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighbourhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.”¹³

Where my work diverges from Appadurai’s is in its closer attention to fiction as a specific project of the imagination. Appadurai’s approach is vast and catholic; notably, he collapses fictional and “factual” genres into the same swirling goals of mediated imagination when arguing that “the imagination in the postelectronic world plays a newly significant role,” having “broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth, and ritual” to “become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies.”¹⁴ Emphasizing his equal interest in mass mediation and mass migration, Appadurai continues:

The key difference here is that these new mythographies are charters for new social projects, and not just a counterpoint to the certainties of daily life. They move the glacial force of the habitus into the quickened beat of improvisation for large groups of people. Here the images, scripts, models,

and narratives that come through mass mediation (*in its realistic and fictional modes*) make the difference between migration today and in the past. ... For migrants, both the politics of adaptation to new environments and the stimulus to move or return are deeply affected by a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space.¹⁵

My concerns here are not with the relationship between media and migration; what I am interested in is the way that Appadurai assigns the significant differences between the “realistic and fictional modes” to mere parentheses, thereby disengaging from delving into their respective relationships to the imagination, which is broadly conceived. I will go on to argue that what is at stake is precisely these differences between what is seen to *count* as realistic or fictional, with the realistic modes being privileged in our repertoires of both production and reception, particularly when it comes to the problematic ways that “Africa” continues to be produced and interpreted. Furthermore, looking specifically at the position of African film and media studies within the institution of the university today, which is what we are attempting in this special issue, we could argue that in these kind of spaces – in contradistinction to what Appadurai suggests of contemporary life more broadly – the imagination, far from being accepted as a part of “quotidian mental work,” is being “successfully sequestered.”¹⁶ This argument depends on viewing ourselves as academics and *also* as the ordinary people with whom Appadurai is concerned; I will return to develop and nuance this idea later.

I share Appadurai’s, Trotter’s and Harvey’s belief that the current moment has to be analyzed on a global scale to some extent, particularly when considering the marginalization of African film studies in the academy. There is, first of all, a

fundamental paradox in our field of study: many of the regularly published scholars working on African film are based not within Africa, but in the United States and Europe. Of course there are exceptions to this rule, such as the work of a large proportion of the scholars published in the Africa-based *Journal of African Cinemas* edited by Keyan Tomaselli and Martin Mhando. But, on the whole, we have to acknowledge that we are a small transnational network of people, with a large proportion of our work circulated through journals based outside of the continent. In relation to the position of African film and filmmakers on the international film festival circuit, I have similarly argued that

... what undeniably makes the network of people involved with films by Africans distinct ... is the limited size of the African network, and the relative lack of support for African films and filmmakers of all kinds. ... This, in turn, means that much more pressure is put on the individual, human elements of this particular network ...¹⁷

As Jonathan Haynes astutely noted during the panel at the 2015 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference out of which this special issue emerged, we simply lack the man- and womanpower to collectively cover the terrain and build our field of study in the way we currently need to. This requires us to confront the fragile and vulnerable institutional arrangements that “support” our field of study and to ask difficult questions about the likely future of those arrangements.

In a deeply related move, we also need to ask questions about why our field is dominated by white scholars and does not have proportional representation from scholars within Africa, and especially Black (African) scholars, as it should. These

questions have recently been initiated in the South African context in dramatic and powerful ways through the Rhodes Must Fall and related movements calling for the decolonization of universities, as I will address below. These movements also raise uncomfortable questions that resonate far beyond South Africa, such as what it is that we are *doing* when we are researching, writing about, or teaching African film far from Africa (as opposed to researching, writing, or teaching African diasporic film or Black film, which may be located in these spaces). Almost every year African students apply to and are accepted to study at SOAS but the funding is often simply not there to support them. This means that I usually end up teaching African film to classes made up predominantly of white European students. While there is nothing inherently wrong with white European students wanting to learn about African film – in fact, this is to be celebrated – it does provoke queries about who our readers/audiences are, and who is to “inherit” our field of study in the future. While a view that sees certain identity markers (such as race, geographical location, or gender) as inherently more authentic than others is problematic and paternalistic, our institutions do need continued scrutiny in terms of the racial, gendered, class, and linguistic constitution of staff and students.

Few would deny that universities in the United States and Europe today, beyond their obvious lack of diversity, are in the grip of a neoliberal corporate logic that seeks to maximize profit, efficiency, and demonstrable and quantifiable impact, while at the same time “sequestering” the imaginations of faculty and staff members.¹⁸ This has resulted in the development of what Cris Shore calls the “multiversity,” which demands so many contradictory things of its employees that it produces “schizophrenic” academic subjects who are forced to sacrifice themselves and their imaginations and adapt to the reality and expediency of the system.¹⁹ Many

faculty and staff members are so overworked that they do not have the time or energy to exercise their imaginations as they ideally would and should in their work as researchers, as thinkers, as teachers; it is as though we have returned to a feudal system, except that we find ourselves with an anonymous feudal lord with whom we cannot even come face to face to make our complaints.

Furthermore, those who work on specialized subjects with smaller student numbers – as we do – are particularly vulnerable to this expediency, working under the risk of the complete closures of our subjects. The critique of – or activism against – universities for not being able to financially support these subjects frequently ignores the broader contexts that determine these smaller student numbers. In the United Kingdom, with the recent introduction of undergraduate fees as high as £9,000 a year, and with government loans to students payable as soon as students start earning more than £21,000, is it any wonder that students are electing to flee from the humanities toward subjects that will lead to high-paying jobs? Unless something changes dramatically in the political order, higher education as a public good – as a right of *citizens* rather than *consumers*, as a right to remain *open* to the future rather than fulfilling a set of requirements so as to secure a well-paid job – will die. The privatization of higher education is fast becoming complete; the place of the university as a critical public sphere is waning and, “in the absence of such public spheres it becomes more difficult for citizens to challenge the neoliberal myth that citizens are *merely* consumers and that ‘wholly unregulated markets are the sole means by which we can produce and distribute everything we care about.’”²⁰

Aihwa Ong importantly reminds us that “the assumption that neoliberalism is an ensemble of coordinates that will everywhere produce the same political results and social transformation” is a myth.²¹ She conceptualizes neoliberalism, in contrast,

as “a logic of governing [a governmentality] that migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts.”²² It is thus incumbent on African film scholars to share their own particular working contexts in relation to local versions and logics of neoliberalism (if any); having lived and worked in the United Kingdom for the past decade, this is the only context on which I can comment with any degree of assurance and experience. What is immediately apparent, however, on reviewing the *institutional* arrangements of universities in different African contexts is that, unlike in the United States and Europe, there are very few dedicated film departments. The overwhelming majority of Africa-based African film scholars are located in Mass Communications, Mass Media, Theatre or Literature Departments. What does this tell us? That audiovisual fiction as a subject in its own right tends to be subsumed either within more “traditional” arts departments (as is the case in certain contexts in the United States and Europe, too), or within the field of media as mass communications, which has historically viewed audiovisual production in more instrumentalist and less imaginative ways. This perhaps also helps to explain why there are a good number of Africa-based media scholars in general, but not many Africa-based scholars researching African narrative film.

One Africa-based film scholar who *has* recently provided an in-depth overview of the institutional arrangements in one African country – South Africa – is Ian Rijksdijk, the director of the African Cinema Unit at the University of Cape Town (UCT), the first institution (to my knowledge) to offer dedicated academic degree programmes that focus on African narrative filmmaking. In a forthcoming article titled “The State of the Arts in South African Higher Education: Film and Media Studies,” Rijksdijk gives an analysis of what is rotten in the contemporary arrangement of universities in South Africa. He opens with the Rhodes Must Fall

movement of April 2015, a student-led movement to decolonize the staff and curricula of South African universities that began with a student flinging feces at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes that used to overlook the UCT campus; but, as I have said, while this movement was specific to South Africa, the discussions and further movements that it has sparked have consistently noted its global relationships and ramifications. In mid October 2015, students at universities across South Africa again began to stage large protests, this time chiefly in opposition to the government's plans to increase university tuition fees by 10.5%, an increase that would prevent many historically disadvantaged people in South Africa from accessing tertiary education at all. This movement of thousands of students – which came to be known as Fees Must Fall – achieved a temporary victory when President Jacob Zuma announced on 23 October 2015 that there would be no rise in tuition fees in 2016. The heart of the problem remains, however, as long as higher education institutions throughout the world are being corporatized by governments, and recent student protests in the United Kingdom, the United States and India bear striking similarities with those in South Africa.²³

Rijsdijk puts central focus on a lecture that Achille Mbembe gave in the wake of the Rhodes Must Fall protests, in which Mbembe contextualized the movement through referring to a “lack of government funding” and “the increased corporatisation of university courses and spaces.” Rijsdijk draws together the work of Mbembe, Terry Eagleton, and Marina Warner to pose a powerful question: what is the meaning and purpose of the university today? He provides one answer through a quote from Mbembe: “The function of higher education is not to create jobs; it is to redistribute as equally as possible the capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know but do not know yet.”²⁴ It is worth pausing here to try to

listen better to Mbembe's words. By saying that the function of universities is *not* to create jobs but to make inquiries into "those things we need to know but do not know yet," Mbembe is insisting on maintaining an openness in our thought processes, an openness to learning new things, an openness to what might come next. If we do not do this, then the knowledge we are supposed to gain from the experience of attending university (both as students *and* staff) risks being always already scripted and decided. Mbembe's phrase "redistribute as equally as possible" acknowledges, however, that universities are not neutral spaces; they have long been subject to gross inequalities (see, for example, the recent critique of contemporary race relations on U.S. university campuses in the American film *Dear White People* [Justin Simien, 2014]). I understand Mbembe as emphasizing, through his use of the word "disciplined," both the need for hard – sometimes even painful – work to address these concerns, but also the continued value of our current disciplines, however much they might also be straitjackets. In terms of this *Black Camera* special issue and its engagement with the constitution of the discipline of film and media studies, I think it is relevant to consider not only the ways in which we – as African film and media studies scholars – have been marginalized within this discipline, but also how we might be contributing to our own marginalization. Engaging fully with contemporary film theory and criticism, not treating Africa as an exceptional space to the rest of the globe, participating in the current move towards exploring the complex, transnational currents and relationships through which films are made, bringing African examples to people's attention within broader studies of narrative, genre, and media institutions – these are all moves that we need to take more decisively. It is important that we are part of these disciplinary discussions and not simply located within African Studies, as divorced from the discipline of film and media studies.

If neoliberalism is understood as an assault on the imagination, on fiction, on the value of the qualitative as opposed to the quantitative, on all those dimensions of human experience that are ineffable and that transcend easy translation into “impact,” then in academic contexts it can also be seen as an assault particularly on those of us *within* the broader field of African media studies (based both within Africa and beyond) who focus mostly on *narrative* media and, especially, on fiction film. Media Studies conceived of in the communications sense is thriving; anyone studying digital media, the news, social media, the internet, or the creative and cultural industries is bound to find many interlocutors, if not employment opportunities. Edited collections such as *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa* (2011) reveal that African media studies is thriving, with many contributors featured from across Africa (and, in particular, the “anglophone” countries of Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Ghana).²⁵ Yet although this collection laudably draws together the study of diverse media – from talk radio to popular music to television and fiction film to the news media – the focus on the concepts of “democracy” and “development” overshadow attention, once again, to the distinctions between different *genres* of media production and consumption, and especially the differences between the so-called “factual” and fictional genres as well as their relationship with one another.

In short, the global exodus from the humanities toward the social and natural sciences (with their attendant focus on more “realistic” or “factual” rather than “fictional” modes) means an evisceration of the imaginative dimensions of the media and a move toward an instrumentalist definition of its meanings and effects. And this has emphatic implications for Africa’s place within the global academy and the global image economy – in fact, what it means is that Africa will be “kept in its place,” the same marginal place to which it has been historically condemned by much of the rest

of the world, a *literal* space, a space denied the possibility of imagination, despite the fact that Africa is quite obviously overflowing with imagination. For against the “specific mentality” of the milieu of storytelling that Mahamadou Kane describes as a formative milieu for many Africans, arose a different foreign mentality, a different discourse, a (neo)colonial discourse, that has repeatedly and anxiously attempted to shoehorn Africa and Africans into a literal narrative, an anthropological narrative, an authentic(ating) narrative, a native/nativist narrative.²⁶ Before I go on to address the specific content of this narrative itself (paradoxically, a fiction that denies Africa its right to fiction), I want to define it in Foucault’s terms, as a “regime of truth.”

In his short essay “The political function of the intellectual,” Foucault writes:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.²⁷

Foucault further argues that “By ‘truth’ is meant a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution and circulation of statements” and that when “linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it,” this truth becomes a “regime.” We can liken the “specific mentality as regards the forms of discourse” through which Africa has tended to be positioned globally – quite often from the outside, but also sometimes from the inside – to what Foucault calls a

regime of truth. And this regime of truth has assigned Africa to an overwhelmingly literal narrative, both in the ways that “Africa” becomes produced and read.

In terms of the production of “Africa,” countless documentaries, news reports, and development aid films made by foreigners about Africa have demanded that viewers adopt a historical, anthropological, or socio-political relationship to the content they are seeing or reading – in other words, they ask spectators and readers to interpret the content literally. Even Nollywood, one of the most productive film industries in the world, was initially subjected to certain anthropological treatments by those seeking to understand the phenomenon only to the extent that it could “reveal” things about the state of life in Nigeria today. The programming at international film festivals of documentaries about Nollywood – as opposed to Nollywood films themselves – is another example of this literal positioning. Similarly, as many African screen media scholars have emphasized, the sources of funding for African-made content are often tailored towards factual rather than fictional fare. Jean-Pierre Bekolo, one of Africa’s most imaginative and creative filmmakers, told me in an interview that one European funding agency continuously offered him money to make a documentary about the Rwandan Genocide, even after he had made it clear that he was not interested in making a film on this topic.²⁸ (Indeed, anyone who has watched Bekolo’s films would know that this would not be a likely topic he would take on.) It is also important to mention that African women filmmakers have rarely been trusted with the larger budgets usually required to make fictional rather than “factual” films; the majority of female filmmakers in Africa are accordingly documentarists.²⁹ Interestingly, one of the few African women filmmakers working in fiction, Fanta Régina Nacro, has made one of the most powerful films to engage with the Rwandan Genocide – not as a documentary, or a

fiction film claiming to be based on “real life,” but as a film told in fable form, *The Night of Truth* (Burkina Faso, 2005).

What emerges from the examples above is a kind of collective fear about African imaginations of specific African contexts and the world at large. This is bizarre when one considers the history of cultural production across the African continent. In one of the few film theory books that actually attempts to integrate African experiences and examples, Robert Stam importantly *historicizes* the mode of realism in a way that allows us to appreciate this mode as one of several regimes of truth. He points out that in Europe, and in France in particular, “realism was originally linked to an oppositional attitude toward romantic and neo-classical models in fiction and painting.”³⁰ And he credits “non-European cultures” with being

the catalyst for the supercession, within Europe, of a retrograde culture-bound verism. Africa, Asia, and the Americas provided a reservoir of alternative trans-realist forms and attitudes. ... Vast regions of the world, and long periods of artistic history, had shown little allegiance to or even interest in realism. ... The African art which revitalized modernist painting ... cultivated what Robert Farris Thompson calls “mid-point mimesis,” i.e. a style that avoided both illusionistic realism and hyperabstraction.³¹

Why, then, has Europe so doggedly insisted on projecting what was initially its own “retrograde culture-bound verism” onto Africa and Africans, in the ways that it frequently funds cultural (and development) projects by Africans and in the ways that it tends to read and analyze cultural productions by Africans?

The legacy of this widespread practice of producing a “literal Africa” is that the fictional works of Africans are, in turn, frequently interpreted in the most literal and unimaginative ways; many African filmmakers have complained, for example, about how – at film festivals and other live screenings of their work – they are asked questions not about the films themselves but about the history and politics of their countries. African spectators were in fact themselves initially defined as capable only of the most literal interpretive strategies by the colonial film units that operated across the continent from the 1920s onwards. Specific rules were developed for films made for Africans; William Sellers, who headed the Nigerian colonial film unit, said for example that the films should leave nothing to the imagination.³²

But it is not only non-Africans who necessarily participate in the sustaining of this particular regime of truth that assigns “Africa” to being produced and interpreted literally. There are also many contemporary examples of Africans also participating in this shoehorning of narratives from and about the continent into a literal space that denies experimentation and imagination. The most farcical recent example of this was the way that the South African Film and Publication Board (FPB) – the national film classification organization – censored Jahmil Qubeka’s film *Of Good Report* (South Africa, 2013) just before it was due to open the 2013 Durban International Film Festival. The censorship occurred on account of an entirely literal reading of this fictional story: the classification committee decided that even though the film tells the *fictional* story of a teacher who has an affair with his 16-year-old student (played by an actress who was twenty-three at the time), the film constitutes child pornography. Notably, some of the main proponents of the film fought back in a similarly literal way, suggesting that *Of Good Report* is a film that champions the rights of abused

young women, even though Qubeka said that he was trying “to tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood from the perspective of the wolf.”³³

Fiction, I would argue, allows us to move in all those uncomfortable spaces that we cannot inhabit in the news media – it allows us to navigate our dreams, our nightmares, our anxieties – and without that realm, with only recourse to being able to read the world factually, literally, quantitatively, we will find ourselves in a very scary place. The news-as-genre tends to focus on negative events and demands to be read literally; fiction asks us as viewers to engage in a completely different way – not at face value, but imaginatively. While fiction can also be highly formulaic, it tends to be much freer in mode, partly because it is able to own up to its temporary status, to the fact that it is the perspective, the story, the imagination of *someone*.

Conclusion

One might ask what any of this has to do specifically with the position of African film studies within the global academy. I suppose I wanted to come at this question not through the “old, tired formulas” in African film studies that Kenneth Harrow critiques,³⁴ but through an oblique angle that nevertheless centres Africa within current debates that affect the *entirety* of the academy, the *entirety* of the humanities, and the *entirety* of film and media studies as a field. If we as African film scholars have been at fault then it is the fault of timidity, of allowing ourselves and our interests to be sidelined rather than assuming the equivalence of our studies to those in film and media studies as a whole. For example, as many Nollywood scholars have pointed out, much of Nollywood’s success can be attributed to its strong links to the formal qualities and operating modes of television;³⁵ in this sense, Nollywood

should be a central part of the current *global* scholarly debate about the endurance of television over film.³⁶ We cannot afford simply to talk amongst ourselves; we have to insert ourselves into these urgent global debates. We also need to value much more, however, the work of Africa-based scholars, who – by living and working in diverse African contexts – are much better positioned to undertake the necessary research and to fortify our field on African ground. The biggest problem in this sense is the marginalization of our field within Africa itself. As Ousmane Sembene liked to say, Europe is on the margins of Africa; indeed, if our field were strong enough within Africa, its marginalization in Europe and North America would not matter as greatly.

Foucault argues that the political task of the intellectual, in relation to any regime of truth, becomes “knowing that it is possible to constitute a new politics of truth” and attempting to change “the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.”³⁷ Rijdsdijk similarly focuses on positive action, seeing in the current dire situation “an opportunity to re-envision the role of the humanities.”³⁸ We need to get creative; we need – as Meghan Morris suggests in the epigraph to this article – to keep using our imaginations. However, this project also entails – to return to my earlier point about whether we as academics also qualify as Appadurai’s “ordinary people” – imagining potential alternatives to universities. We have to be brave enough to imagine our own extinction if we are to fight the corporatization (and Eurocentrism) of universities as we know them, while also acknowledging that there may be new ways of engaging with knowledge production and learning that may be more democratic than universities have ever been. To echo Mbembe’s vital words, in light of the current dominance of neoliberal capitalism’s regime of truth, part of our new role as scholars appears to be not only the pursuit of knowledge but also, paradoxically, the safeguarding of a space in which it is acceptable *not* to know.

Biography

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⁴ Cited in Tom Gunning, "Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System" (1991), republished in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 469.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.

⁶ David Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013): 2.

⁷ Manthia Diawara, "Popular Culture and Oral Traditions in African Film," *African Experiences of Cinema*, eds Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (London: BFI, 1996): 210.

⁸ Cited in Jane Bryce, "Moussa Sene Absa on finding *Waru* in Barbados," *Black Camera* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 112.

⁹ Diawara, "Popular Culture," 210.

¹⁰ See, for example, Matthias Krings, *African Appropriations: Cultural Difference, Mimesis, and Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age*, 14.

¹² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 3–5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6, my emphasis.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ Lindiwe Dovey, *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* (New York: Palgrave): 26.

¹⁸ See, for example: Giroux, "Neoliberalism"; Cris Shore, "Beyond the multiversity: neoliberalism and the rise of the schizophrenic university," *Social Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2010): 15–29; Aihwa Ong "Neoliberalism as a mobile technology," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32, no. 1 (2007): 3–8; David

Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).

¹⁹ Shore, "Beyond the multiversity," 15-29.

²⁰ Giroux, "Neoliberalism," 428, citing from *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism* (1997).

²¹ Ong, "Neoliberalism as a mobile technology," 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ On the recent student protests across the US, see Reuters, "Students across US march against debt and for tuition-free public college," *The Guardian*, November 12, 2015, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/12/students-us-march-against-debt-for-free-public-college?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Gma, accessed November 13, 2015. On the recent student protests across India, see Aranya Shankar, "Students protest against end of fellowships," *The Indian Express*, October 28, 2015, www.indianexpress.com/article/explained/students-protest-against-end-of-fellowships-why-it-is-important, accessed November 13, 2015. For the ongoing work of the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts across the United Kingdom, see www.anticuts.com, accessed November 13, 2015.

²⁴ Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk, "The State of the Arts in South African Higher Education: Film and Media Studies," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* (forthcoming).

²⁵ *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*, ed. Herman Wasserman (New York: Routledge, 2011).

²⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁷ Michel Foucault, "The political function of the intellectual," *Radical Philosophy* 017 (Summer 1977): 13.

²⁸ Personal communication with Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Durban International Film Festival, South Africa, 26 July 2013.

²⁹ See *Gaze Regimes: Film and Feminisms in Africa*, eds Jyoti Mistry and Antje Schuhmann (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015).

³⁰ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 15.

³¹ Ibid., 17.

³² See James Burns, *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

³³ For a longer analysis of what occurred see Dovey, *Curating Africa*, 159-167.

³⁴ Kenneth Harrow, *Postcolonial African Cinema: from political engagement to postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): xi.

³⁵ See, for example: Jonathan Haynes, "African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions," *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* 4, no. 1 (2011): 67-90; Alessandro Jedlowski, "Small Screen Cinema: Informality and Remediation in Nollywood," *Television and New Media* 13, no. 5 (2012): 431-446; Moradewun Adejunmobi, "African Film's Televisual Turn," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 120-125.

³⁶ William Uricchio, "Film, cinema, television ... media?," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 266-279.

³⁷ Foucault, "The political function of the intellectual," 14.

³⁸ Rijdsdijk, "The State of the Arts."