

## **The Local Film Sensation in Ethiopia: Aesthetic Comparisons with African Cinema and Alternative Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores ways to bridge the critical divide between African Cinema<sup>1</sup> and the commercial, digital video films on the continent, focusing specifically on the Amharic language films of the Ethiopian film industry. Cinema in Ethiopia is distinct from other experiences of cinema in Africa and yet largely unstudied because of the inaccessibility of Amharic to many Western-based scholars. This article will present original research into the (video) film<sup>2</sup> experience in Ethiopia by offering localized perceptions and exploring specific Ethiopian films from a broad film studies perspective. After suggesting possible aesthetic comparisons between African Cinema films and locally made popular films in Ethiopia and acknowledging both local and global influences on filmmaking in Ethiopia, I argue that African film and media studies should start to look beyond the moralizing discourse that has long dominated the scholarship and learn from the pleasure and popularity generated by video films in diverse African contexts.

### **Introduction**

Since its conception, cinema has often been associated with and dominated by elements reflecting mainly European and American cultural forms. The conventions of different cinematic movements, such as Expressionism in Germany, Social Realism in Russia,

Impressionism and Surrealism in France, and Neorealism in Italy have all aided the evolution and diversification of film but also reflect the medium's history as cultivated by such European and American experiences. Hence, these movements bore the hallmarks of new narrative conventions and filmic codes adapted and integrated from elements of specifically European and American practices, which became embedded within the technical tools of cinema when it was exported around the world. Not surprisingly then, filmmaking in Africa has also been strongly influenced by European and American film practices with many of the most prominent sub-Saharan African filmmakers often emerging from European or American film schools, with their films often also influenced by European or American funding. Part of my intention in this article, therefore, is to compare African Cinema with Ethiopian (video) films, and some of the ways cinematic mediums have been adapted to sub-Saharan African forms of storytelling and cultural expression in African languages. The main focus of this article, then, will be presented through a nuanced analysis of diverse popular films from Ethiopia. This is in response to calls from Jonathan Haynes and other African film scholars \_to roll out the full disciplinary apparatus of film studies and apply it to the video films<sup>3</sup> in an attempt to critically engage with Ethiopian productions, aimed at instigating more debates and scholarship addressing the complexities of cinema in Ethiopia.

When it comes to questions about popular African films in Africa, one has to look beyond the established and world-renowned cineastes of African Cinema such as Ousmane Sembene, Gaston Kaboré, Souleymane Cisse, Djibril Diop Mambety, Med Hondo, Haile Gerima and Jean-Pierre Bekolo (to name only a few). Instead, the recent phenomena of local video film industries flourishing in Ghana and Nigeria and more recently (in the past ten years or so) in Ethiopia have to be acknowledged for their rapid growth and unsurpassed popularity within their respective countries and diasporic communities. Despite much recent scholarship

lauding the success of the Nigerian and Ghanaian video film industries, there has been no systemic research on the recent growth of the video film industry in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia presents a unique case which deserves attention, not only due to the rapidly growing size of its potential internal market (with a population growth estimate by the Population Reference Bureau expecting Ethiopia to be the ninth most populous nation in the world by 2050) but, unlike the rest of Africa, European languages were not colonially institutionalized in Ethiopia. This has meant that whilst Nollywood profits internationally from the global power and status of English,<sup>4</sup> Ethiopia remains relatively untouched by the Nollywood phenomenon and unexplored by the emerging scholarship on video film experiences in Africa. Instead, the local Amharic language film industry has recently grown to fill the gap in demand for a locally produced and locally comprehensible film industry. At no point do I claim that a —national cinema exists; rather, I intend to explore cinema’s multifaceted meanings within Ethiopia through a textual analysis of films in the Amharic language. The

Ethiopian experience is overlooked within the vastly expanding scholarship dedicated to African film and media studies as the Ethiopian context proves less accessible to outsiders for linguistic, cultural and historic reasons while European and American scholars have historically focused on Anglophone and Francophone contexts. Conversely, there are only a few studies or publications<sup>5</sup> that mention cinema in Ethiopia from within the country as there has been an historic lack of film studies taught at academic institutions in Addis Abāba or elsewhere in the country.<sup>6</sup>

The popularity of emerging video film industries throughout Africa and their hold over the imaginations of a diverse spectrum of African contexts has, according to Lindiwe Dovey, —brought about something of an impasse in African film studies, which has traditionally focused on —African Cinema.‖<sup>7</sup> These commercially orientated digital video films are most

often ridiculed by African film critics as being of poor technical and aesthetic quality, promoting immoral content, and citing their commercial aims as damaging the integrity of —serious African art.

There has been a polarization of these two forms of moviemaking both from practicing film/video professionals and within academia. African video filmmakers claim their commercial success and popularity is dependent on giving the people the stories they want.<sup>8</sup> This has resulted, particularly in Ethiopia, with the generic romantic comedy formula coming to dominate screens as of late. Filmmakers in the African Cinema tradition have long since rejected Hollywood-style genres and have consciously created their cinema in opposition to the perceived endemic racism of such films, which are regarded as \_estranged from African realities and purposes.<sup>9</sup> The result has been the divisive and often confrontational stance which filmmakers and some film critics and scholars have taken.<sup>10</sup> By way of attempting to draw African Cinema and video films into the same critical frame, I first construct a more comparative debate between the content, form and function of these two different types of films. By doing so, I offer an alternative to what Dovey identifies as \_the moralising discourse that has dominated African film studies<sup>11</sup>. This is then complemented by deeper textual, intertextual and contextual readings of the Ethiopian film industry and a selection of successful films.

While the burgeoning film industry in Ethiopia is impressive due to the quantity of films being produced and the impressive commercial figures of the most successful films, an overview of the video film industry in Ethiopia will only make up part of my study. What I regard as meriting further exploration and focus on towards the end of the article are the ways in which Ethiopian films harness a powerful storytelling that attracts long queues outside Addis Abäba's cinemas and avid interest from the Ethiopian diaspora (accessing films online). My

analysis of Ethiopian films will highlight the myriad of social and cultural influences the movies are built upon, with the Ethiopian experience of cinema offering a unique case in Sub-Saharan Africa, vastly different from the scholarship that has focused too exclusively on Nollywood.

### **Aesthetic Comparisons: African Cinema and Ethiopian Films**

As already noted above, the success of video films seems to be in the stories they tell rather than the technical and aesthetic accomplishments they display. The pressure for video filmmakers to be commercially successful also requires a close understanding of their local audience. This close dialectical relationship between filmmaker and audience not only enables a cinema which entertains, but also one that feeds off contemporary issues affecting society, thus naturally engaging with local socio-political and cultural issues. The techniques used in much of African Cinema, however, are widely considered to be more aesthetically accomplished. This is particularly the focus of studies seeking to delineate a specific —African film language through analyzing the specific cinematic techniques in African Cinema, such as the use of the long take and long shot or identifying a —delayed temporality. The discourse on African Cinema is altogether different from African video film critiques which often note videos as primarily melodramatic,<sup>12</sup> using close-ups to focus on faces and emotions, often relying on dialogue to fuel the narrative. Indeed, Haynes notes that video films in Nigeria \_contain none of the visual poetry of true cinema. But in the aggregate they contain a staggering amount of narrative energy.<sup>13</sup> This lack of —visual poetry is also often noted in Ethiopian video films. And yet, if one looks more deeply one can find similarities between the embellishment of storylines in African Cinema and video films, with Dovey particularly noting,

the —delayed temporality‖ which is seen to approximate \_the non-narrative rhythms of poetry of orature rather than prose.’<sup>14</sup>

A common technique in video films is the establishing shot followed by a long take, often filled with dialogue that drives the narrative forward. This has the effect of exploiting the *mise-en-scène*. Long connective sequences are also prominent, with characters often shown driving from one location to the next, highlighting space, for example. While these sequences are not essential to the plot, they often create the sense of a —delayed temporality‖ with the shot often lasting a few seconds after the characters have left the frame. አንጥረኛው - —*Ant’irāñaw / Blacksmith*‖ (dir. Abirham Tsägaye, 2001) is an Ethiopian video film imbued with this —delayed temporality‖ at the end of many of its sequences. The final shot will often linger or even freeze a couple of seconds after the main characters have left the frame before cutting to the next scene, this is evident when the protagonist, Chärinnät, travels back to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church where his parents are buried (fig. 1). Here, this technique creates a profound sense of loss as throughout the film Chärinnät over-comes the murder of his mother (which he is shown witnessing as a child in the opening of the film) and the stigma attached with hailing from a family of blacksmiths, traditionally associated by many in Ethiopia with the evil powers of *buda*.<sup>15</sup>

The lack of camera movement and long takes associated with much African Cinema similarly create a sense of —delayed temporality.‖ One of the canonical works of African Cinema, Mauritanian-born Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Waiting for Happiness* (2002), is renowned for how it also creates a similar sense of loss through this —delayed temporality‖ technique in which lingering shots remain fixed a few seconds after characters exit the space. It is hard to find other examples of Ethiopian video films (other than *Ant’irāñaw*) achieving this same sense of loss though creating a —delayed temporality‖, however, such films as ስርዖት

- —*Siryät / Absolution* (dir. Yīdnāqachāw Shumāte, 2007) and ሄርሜላ - —*Hermelal* (dir. Yonas Bīrhane, 2005) employ a similar —delayed temporality to help create a sense of suspense. Suspense films in Ethiopia, which will be explored in more depth later in this article.

Conversely, a —delayed temporality can be noted in the opening sequence of the romantic comedy, የወንድች ጉዳይ 2 - —*YäWändoch Gudday 2 / Men's Affair 2* (dir. Admasu Kābädä, 2009), here the delayed temporality is used for comedic effect in a prolonged montage of Zārihun running from a gang of wronged bodybuilders. As Zārihun is seen quickly sprinting through each frame, passing different shop exteriors (which highlight the distance he has run), each shot lingers a few moments to record the fact that his pursuers seem to be nonexistent (only for the pursuers to comically reemerge a few scenes later).

The numerous and popular romantic comedies and romantic dramas that are successfully made, however, are most often critiqued for —soap opera style aesthetics. This conception has prevailed to such an extent that it has become almost synonymous with the entire video film medium in Ethiopia over the past decade. The strong affinity Ethiopian video films have with soap opera style dramas can be traced back to one of the first video films to be successfully released in cinemas, የበረዶው ዘመን - —*YäBärädow Zämān / The Age of Ice* (dir. Helān Tadāssa, 2002), which was originally made as a soap opera for TV, subsequently edited together for the big screen after a breakdown in efforts for it to be aired on national television.<sup>16</sup> The film's narrative and resulting length is thus disruptive due to the sometimes unrelated episodes being linked together in a supposedly linear narrative. The weaving together of disparate episodes into a feature-length film detracts from the melodrama of each episode, deflating moments of suspense and creating instead an atmosphere of dislocation and failed dreams. This is particularly pertinent within *YäBärädow Zämān*, in which a family of two brothers and five sisters fend for themselves after their parents' deaths.

Through the film's numerous melodramatic moments, a sense of social realism persists, as the film reproduces the pace and struggle of everyday life and comedic climaxes are undercut by new daily dilemmas at the beginning of each episode.

Social realism is openly identified as the genre and aesthetic of many African Cinema films, but it is a feature of Ethiopian films as well.<sup>17</sup> The 2002 film የገገ ትውልድ - —*YäNätsa Tiwilid / The Free Generation* (dir. Abirham Tsägaye, 2002), is a poignant example of social realist aesthetics through the depiction of two opposing groups from a village playing *gänna*<sup>18</sup> and the almost ethnographic footage of a rural wedding (fig. 1 & 2). The film then follows the story of the newly wedded couple as they become the victims of a violent escalation between the opposing groups. The wife, Askaläch, is abducted and as she escapes her captors to Addis Abäba by foot, the film is cleverly edited and shot to depict the fertile natural landscape of rural Ethiopia, compared to the polluted urban sprawl of the streets of Addis Abäba.

As with *YäNätsa Tiwilid*, most other Ethiopian films use natural locations and are shot within a few weeks with little rehearsal time, circumstances that enhance the social realist aesthetic through the use of improvisation and non-professional actors (most evident in the roles of secondary characters). In spite of often melodramatic narratives, I contend that Ethiopian films offer visceral representations of everyday Ethiopian culture, communicating a social realism unlike some Amharic language films shot on film stock such as Haile Gerima's *Teza* (2008), which exhibits many surreal sequences. This familiarity and closeness conveyed through video films' sense of reality is perhaps due to certain modes of production, such as the constrained shoot duration and budget, and greater emphasis on improvisation and short rehearsals as compared to African Cinema films like *Teza*, which can be years in the making.

In order to conduct a more thorough comparison of these two African film divisions, as Haynes points out, "we need much deeper readings of the [video] films, approaching them as



works of art with adequate interpretative sophistication.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the comparatively large amount of scholarship that is devoted to African Cinema, there remains only a small amount of detailed studies and historic accounts of video film industries on the continent, making deeper readings more difficult. Other difficulties arise due to the very different circumstances that surround the modes of production of African Cinema compared to those of the video films (as previously discussed). Because of the amount of resources put into African Cinema productions, it is often difficult to find equivalent narrative and aesthetic integrity within video films.

Perhaps the idea of —integrity, as Dovey suggests, could be used as one ‘key conceptual framework’ in order to engage in ‘deeper readings of all African films— regardless of the format in which they are made.’<sup>20</sup> A film such as Sembene’s *Guelwaar* (1992), while seeming to exemplify narrative integrity, may be criticized for displaying internal contradictions in how it depicts the Senegalese masses opposing foreign aid dependency while at the same time the credits note a foreign aid agency as a benefactor of the film.<sup>21</sup> The opposite may be true of the Ethiopian film ጋራ ጥሎ ማግኘት - —*Diplomat* (dir. Naod Gashäw, 2011), which despite a loose narrative structure and distractingly melodramatic sound design, was entirely produced by Ethiopians, a mode of production that can be seen as reinforcing the film’s major theme of political self-reliance. And in a similar vein, while a video film such as *Hermela* may lack the layered and sophisticated aural integrity that one finds in Haile Gerima’s *Harvest 3000 Years* (1976),<sup>22</sup> on another level it offers a resilient film noir influenced visual and aesthetic integrity in the choices made by the director and cinematographer (Yonas Bīrhane and İst‘ifanos Bīrhe respectively): *Hermela*’s stalker is repeatedly seen in plain clothing (black leather trench coat, white shirt and sunglasses) and early on in the film, only depicted with low-key lighting, often casting his face in shadows to add to the mysteriousness of the character, well suited to the suspenseful atmosphere of the film (fig. 3). Finally, the integral dialectical

relationship between video filmmakers and their audience has to be emphasized, as it is essential to the commercial viability of the product— something that is frequently lacking within African Cinema, whose filmmakers are often based abroad and/or dependent on foreign donors. Ultimately, video films that become popular successes or which have a profound impact on society, engaging local audiences with filmic texts and their themes, and films with \_symbolic narratives<sup>23</sup> that require interpretation, are the ones that merit more comprehensive analysis.

While films included in the canon of African Cinema were born out of the historical struggle of decolonization, dubbed the \_child[ren] of political independence,<sup>24</sup> they have failed to generate a mass audience in Africa, unlike recent and ongoing work by local video film industries on the continent. Video film production on the continent coincided with the demise of the postcolonial leaders and can to some extent, as stated by Dovey:

be seen as the disillusioned offspring of the postcolonial period, with its failure to bring about real social and economic independence for the vast majority of people, as well as freedom from the constraints of neo-colonial financial institutions, African dictators and government corruption.<sup>25</sup>

The popularity of video films, therefore, is more linked to ordinary people's need for escapist narratives and light entertainment in their own language. Films from the canon of African Cinema, however, remain \_foreigners in their own countries<sup>26</sup> as they remain largely unseen by African audiences, managing only to gain brief exposure through international film festivals.<sup>27</sup> Funding also continues to be structurally inhibiting, reflecting global neo-colonial dependencies, as many productions regarded as African Cinema still rely on conditioned funding by European/American backers.<sup>28</sup>

To what extent then, can films from the corpus of African Cinema be considered socially important cultural forms when they remain largely inaccessible to African audiences? Indeed the idea of attaching paramount importance to the dialectical relationship between filmmaker and audience, as is evident with video filmmakers, is shared by what Karin Barber perceives as the closeness between producers of narrative and their consumers in varying African contexts.<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Haynes traces this idea, pointing out that video film markets in Africa are structured and orientate themselves almost exclusively around the desires of their audience.<sup>30</sup>

Dovey further notes that:

Many African video filmmakers also work within their local environment and have spoken of how their films reflect the desires of their audiences rather than their own beliefs. Filmmakers and audiences are thus both to be read as —storytellers‡ in the context of African filmmaking.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike much of African Cinema, video films come from and circulate primarily within African contexts amounting to one of the most prominent forms of artistic culture to emerge from the continent in recent times. As such, Haynes rightly points out that ‘\_videos are so fundamental to Africa’s self-representation that it is impossible to understand contemporary Africa and its place in the world without taking them into account.’<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the story of filmmaking in Africa cannot be fully understood until one considers what African audiences demand in their cinemas. In Ethiopia, at least, this demand is dominated by the local video film industry, which has achieved the kind of closeness to its local audience that African Cinema has long idealized.

## **The Local Film Experience in Ethiopia**

Since the early to mid-2000s, Ethiopia has experienced phenomenal growth in the production of locally made video films. Much like the video film industries that have emerged in other African nations, such as Nigeria, Ghana and Tanzania, the Ethiopian industry has adopted a commercially driven model. It is a model altogether different from the corporate, studio-led commercialism of Hollywood, emerging instead from the commerce of the African market in the form of committed individual entrepreneurs engaged in informal economic structures.<sup>33</sup> Shot in Amharic, Ethiopia's lingua-franca, these films are funded by small-scale independent director-led production companies or companies that have emerged from video and music vending stores, and are filmed digitally. These films are targeted mainly at local urban audiences, but also reach a large diasporic audience. When a ban on screening video films in cinemas was lifted in 2002, and after a few early successful screenings of local Ethiopian productions, the 2003 release of Tawädros Täshomä's ቀዝቃዛ ወላፊን - —*Qäziqaza Wälafän / Cold Flame* is seen to be ground-breaking due to its huge popular success in Ethiopia and throughout the diaspora signaling the commercial viability of video filmmaking in Ethiopia. The popular local success of such films spurred cinemagoing in Addis Abäba in particular, with government-owned cinemas screening local productions, relegating foreign films to the most unpopular morning showtimes—if showing them at all. As a result, the cinematic experience in Ethiopia has been progressively reconfigured towards domination by local video film productions.

Unlike in other parts of Africa, where Nollywood films and their straight-to-video distribution system are popular, Nollywood films have been unsuccessful in Ethiopia due to perceived cultural incompatibilities, while the straight-to-video distribution of early Ethiopian video productions in the 1990s was never commercially viable due to the low penetration of

VHS players in Ethiopia and the threat of piracy, among other reasons. The steady increase of successful Ethiopian productions screened in government owned cinemas, based almost entirely in the capital city of Addis Abäba, saw a proliferation in the building of new, privately owned cinemas, starting with Alem Cinema's construction in 2002.<sup>34</sup> The rapid growth of film production in Ethiopia, is evidenced by figures from the Addis Abäba City Council's Culture and Tourism Office, which is tasked with monitoring and licensing all feature-length films produced and distributed in Addis Abäba. While there were no more than twenty feature-length video films produced up until the turn of the twenty-first century, 125 films were licensed in the most recent year of records (ending on the 11th September 2013). In the past eight years roughly 500<sup>35</sup> films have been produced in Ethiopia—an unprecedented growth of the Ethiopian film industry.

The most popular Ethiopian film genres are comedies, romantic comedies, and romantic dramas, which prove particularly popular among the younger generations of the emerging urban classes of Addis Abäba, which make up a large proportion of the cinemagoing demography in the country. Films are often didactic in nature and approach themes relevant to modern Ethiopian society, with moral and social commentary portraying and critiquing how Ethiopian society has changed in recent times. It is interesting to note also that Ethiopian films remain popular at home and in the diaspora in spite of the many cultural commentators who criticize their \_dis-jointed<sup>36</sup> storylines, and the fact that the average film is shot in a matter of weeks on a low budget (averaging around US \$14,000 – \$20,000) with \_noticeable technical deficiencies.<sup>37</sup> These deficiencies are particularly apparent in often distracting and poor quality sound designs, and also evident in the lighting and cinematography of many films. It would seem that the low quality of production and —dis-jointed storylines, in the Ethiopian context

and similarly elsewhere in Africa, however, do not necessarily detract from the stories told in these films being able to speak to and engage with their audience.

The often noted low aesthetic quality of video films in Africa would be difficult for audiences in other parts of the world to tolerate, particularly as Hollywood's global attraction relies ever more increasingly on the success of its multi-million dollar budget action films. While at the other end of the spectrum, the proliferation of international film festivals throughout the globe endeavor to triumph artistic cinematic ingenuity in both the form and content of the films they select to screen. This suggests that Ethiopian and other African audiences share a different relationship to storytelling than those in the West (and other places) who invest much in the criterion of —aesthetic quality. As Haynes and Okome, as two of the most prominent Nigerian video scholars, suggest, “audiences seem not to mind [the poor audio-visual quality of video films], being interested mostly in the stories the videos tell.”<sup>38</sup> It is, then, the stories of the video films that are paramount, eclipsing technical and audio-visual deficiencies. As has been demonstrated earlier in the article, with the comparison of films from the canon of African Cinema and Ethiopian features, deeper analyses of video films can open them up to nuanced interpretations understanding the crucial role they play in society as a form of popular modern cultural production. The article will now move on to explore the artistic diversity of Ethiopian films in their own right, regarding them through a critical lens exploring textual, intertextual and contextual specificities.

### **The Diversity of Ethiopian Films**

Ethiopian filmmakers who work in Addis Abäba have spoken of how their films, instead of reflecting their own beliefs, are tailored to the desires of their audience which is said to be made up of both the male and female growing urban middle class.<sup>39</sup> Cinemas are said to be a

particular attraction for dating couples as they offer a relatively inexpensive experience in a space separated from the norms and prying eyes of everyday life in the safety of relatively reputable institutions. This is certainly reflected in the tone of Ethiopian films as they are resoundingly positive in their conclusions, with the central theme of love's ability to overcome any adverse situation, key in most narratives. This central theme permeates the labels of Ethiopian film genres with the precursor, —የፍቅር (yāfiqīr – —love's/romantic), often seen accompanying other genre labels, such as comedy, drama, and even suspense films. When examined more closely, however, the video films of Ethiopia take on and often fuse together many genres and forms, and tackle a wider range of issues than most observers acknowledge.

The narrative diversity ranges from epic period dramas to comedies situated in the vast condominium communities that dominate Addis Abāba's urban landscape. Among video films displaying this diversity, a number confront issues of Ethiopia's recent history, such as the Red Terror of the Communist Derg regime and its effects on contemporary Ethiopian society. Some of the most well-known are ቀይ ስህተት - —*Qäy Sihtät / The Red Mistake* (dir. Täwädros Täshomä, 2006) ስርየት - —*Siryät / Absolution* (dir. Yidnäqachäw Shumäte, 2007), አዲናት - —*Adinat / Rescued Her* (dir. Abinät Bälay, 2007), የእግር እጣ - —*Yä'İgīr İt'a / A Chance on Foot* (dir. Täsfäye Gäbrä-Mariyam, 2010) and የራስ አሽከር - —*YäRas Ashkīr / Personal Servant* (dir. Zäkariyas Kassa, 2013). Other films engage with issues to do with migration and the life of Ethiopians abroad, such as ቤካሽን ፍሮም አሜሪካ - —*Vacation from America* (dir. Binyam Wäru, 2010), አባይ ወይስ ቪጋስ - —*Abay vs Vegas* (dir. Täwädros Täshomä, 2011) and ሶስት ማእዘን - —*Sost Ma'izän / Triangle* (dir. Täwädros Täshomä, 2013), while other recent films focus on the influx of Chinese nationals in Ethiopia, such as ዘራፍ - —*Zärraf / He Who is a Defender* (dir. Naod Gashäw, 2011), ሜድ ኢን ቻይና - —*Made in China* (dir. Mäsfīn Hayleÿäsus and Täwädros Säyum, 2012) and the Kung-Fu film ሴት - —*Set / Woman* (dir.

Awäl Hayrädin, 2012). A smaller number of films, such as አሸንጌ - —*Ashenge* (dir. P‘awlos Rägässa, 2007), deal with the memory of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia,<sup>40</sup> or with Ethiopia’s geopolitical tensions with its neighbors—namely, Eritrea in የባህር ቦር - —*YäBahir Bär / Sea Port* (dir. T‘ilahun Gugsä, 2008) and Egypt in ዲፕሎማት - —*Diplomat* (dir. Naod Gashäw, 2011). In 2013, Yidnäqachäw Shumäte’s film ኒሻን - —*Nishan / Medall* was the first Ethiopian digital video film to be screened at FESPACO 2013, and the following year at the Africa in Motion film festival, demonstrating that the rising standards of production in the Ethiopian film industry are being recognized internationally.

The recent release of the epic period drama, ቆቂቆ እስጢፋኖስ - —*Däqiqä İst’ifanos* (dir. Täshomä Shäfäräw, 2015) has arrived a few years after P‘awlos Rägässa’s 2007, *Ashenge*, the first epic period drama produced in the country on video (fig. 4). P‘awlos<sup>41</sup> has already begun pre-production on yet another epic love story set during the five year Italian occupation of Ethiopia from 1936-1941 and it is evident that more films are tapping into Ethiopia’s rich history. *Ashenge* highlights the war crimes committed by the Italians during the occupation of Ethiopia whilst other films such as, *Siryät*, reflect on the lasting effects of past atrocities carried out under the communist Derg regime.<sup>42</sup> Other films such as *Nishan* eulogize heroic Ethiopian forefathers as patriots who bravely defended their country from the Italians whilst urging the younger generations to remember their country’s rich history but importantly realize that history is now in their hands, along with the future prospects of Ethiopia. The namesake of the film and female protagonist, *Nishan* (meaning —medal of honor), symbolically encapsulates this idea and is realized in the film when an old patriot entrusts his service medals to Nishan in order for her to thwart a criminal plot and in turn take her destiny into her own hands (fig. 5). Ethiopia’s complex history is harnessed in multiple ways by films



for various reasons, but all of these films contribute to reinforcing nationalistic narratives at a time when social inequalities remain prominent.

Looking at the diversification of the video film industry in Ethiopia offers new insights into the progression of —serious|| intellectual Ethiopian filmmakers, but it can also risk overlooking some of the vital elements which initially triggered the local success of Ethiopian films. One of the earlier video films to be made in Ethiopia, Täsfäye Mamo’s, ፍቅር መጨረሻ - —*Fiqir Mäch’äräsha / The Edge of Love*|| (1994), was directly inspired by a local story from the oral traditions of Bahir Dar,<sup>43</sup> which he adapted for the screen.<sup>44</sup> Täsfäye and others contend that Henok Ayälä’s, የወንዶች ጉዳይ - —*YäWändoch Gudday / Men’s Affair*|| (2007) ushered in the contemporary trend in making romantic comedy films, and *YäWändoch Gudday* is often referred to as the most successful title in Ethiopia’s video film industry.<sup>45</sup>

Within this popular comedy are direct influences from witticisms and double meanings which permeate the Amharic language and are commonly found within oral storytelling traditions in the country. A popular aspect of these films is the use of comedic oral storytelling elements derived from the traditions of ሰምና ወርቅ (*säm-inna wärq* – —wax and gold||) to offer a familiar form of escapism through what is regarded by Amharic speakers as a very high form of humor. The specific use of *säm-inna wärq* is in playing with a duplicity of the message whereby the —wax|| meaning hides a deeper —gold|| significance. As the (late) pioneering Ethiopianist scholar, Donald Levine, points out:

In figures known as *hibir* and *mürimmür*, the wax and gold are combined in the same word or phrase instead of being put side by side. These figures thus correspond to the English pun. In verses which employ these figures the wax is often but a contrived and transparent excuse for getting to the real point, which appears only in the pun.<sup>46</sup>

This form of comedic device is further apparent in the film ያለ ሴት - —*Yalä Set / Without a Woman* (dir. İst‘ifanos Bärıhe, 2011), which is an adaptation of a traditional oral tale in which three brothers compete to win the inheritance from their mother. Within the film the mother’s will states, ‘The one who begets a child first shall inherit my wealth.’ Two of the brothers, T‘ıbäbu and İskındır engage in hurried promiscuity with multiple women which leads to various comedic events, while the youngest brother, Robäl, remains in his committed and loving relationship which, in time, results in a child. This moralistic meaning is thus hidden throughout the film through many comedic sequences, only revealing the true message in the denouement of the plot in which Robäl decides to share the inheritance equally between himself and his two brothers.

The film *Zärraf* (dir. Naod Gashäw, 2011) demonstrates a variation of *säm-inna wärq* in its imaginative satirizing of the oral poetic genre —ፋከራ (fukkära). *Fukkära* is deeply rooted in Amharic oral tradition and is most commonly used to boast of one’s own prowess, strength and heroism, to incite courage before battle, and encourage uprisings against invaders—the word *zärraf* (the title of the film), exclusively used in the context of *fukkära*, literally means ‘he who slays with a sword’, or ‘he who is a defender/killer’. Ironically in the film, however, the *fukkära* is recited by İndäshäw, whose heart rate becomes erratic at the sight or sound of anything originating from China after laying the blame for his father’s death on a faulty Chinese-made generator. When İndäshäw’s daughter gets engaged to a Chinese national, Po, İndäshäw is admitted to hospital after passing out. While in hospital, incapacitated in bed and wired up to heart monitors, İndäshäw suddenly sits up and in a medium-shot is seen reciting his *fukkära* comically urging the nurse and doctor who rush in, concerned about his worsening condition, to join his campaign against the invading Chinese.

The patriotic fervor of İndäshäw’s *fukkära* is undermined by his state of weakness and frailty in hospital. This manly bravado masks the character’s inability to influence events,

allegorically encapsulating broader Ethiopian concerns regarding the liberal inclinations of the younger generations and encroachment of outside forces within socio-political and cultural realms. *Zärraf's* popular success in Addis Abäba is attributable to filmmaker and writer Naod Gashäw's imaginative way of adapting traditional oral forms which are deeply familiar and recognizable to Ethiopian audiences.

A culturally specific kind of adaptation and visualization of spoken and oral narratives can, therefore, be seen in popular Ethiopian films. But beyond this, if video films are only read in terms of their relationship to local oral 'realities' and histories, then one risks overlooking the fact that video films are positioned at the forefront of cultural transformation (due to their rapid rates of production and popular consumption) and therefore also reflect the complex intertextuality which defines contemporary cultures' relationship with the local and global. Ethiopian films are not only engaged with local sources such as oral stories and traditions, as exemplified above by *säm-inna wärq*, or Amharic literature, as with the adaptation of Adam Rätta's 2008 novel *Ītemete Lomi Shita* onto video with ሎሚ ሽታ - —*Lomi Shita / Scent of Lemon* (dir. Abirham Gäzahäñ, 2012) but also directly reflect aspects of Bollywood cinema. Tom Thomas' 2008 film, ውሳኔ - —*Wisane / Decision*, for example, is an Ethiopian adaption of the Indian film *Tulsi: Mathrudevobhava* (dir. Ajay Kumar, 2008). Other transnational influences include Kung-Fu films, as in the previously mentioned *Set*, the Mexican telenovelas that enjoy prime time slots on Ethiopian TV, Shakespeare, with Manyazäwal Īndäshaw's 2009 adaptation of *Othello*, ዴዘዴሞና - —*Dezdemonä*, and of course Hollywood films. One also finds many Ethiopian films with English titles such as ሹገሻ ማሚ - —*Sugar Mummy* (dir. Aläm Zägäd Zäwädu, 2011) or ሚስተር ኤክስ - —*Mr. X* (dir. Täwädros Täsfäye, 2012). The position of Ethiopian films as originating from both global and local

sources portends to the deeply nuanced and multidimensional aspects of video filmmaking on the African continent as films absorb and embrace the forms of transnational mass media.<sup>47</sup>

One of the most aesthetically and narratively distinct genres in Ethiopia, emanating from both local and global influences, is the suspense genre (also —romantic suspense in Amharic) which has already briefly been discussed. The aforementioned *Siryät* and *Hermela* are the most successful and well-known Ethiopian suspense films to-date. Both films follow the stories of deranged stalkers, determined not to let anything get in the way of them achieving their aims. Whilst the innocent *Hermela* (the title character of the film) is oppressively stalked day and night with her and her family suffering severely, *Siryät* follows the lives of two brothers, Mäsfīn and Nati, as they investigate a mysterious man who monitors their house each night, only for them to be caught in a web of peculiarly linked murders. As mentioned with *Hermela*, other suspense films made in Ethiopia are also heavily influenced stylistically by the globally intelligible film noir and thriller genres.

A form of suspense is often achieved by juxtaposing the —delayed temporality, created within longer takes (associated previously with African Cinema) and slow-motion, with faster paced chase sequences. In *Hermela* for example, the intentions of *Hermela*'s unknown obsessor, (later named as Kassahun) are realized in the film's opening as he enters a desolate shot of a residential street at night, waiting and smoking a cigarette (another film noir trope). After Kassahun has vacated the frame, time is momentarily still as the shot lingers a few seconds, depicting the empty street. A private taxi then arrives, perfectly framed in the center of the shot where Kassahun had been standing previously, the implicitly staged choreography of the shot arousing our suspicions. *Hermela* emerges from the taxi and walks off into the background darkness of the low-key lit scene while the taxi drives on, out of shot.

Kassahun's dramatically elongated shadow then suddenly appears in pursuit of Hermela in film noir style and accompanied by a staccato in the film's music, breaking the normality of the sequence and alerting the audience to Kassahun's sinister intentions (fig. 6 & 7).

After this long take, the quickening pace of music, cross-cutting and action all ratchet the suspense as a close-up of Hermela's legs steadily walking is followed by a graphic-cut showing the larger strides of Kassahun in pursuit. The intensity of the music and crosscutting from character to character repeats, then as Hermela turns suspecting someone is following her, the reverse shot of the empty street is shown. Adding to this opening ambiguity, the shot then lingers after Hermela has left the frame, this —delayed temporality confirms the emptiness of the street and adds to the mystery of Kassahun, building the audience's sense of anticipation. The film noir aesthetics of *Hermela* are enhanced by the film's cinematography as can be noted in the close ups of body parts, such as feet, faces and hands (fig. 8). Furthermore there are numerous angled shots deployed throughout the film such as the use of a low-angled canted shot depicting Kassahun putting on his trench coat in the film's opening, attaching an aura of omnipresence to the character as his whole figure engulfs the frame.

While *Hermela* is stylistically influenced by film noir aesthetics, the narrative structure is fairly linear as the stalking and crimes committed by Kassahun intensify before the police finally have enough evidence to act upon. *Siryät*, on the other hand, borrows more noticeably from the narrative structures of film noir and thrillers by obscuring the murdering motives of the antagonist, Gaga. Before committing each murder, the muted, one-eyed Gaga forces his victims to read his final message, asking —ረሳሻሽ/ረሳሻሽ (—räsashīñ / räsahāñ - do you remember me?). This complicates the plot as the audience is left guessing the logic behind the murders and relationships between the characters. Only through a flashback, during the lead up to the climax of the film, does Gaga's murderous logic become clear. The flashback shows

Gaga being tortured by Derg officials, therefore revealing the relationship between Gaga and his victims, as the people he has recently murdered are now seen to be his tormentors. The despairing Gaga is forced to watch the officials kill his daughter in a botched threat to make him speak and as Gaga mournfully vows vengeance, he is silenced by his captors as they cut out his tongue.

The flashback here introduces the moral ambiguity associated with film noir, making the audience feel sympathetic towards a brutal murderer who continues to carry out his last act of vengeance. Gaga's scarred face and determined and cold expression, for example in the moment before he murders his first victim, is juxtaposed by the distress etched across his unscarred face when the flashback provides the motive for Gaga's murderous acts (fig. 9 & 10). With Gaga's accidental death in the penultimate scene of the film, along with the murders of all those ex-Derg officials complicit in his torture, *Siryät* reaches an equilibrium and peace in its closing. The final scene shows the older brother, Mäsfīn and his fiancée in a lush green park enjoying a romantic embrace, free from the darkness of the previous scenes and murders committed mostly during the night. While the deaths of Gaga and the ex-Derg officials absolve their whole generation's complicity in the atrocities committed under the Derg, the concluding sequence in *Siryät* urges Ethiopia's younger generation to strive for compassion and happiness. The color palette (green and blue) of this sequence is notably different from the red back-lighting and strong use of shadows in the rest of the film with the color green, in particular symbolizing the coming harvest season in Ethiopia, thus offering a sense of expectation for the country's future lead by its younger generations (fig. 11).

The tone and moral outcome of the Ethiopian suspense films, unlike American and European thrillers, is normally positive. *Hermela* (based on a true story) ends in the successful arrest and sentencing of Kassahun (Hermela's stalker) which ultimately leads to his death after

he attempts to escape custody. Hermela's voice is heard over the final shot of the film, explaining in her own words that nothing bad can come as a result of true love, echoing the common Amharic saying —ፍቅር ይሸነፋል (fiqir yishänäfal – —love wins in the end) and the loving images of Mäsfīn and his fiancée at the end of *Siryät*. The moralizing intent of *Hermela* is further made apparent as the film's dedication reads, 'to those who fight in the name of justice, truth and fairness.' Hermela's concluding remarks speak of the pain she and Ethiopian communities have gone through in recent times urging a similar message to *Siryät*, stressing the social responsibilities people are expected to show each other according to Ethiopian custom and as set out in law.

The two suspense films discussed above are full of aesthetic (and with *Siryät*, narrative) complexities despite video films being often noted for their lack of aesthetic integrity. And even prior to these recent productions there has been notable praise for a few early video films for their aesthetic and cinematic qualities. Early cases of Ethiopian video films with —symbolic narratives can be seen in ፍቅር - —*Fidda / Recompense* (dir. Bāminabu Kābādä, 1999), *Fiqir Mäch'äräsha*, *YäNätsa Tiwiliid* (both mentioned above) or ጥዕና - —*Gudifächa / Adoption* (dir. Tat'äq Tadässä, 2003), followed by films such as *Ashenge* and *Siryät* in 2007, which received widespread local recognition for their stylistic and narrative qualities. *Ashenge*, by P'awlos Rägässa is a landmark film in many aspects, technically and aesthetically outstanding, having perhaps more in common with lauded auteurist African Cinema, with P'awlos being not only the film's director, but also writer, cinematographer, music composer, and producer of special effects. More recently, the second feature by *Siryät*'s director, Yīdnāqachāw Shumāte, the aforementioned, *Nishan*, was a rare digital video film participant in FESPACO's 2013 feature film competition and enjoyed screenings in film festivals in the USA (Seattle International Film Festival 2013, African Diaspora International

Film Festival 2013), Brazil (Imagem dos Povos 2013), UK (Africa in Motion 2014) and Germany (Afrika Filmfestival Köln 2014).

*Nishan*'s success has been followed up by the inclusion of Hermon Hailay's 2015 digital video film የፍቅር ዋጋው - —*YäFiqir Wagaw / Price of Love* in that year's FESPACO. Other recent releases such as Hermon's ባላገሩ - —*Balagäru / The Countryman* (2012), 400 ፍቅር - —*400 Fiqir / 400 Love* (dir. Abinät Bälay and Biniyam Alämayähu, 2013), ትራፊክዋ - —*Traffikwa / The Traffic Police Woman* (dir. İyärusalem Kasahun, 2013), ገዳይ ሲያረፈፍድ - —*Gäday Siyaräfäfid / When the Killer Was Late* (dir. Naod Lämna, 2014), ራቡኒ - —*Räbunil* (dir. Qidist Yilma, 2014), and አይራቅ - —*Ayraq / Don't be Distant* (dir. Fiqiräyäsus Dänbäru, 2014) are amongst a number of movies that are portraying more innovative and sophisticated aesthetic and narrative techniques. It is therefore now necessary to recognize that the technical aspects of video films are no longer as divorced from global cinematic standards as they once seemed. Noting the improved qualities of these popular video films ultimately demands more nuanced and sophisticated critiques aimed at interpreting the complexities of the contemporary African cultures and societies of which these movies are a product.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have explored ways in which video films from Ethiopia can be drawn into the same critical frame as African Cinema. As technical and structural disparities between African Cinema (celluloid now being replaced by digital) films and video films from Africa subside, there is increasing evidence of aesthetic conjunction.<sup>48</sup> The degree of —closeness and dialectical relationship between a filmmaker and his/her audience, as well as the structural implications involved in funding, producing and distributing a film, however, can be seen to play an integral role in defining the success of both African Cinema and video films. Video



films can, in fact, be seen as a more accurate barometer of the various cultures of sub-Saharan Africa as they reflect both contemporary local and global influences and are, importantly, driven by popular local demand in the countries where they are produced.

Through focusing closely on Ethiopian films and the concerns of Ethiopian filmmakers, one can see that despite their commercial orientation, these films engage in myriad socio-political critiques, as well as reflecting local and global influences. This brief case study of the video film industry in Ethiopia has offered new insights into the diverse influences and stories of video films from the country. Despite film professionals in Ethiopia voicing their concerns over structural obstacles (such as the saturation of the romantic comedy genre or threat from piracy and unequal exhibition opportunities), it is clear that the video film industry in Ethiopia will continue to develop and produce vibrant, diverse and increasingly more technically and aesthetically accomplished films as the internal market expands.

Through focusing on the textual analysis of films, I have sought to move away from the common moralizing discourse of African film studies. Instead of trying to define progressive and didactic elements of Ethiopian films, this study has, in part, been a response to Dovey's call that perhaps it is time for —African Cinemal scholars to start learning from the pleasure generated by African video films.<sup>49</sup> By exploring the two most successful films from the suspense genre in Ethiopia, *Hermela* and *Siryät*, this article offers a contextualized analysis of their style and form as both heavily influenced by film noir/thrillers but also as specifically Ethiopian in tone and nature. This preliminary analysis will hopefully encourage a more sophisticated and nuanced critical debate on cinema in Ethiopia. The focus on interpreting the form and content of video films produced in Ethiopia is aimed at reconfiguring the perception of video films in Ethiopia (and elsewhere) towards acknowledging them for their own cultural and artistic accomplishments. Ethiopian films are a fundamental contribution to the cultural

self-representation of a contemporary society currently engaged in rapid socio-economic change. As cinema in Ethiopia expands and reflects ever more diverse experiences, committed textual interpretations are necessary in order to seek out how these films change and mediate between Ethiopian history and contemporary concerns.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> —African Cinema in this article will be understood as the canon of films (mostly celluloid films) that have recently been discussed in terms of a sub-genre of —World Cinema. These films often reach recognition after enjoying successful screenings at international film festivals across the world, however, due to structural reasons such as the threat of piracy and inadequate technology, are only rarely seen in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> The term video is in brackets here as, although video technology was instrumental in the development of the film industry in Ethiopia, films are now produced on differing digital formats and are simply referred to as —films in Ethiopia regardless of the fact that they are not produced on celluloid film stock.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —What Is to Be Done? Film Studies and Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos, in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, eds. Mahir Şaul and Ralph A. Austen (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Moradewun Adejunmobi, —English and the Audience of an African Popular Culture: The Case of Nigerian Video Film, *Cultural Critique* 50 (2002): 74-103.

<sup>5</sup> The best Amharic texts on the subject include Haylu Kābādā, የፊልም ጥበብ በኢትዮጵያ - —*YäFilm T'ibāb*

*BäIt'op'ya / Film Craft in Ethiopia*, (bachelor's thesis, Addis Abāba University, 1986); Täsfäye Mamo, የኢትዮጵያ ሲኒማ ከትላንት እስከዛሬ - “*YäIt'op'ya Sinima Kätīlant ĪskāZarē / Ethiopia's Cinema, from Past to Present*” (presentation, The Seminar on Copyrights and Related Issues in Ethiopia, Addis Abāba, July 19, 2007); Fikadu Līmāniḥ, የፊልም ጉዳይ: የአቡጊዳ ግርግር - —*YäFilm Guday:*

*YäAbujedi Gīrgīr / Film's Affair: Calico's Hustle and Bustle* (Addis Abāba: Littman, 2013); Michel Papatakis, ይህ ሁሉ ለምን?! - —*Yihe Hulu Lāmin!! / Why All of This!!* (Addis Abāba: Andnet Printers, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Addis Abāba University is the first university in Ethiopia to offer a film studies programme. This was introduced in the 2014/2015 academic year in the form of the one year MA course in film studies.

<sup>7</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video, in *Storytelling in World Cinemas Volume 1 – Forms*, ed. Lina Khatib (London: Wallflower Press, 2013), 90.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. and also apparent from Yidnāqachāw Shumāte (filmmaker), Täsfäye Mamo (president of the Ethiopian Filmmakers Association and filmmaker), Mäsfīn Hayle-Īyāsus (actor and filmmaker), Naod Gashāw (filmmaker) and Zälalām Wäldä-Marīyam (filmmaker) in discussion with the author, March/August 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions, *Situations* 4, no. 1 (2011): 67.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —Political Critique in Nigerian Video Films, *African Affairs* 105, no. 421 (2006): 513.

<sup>11</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video, 99.

- <sup>12</sup> Brian Larkin
- <sup>13</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —Preface, in *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (JOS: Nigerian Film Corporation, 1997), 9.
- <sup>14</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video, 96.
- <sup>15</sup> *Buda* is a superstitious belief from rural Ethiopia associated with traditional metalsmiths. *Buda* is comparable with the idea of the —evil eye, those identified as *buda* are believed to have the capability to curse people and cause people to get sick.
- <sup>16</sup> Täsfäye Mamo, የኢትዮጵያ ሲኒማ ከትላንት እስከዛሬ - “*YäItyop’ya Sinima Kätilant ĪskäZaré / Ethiopia’s Cinema, from Past to Present*” (presentation, The Seminar on Copyrights and Related Issues in Ethiopia, Addis Abäba, July 19, 2007)
- <sup>17</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video, 96.
- <sup>18</sup> *Gänna* is a traditional Ethiopian sport played only on special occasions that resembles field hockey.
- <sup>19</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —Preface, 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video, 98.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> See Michael W. Thomas, —*Harvest 3000 Years/Mirt Sost Shi Amät* (Haile Gerima, 1976): A Revolutionary Ethiopian Film, in *Africa’s Lost Classics: New Histories of African Cinema*, eds. Lizelle Bisschoff and David Murphy (London: Legenda, 2014), 182-189.
- <sup>23</sup> June Givanni, ed. *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image* (London: British Film Institute, 2000).
- <sup>24</sup> Mbaye B. Cham, introduction to *African Experiences of Cinema*, eds. Imruh Bakari and Mbaye B. Cham (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video, 90.
- <sup>26</sup> Emmanuel Sama, —African Films are Foreigners in Their Own Countries, in *African Experiences of Cinema*, eds. Imruh Bakari and Mbaye B. Cham (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 148. <sup>27</sup> It should be noted here that whilst recent foreign funded Amharic language celluloid productions, such as, ኦትሌቱ - —*Atletu / The Athlete* (dir. Rasselas Lakew and Davey Frankel, 2008) and ድፍረት - —*Difret (Difrät) / Audacity* (dir. Zeresenay Mehari, 2014), have received limited theatrical release in Ethiopia, they do not attract the audience numbers associated with the video productions. According to weekly Ethiopian box-office figures, despite *Difret* enjoying much publicity in the news in Addis Abäba, it was only featured in the top ten once (at number ten) for the week of October 13 - October 19, 2014 (This date is converted from the corresponding Ethiopian calendar date, ጥቅምት (t’iqämt) 3 - ጥቅምት 9, 2007). See <http://www.hoyahoyie.com/index.php/boxoffice> for the only website monitoring the Ethiopian box-office, offering weekly updated lists of the top ten films. Accessed May 24, 2015.
- <sup>28</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions, 67.
- <sup>29</sup> Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 5.
- <sup>30</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions, 75.
- <sup>31</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video, 93.
- <sup>32</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —What Is to Be Done? Film Studies and Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos, 21.
- <sup>33</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions, 67.
- <sup>34</sup> There are now around twenty privately owned cinemas in Addis Abäba along with around twenty more private cinemas existing in major cities and towns throughout Ethiopia, such as Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Mäqällé, Jimma, Ambo, Gondär, Aksum, Harar, Dässé, Säbätä, Jijiga, Diré Dawa and Adama. <sup>35</sup> This number varies according to different sources, according to Fiqadu Limäniñ the number was placed at 493 in September 2013.

- <sup>36</sup> Lucy Gebre-Egziabher, *Digital Filmmaking: Panacea or Scourge for African Cinema* (2006), 7, [http://blogs.nvcc.edu/lgebre/?page\\_id=382](http://blogs.nvcc.edu/lgebre/?page_id=382), accessed March 14, 2014.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome, —Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films,|| in *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (JOS: Nigerian Film Corporation, 1997), 23-24.
- <sup>39</sup> Yīdnāqachāw Shumāte (filmmaker), Täsfāye Mamo (president of the Ethiopian Filmmakers Association and filmmaker), Mäsfīn Hayle-Īyāsus (actor and filmmaker), Naod Gashāw (filmmaker) and Zälalām Wäldä-Mariyam (filmmaker) in discussion with author, March-August 2014. <sup>40</sup> The Italian Occupation of Ethiopia lasted five years, from 1936-1941. During this time the Ethiopian Emperor Haylä Sällase (Haile Selassie I) was living in exile in the U.K. The Italian forces only managed to occupy major urban centers with the ongoing Ethiopian resistance achieving victory over the Italians with the aid of British forces led by Major General Orde Wingate in 1941.
- <sup>41</sup> Due to Ethiopian names being constructed differently from the Western naming convention, all Ethiopians mentioned here will be cited using their first name as this is the name by which they are known.
- <sup>42</sup> The Derg was the military junta that overthrew Emperor Haylä Sällase (Haile Selassie) in 1974 and lasted until 1991, during which Ethiopia experienced war with Somalia and Eritrea, famine and the Red Terror purges which took the lives of thousands of innocent civilians.
- <sup>43</sup> Bahir Dar is the capital of the Amhara region in north-west Ethiopia, situated on the southern shores of Laka T‘ana.
- <sup>44</sup> The film uses the Bahir Dar locale, mentioned in the folktale as its setting and local, nonprofessional actors in the leading roles. A short translation of the oral tale can be found at <http://www.ethiopianfolktales.com/en/amhara/44-the-two-lovers>.
- <sup>45</sup> Täsfāye Mamo (president of the Ethiopian Filmmakers Association and filmmaker) and Mäsfīn Hayle-Īyāsus (actor and filmmaker) in discussion with the author, August 2014.
- <sup>46</sup> Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 6.
- <sup>47</sup> Jonathan Haynes, —African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions,|| 74.
- <sup>48</sup> See Jonathan Haynes, —African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions,|| 67-90.
- <sup>49</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, —Storytelling in Contemporary African Fiction Film and Video,|| 99.